

## **Machine possession: Dancing to repetitive beats**

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### **Enter**

Through a focus on the electronic machine aesthetic in genre variants of techno music, this chapter addresses affective relationships between repetitive beats associated with electronic dance music culture, and a technoculture that is centered on the accelerated data flows of electronic information and communication technologies.<sup>1</sup> The argument here is partially underpinned by a consideration of contemporary media forms as “structures of feeling,” which are

*symptomatic*, in that they provide indices of complex social processes . . . they are also *productive*, in the sense that do not *represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes and help to constitute them. (Shaviro 2010: 2)

In this context, media works “are *machines for generating affect* . . . They generate subjectivity” (ibid.: 3). An additional cue is taken from the suggestion by Jacques Attali that music is prophetic, articulating social structures as they emerge.

Representation against fear, repetition against harmony, composition against normality. It is in this interplay of concepts that music invites us to enter, in its capacity as the herald of organizations and their overall political strategies—noise that destroys orders to structure a new order. (Attali [1977] 1985: 20)

Developed in parallel with conceptual thinking about the technoculture, techno music is of particular relevance here. Its musical aesthetic is characterized by the textures of its instrumental electronic sounds (without the emulation, or simulation, of acoustic instruments<sup>2</sup>), which may, as I argued previously (Rietveld, 2004), be regarded as a type of interface between the human subject and the machine. Combined with

repetitive beats of 130 bpm and faster, played for several hours, those sounds enable the dancer to enter into a type of machine-driven trance, whereby one's self-conscious subjectivity is (figuratively speaking) temporarily sacrificed in order to become cyborg. Here I wish to further this point, arguing not only that participation in electronic dance music events occurs in a world dominated by robotics and electronic communication devices—a characteristic of the technoculture—but also that such participation occurs within the context of a political-economic system based on acceleration, about which Benjamin Noys posits that human beings have their “own machinic nature” that “coincides with the repetitions of labor and production” (2010: 41). Elsewhere, Noys illustrates this with reference to 1980s and 1990s techno music from Detroit and its relationship to the car industry that has long dominated the city.

The music is the driving sound of the future, but also a sometimes-stuttering swirl, a movement forwards and backwards, a repetition that alters. Something new takes place. Something old takes place as well. Older dreams from the Fordist space race, as well as the new dreams inspired by robot production lines at Ford. (Noys 2017)

To enter into this discussion, the machine aesthetic of electronic dance music—and specifically the electronic sound of techno—is addressed in relation to the use of what in popular parlance are called “repetitive beats,” suggesting an emphasis on the metronomic pulse of a 4/4 beat. Most techno dance music is characterized by a post-disco, house music-inflected, rhythm that is known as “four-on-the-floor,” in reference to the pulse that is explicitly emphasized by a kick drum on each beat (regular like the piston of a mechanical machine), while the snare is heard on the second and fourth beats, and an open hi-hat sound provides a sense of pull and push in between the beats. Music styles that fall within the rhythmic realm of the disco-continuum include not only Chicago house music and Detroit techno, but also hi-NRG and trance. However, this pulse is not always emphasized; as Simon Reynolds (2013) puts it, “the UK came up with its own unique mutant versions of House and Techno . . . adding elements from dub reggae, dancehall,” as well as electro, resulting in UK breakbeat music that he calls the “hardcore continuum.”<sup>3</sup> This is not to be confused with hardcore techno, though, a fast-moving nihilist four-on-the-floor style of techno that emerged from, for example, Belgium and the Netherlands.

By contrast, within the UK hardcore continuum, the pulse is present yet ruptured by a polyrhythmic combination of digitally processed repetitive breakbeats that offer both speed in the rhythm elements and, simultaneously, slowness in the basslines. In electronic dance music, then, two versions of repetitive beats can be identified: on the one hand, the kick drum beats of the four-on-the-floor of the disco impulse, and, on the other hand, the syncopated breakbeats of the hardcore continuum that “de-emphasize strong beats” (Butler 2006: 78). Both provide a seemingly infinite machine-generated pulse to a dance DJ-set within which sounds and textures of synthesizers, rhythm machine as well as various musical elements are brought together within a danceable journey for its “musicking” participants (Small 1998). This is even truer in the case of breakbeat music, where sampler effects (such as stuttering, truncating, time stretching) are given prominence.<sup>4</sup> Such an assemblage has led Drew Hemment (2004: 78), in relation to the work of Gilles Deleuze, to conceptualize popular electronic music as “the sonic machinic, ... a dispersed terrain that includes multiple, mobile nodes.” In this way, music is “an expanded field.” As I have shown elsewhere, the nomadic DJ-mix creates a fluid referential framework that shifts according to its context (Rietveld 2011). In a similar vein, giving recognition to the complexities of the (possibly prophetic) assemblage of techno, its rhizomic dis/connections of musical styles, multiple rhythms, cultural settings, and technological shifts, Kowdo Eshun wrote, in the late 1990s, that techno exists within “the matrices of the Futurhythmicmachinic Discontinuum” (1998: -001).

My argument is that within a cyclone of repetitive beats within a DJ-led ritual of sustained dancing over several hours, a breakdown of subjectivity can occur during a peak dance experience. In an important study of music and possession trance, Gilbert Rouget ([1980] 1985) shows that an effective way to induce trance is through dance, as an embodied engagement with pulsing music that eventually intensifies to a climatic peak. Such possession trance can be found in West African religious music practices, which were arguably transposed and morphed as a result of the experience of the Atlantic crossing of West-African people who were forced into slave labor, finding their way in secularized form into African-American and Afro-Caribbean dance music genres (Sylvan 2002). Paul Gilroy usefully theorizes the resulting diverse cultural outcomes of this diasporic experience as “the Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993). Within its original West African religious contexts, melody or words provide a figurative component to the abstractions of the rhythm, which is then acted

out as a god or sacred animal by the possessed dancer with the effect of a cathartic “release” (Rouget 1985: 118).

In the case of techno and its variants, it is tempting to think that the instrumental abstraction does not lend itself to a figure. Yet, although the possession figure is not an animal spirit or deity, the machine aesthetic of electronic music can provide a contemporary “figure.” Roughly speaking, the abstractions of the rhythm are danced by the legs and torso, and the machinic “figure” is given shape by the movement of the arms and hands. Importantly, Rouget shows that music can act as “a real architecture of time,” in which melodic or rhythmic statements are sequenced in such a way as to transform “our awareness of time and space,” bringing “about a transformation in the structure of consciousness” (1985: 122–3). And so, although Theodor Adorno stated back in 1951 that the machinery of post-war culture produces, “(a) dissolution of the subject, without a new one appearing in its stead” (2011: 8), I suggest that new subjectivities are produced within the media-saturated flows of affect that are processed and given shape to by physically engaging with repetitive electronic dance music.

As also Robert Fink (2005) observes, various subject positions are nevertheless possible during a dance event, including that of the bystander and that of the DJ—the latter is both part of the event and an accommodating, mediating, spectator. The electronic dance music DJ in particular, according to Fink, is able to produce a musical journey that generates a double experience of *jouissance*: first by producing a sense of a forever present, through the sheer length of a dance session based on strongly emphasized repetition; second, by “peaking” the dancefloor, an intense moment of energy release within both the dancers and the music. The peak can be a specific point in—or a series of points throughout—the sequence of the DJ’s music programming. But peak experiences can also be embedded in the microstructures of music productions. Through the combination of the regular repetitive pulse with the electronic machine textures of the music, a trance experience is made possible that may generate a type of machine possession—or, reversely, a form of machine exorcism, depending on the symbolic, structural and subcultural context, as will be shown. In this contemporary dance ritual, the dancer is figuratively inoculated, within the relative safety of a musically controlled procedure, against the bewildering machine-driven pulses of the technoculture.

## Repetitive Beats

Rave culture spread across Europe during the early 1990s, and elsewhere, especially to Australia, Canada, Japan, and the US, as well as to backpacker destinations, such as Thai island Ko Pha Ngan. Long-term nomadic visitors to the Indian coastal province of Goa, and to the Spanish Balearic island Ibiza produced their own blueprints that partly inspired, and partly intermingled with, the rave concept. In the UK, the British Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA), 1994, 63 (1)(b) partially defined raves by “sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” (“Powers in Relation to Rave” 1994).<sup>5</sup> Raves are dance parties that, for a range of logistical and legal reasons, are held outside of the legislated nightclub and music venue environment (Collin 1997; Garratt 1998; Reynolds 1998), effectively functioning as “temporary autonomous zones,” or TAZ—a term adapted from Hakim Bey (1991). Around 1990, such events could attract hundreds of participants as result of a British media-generated moral panic (Thornton 1995; Melechi 1993; Redhead 1993; Rietveld 1993). The above legal definition of raves can appear to be vague, if only because most forms of contemporary popular music—including jazz, rock, and funk—are characterized by a repetitive beat. Still, the CJA, 1994, does indicate the foregrounding of an explicitly driving repetitive pulse that characterized the soundtrack of such marathon dance events dominated by then-emerging hardcore rave music, and imported house music from Chicago and techno from Detroit, not to mention Italian house, as well as more industrial inflected electronic beats from Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Although these styles all have their own complex genealogy, they are related by a shared dance club history that connects in rhizomic ways to the 1970s New York City disco scene (Lawrence 2003; Fikentscher 2000; Shapiro 2005); the disco-impulse, with its rhythmical structure of four-on-the-floor, is audible in their musical structure. In disco and subsequent dance music styles, a regular repeating pulse has a double function. Firstly, it enables the DJ to segue and blend recordings in a continuous beat-based mix, which slowly opened the door for machine-generated rhythms during the 1970s (Rietveld 2010b). Secondly, it encourages dancers to stay on the dancefloor as the beat goes on and on, which Robert Fink (2005: 38) identifies as “music of the *drive*,” without immediate final closure based on a tonic note resolution as one expects in “music of *desire*,” such as a standard pop song or,

with a more intense push towards guitar and drum-driven sexual climax, in rock recordings.

By the early 1990s, the sound of electronic dance music picked up some of the more “motorik” aspects of European electronic dance music that was initially tagged as “hard house,” which incorporated a strong mix of acid house and techno music influences, with a hint of industrial music in its genealogy. Eventually, this morphed into a trance-inducing format that came to be known as “trance,” an instrumental beat-driven music with a tempo of around 135 bpm. This techno subgenre propels the dancer subjectively forward, as the repetition transports the music through a morphing wash of electronic sound that rarely seems to resolve on the tonic. In turn, this can have a synesthetic effect; when the eyes are closed, it is possible to experience a feeling of travelling through a spiraling never-ending light tunnel of a psychedelic mandala. Physically moving the body to a continuous digital flow of repetitive beats, dancers are enabled to reach a mental state in which conscious awareness of the past and the future disappears, and to become as one with the sound of music, in particular its machinic pulse and electronic textures (Rietveld 2010a).

The characteristic four-on-the-floor beat of techno and trance, then, developed from a range of directions. Connections are made that are not always direct, but, to use a Deleuzian term, “rhizomic,” broken and reconnecting (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987). It was during the 1970s that the strut of soul, funk and rock morphed toward a driving repetitive machine beat, not only in disco, but also in German experimental rock, belligerently called “Krautrock” by the British music press. According to Simon Reynolds, this music movement “brought into focus the idea that had been latent in rock . . . that the rhythmic essence of rock music . . . was a kind of machine-like compulsion” (2000: 32). Known as the “motoric,” this was pioneered by bands like Neu! and Can—whose style may be defined as residing between the “man-machine rigor” of the German electronic outfit Kraftwerk, and the “sex machine sweat” of American funkster James Brown. Authors such as Peter Shapiro (2005) have suggested that the trope of long-distance trains that transported African-Americans from the southern states to the industrial north of the US, during the first half of the twentieth century, had an important influence on the looping, repetitive grooves of the blues; in turn, this has partially inspired Kraftwerk to produce the intense train-drive of their 1977 recording “Trans-Europe Express” (Flür 2000).

According to Shapiro, also the stepping rhythm of the marching bands of New Orleans was of importance to the development of the tight funk grooves that ultimately informed disco. Robin Sylvan (2002) similarly emphasizes the importance of this southern American city, showing it as a link to the secularization of West-African musicoreligious practices, in which energetic intensity and repetition in movement are generated to produce a state of possession trance in the dancer. Through such Black Atlantic connections, remnants of possession rituals entered the profane realm of modern popular music, to become intertwined with various forms of dance music, from R&B to the sound system culture of reggae (of importance to UK breakbeats), and on to the ritual of techno.

### **Machine Possession**

In terms of Robert Fink's concept of *drive* in repetition, it is tempting to find, as Drew Hemment puts it in a Deleuze-inspired assessment of electronic dance music, that, "a pulsing flow of intensity" produces "a flow of desire not directed towards a climax or resolution" (2004: 87). Indeed, in the context of the genealogy of DJ-led dance parties a musical space is created where the journey (rather than the end-goal) is emphasized, where time is now, and binaries such inside-outside, subject-object, seem to be, temporarily, erased—a point I have made elsewhere (Rietveld 1993; 1998; 2004), and which can be illustrated by a Chicago-based dancer who stated, in 1992: "I dance until the walls fall away from around me" (in other words, boundaries dissolve). In this way, the ability to articulate the experience in language is hampered. For example, over the countless dance events I have attended since the rise of techno at the end of the 1980s, many dancers have found that their intense experience is beyond words, using descriptions such as a wide-eyed "there is nothing like it," or a simple "I feel reborn!" (an intense experience enabling a new perspective or subjectivity). Here, as Fink points out in the context of disco, links may be made to libidinal philosophy, which "offers liberation through 'pure' desire, not dialectical struggle" (2005: 37).

Fink points out that the driving experience of repetition cannot be fully explained through the concept of *jouissance* however, as this may cloud the analysis through overgeneralization. In particular, over the length of a track or of a DJ-set, intensely repetitive music can have a direction that, eventually, leads to climax, the peak experience (see also Sylvan 2002). For example, Kai Fikentscher (2013)

shows how the programming of separate musical elements (the recordings) is an essential DJ-skill. Other commentators, including Robin Sylvan (2002), observe the importance of the journey in electronic dance music, which eventually leads to an energetic climax. This can be illustrated by the Tantric-inspired approach of pioneering Californian trance DJ Goa Gill, who explains how in the Indian province Goa he developed a DJ style that drives dancers through an assault of the senses with industrial mechanical repetitive beats through the night, disorienting and hypnotizing his crowd into a trance. Only at sunrise does the relentless drive recede to give way to narrative songs, giving the dancer the opportunity to return to a sense of wholeness (Davies 2004; Rietveld 2010a). Mark J. Butler (2005: 226) points out that, recordings within the subgenre of trance “typically feature especially climatic builds, in which devices such as snare drum rolls . . . and crescendo create dramatic increases in intensity.” Such an increase in energetic intensity, Gilbert Rouget (1985) has found, may help achieving a state of trance. A different example can be found in the programming technique of DJ-producer Frankie Knuckles (once Chicago-based house music pioneer,), with the support of remixes he specially prepares in advance, emphasizing the “foot,” or four-on-the-floor kick drum. Over many hours (six, eight, even ten hours), he almost insidiously envelops dancers into the repetitive beat, slowly increasing the speed of the music selections, and thereby increasing the energetic intensity, all who are present dance in unison towards the musical peak moments. US-born DJ Osunlade—also a Yoruba-trained priest—adopts yet a different strategy, building up his set with multiple peaks, taking the energy slightly down after each peak—a risky moment that can lose the attention of dancer, but instead creates a tension of anticipation, holding dancers in suspense on the dancefloor for hours through the night.

The management of energy or vibe (St John 2009; Fikentscher 2000) is, to adapt Robert Fink’s libidinal framework, a matter of “syntactic control, a transformed, complex musical erotics of repetitive tension and repetitive release” (2005: 41). The performance of this sex machine is a matter of “recombinant teleology” (43) that can be characterized by an excessive timeframe, “imagined as the music of machines, androids and cyborgs” (45), within an imperceptible duration toward a climax, as illustrated above with a Frankie Knuckles DJ-set. Also, the structural climax—or, even, multiple climaxes—may not occur in a linear or regular fashion. By contrast, “a complete tension-release arc might be smaller than the piece” (46), which is typical



of much dance music. For example, Kai Fikentscher (2000) shows that the repetitive qualities of post-disco dance club music are more than just an emphasis on the pulse through an on-the-beat rhythm, as these provide DJ-friendly predictable internal musical structures that additionally operate according to the logic of four-bar, eight-bar, sixteen-bar, and thirty-two-bar cycles. For Fink, the recombinant teleology that can be found in disco characterizes the wider social and cultural realm, dominated by instant consumerist desire, which he further identifies in the aesthetics of repetition of advertising and in the flickering flat television screen. The breakbeat-driven hardcore continuum seems to respond to a more intensely accelerated experience, though, which is addressed next.

### **Accelerating Rupture**

During the 1980s, UK rave culture took its cue from Jamaican sound systems that were used for dance parties, originally called “raves.” In the UK, the reggae music that was favored by the first generation of Jamaican immigrants tended to be replaced, on occasions, by electro for a younger ethnically mixed working class generation. The breakbeat style of electro would have important consequences for the development of a set of recognizable music genres, first in London, and next in other English cities.<sup>6</sup> The associated musical aesthetic went through a set of incarnations, both stylistically and in name, from acid house and techno to rave hardcore and the more dancehall reggae-inflected subgenre called “jungle.” The latter two subgenres incorporate breakbeats based, as in hip-hop and electro, on samples of drum fills or breaks that “originate in live percussion” (Butler 2006: 78). Unlike in hip-hop and electro, though, breaks are accelerated in hardcore rave. This inspired Simon Reynolds to introduce the concept of the “hardcore-continuum” to designate those subgenres characterized by rhythm programming that utilizes accelerated breakbeat samples. The resulting digitally ruptured approach to rhythm informs those subgenres that followed, such as jungle, and then drum’n’bass, which appeared around 1995 (Martin 1997; Belle-Fortune 2004). A combination with “half-time” (halved tempo) low-frequency basslines resonates with dub reggae, in effect making such dance subgenres part of what may be understood as the “dub diaspora” (Sullivan 2014; Rietveld and van Veen 2015). In the second half of the 1990s, this morphed to the funkier, and more erotic, UK garage (also known as underground garage or speed garage), appealing to female dancers by taking inspiration from

New York club music (“garage”)<sup>7</sup> that was played in the second rooms at jungle and drum’n’bass events. This subgenre provided rhythmical and stylistic characteristics to other subgenres with a more macho-stance that followed into the new millennium, such as grime (featuring rapidly speaking MCs) and dubstep (which is mostly instrumental, and characterized by its slow-moving sub-bass).

Breakbeats tend to stress syncopation, differentiating the hardcore continuum from the four-on-the-floor kick drum repetition of the disco impulse; the hardcore continuum is thereby more part of a reggae continuum. A much-used repetitive accelerated breakbeat sample is the “Amen-break,” a syncopated four-measure drum break popularized by the electro music genre. This sample was taken from a 1969 b-side soul recording, “Amen Brother” by the Winstons. This particular drum break features an inbuilt hesitation, as a teasingly delayed snare hit in the third measure is withheld from the fourth measure, producing a tiny climatic gasp of air, a moment of rupture and suspense, simultaneously producing a desire for return to the regular rhythmic flow (Harrison 2004; Butler 2006). Such a sampled “block of time-space” (Hement 2004: 88) produces a sense of excitement, which, through relentless repetition, creates the main rhythm that plays with the musical pulse in accelerated form. As such, this musical form sounds like an attempt to keep up with the ever-accelerating immediacy of communications that characterize a culture embedded in rapid global capital flows.

With reference to Fredric Jameson’s 1980s work on the cultural logic of late-capitalism, Mark Fisher observes about his London-based students that “we . . . are now facing a generation that is born into that ahistorical, anti-mnemic blip culture—a generation, that is to say, for whom time has always come ready-cut into digital micro-slices” (2006). Breakbeat samples may act as the “digital micro-slices” that are experienced in everyday life by this, and its preceding, generation. A rhythmic complexity can be achieved in high-resolution digital production that, as Anne Danielsen (2010) argues, can feel almost organic. This seems a long way from the explicit mechanical beat of the drum machine-generated four-on-the-floor beat. Indeed, in the popular mind, breakbeat music does no longer adhere to a 4/4 measure. Nevertheless, the Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) on which digital music is produced provides an internal clock (its mechanical heartbeat) to produce a metronomic pulse.

As sampled breakbeats are dislodged from their original contexts, their surface value is emphasized without connection to their original signifiers, thereby amplifying the effect of what seems an empty desire, an aimless continuous *jouissance*. However, as dancers engage with this aesthetic—an “architecture of time” (Rouget 1985: 122)—a new set of meanings is produced in relation to the intensity of city life and the speed of communications. To understand the underlying rationale of London’s breakbeat genres, Chris Christodoulou has applied Paul Virilio’s notion of “dromology” (study of speed) and notes that, “speed provides an important impulse for ritualized social interaction” (2013: 196). Steve Goodman (2005) too addresses issues of tempo in electronic dance music, in particular with regard to differences between subgenres, introducing method of “dromography” to identify “speed tribalism”—a concept he mainly discusses in a London-based context of drum’n’bass and related music styles. A cultural philosopher, manager of the Hyperdub recoding label, and also known for his dubstep productions under the machinic name Kode9, Goodman argues that a subjective transformation occurs depending on the speed of musical pulse: “at certain affective and speed thresholds, an audio collective will undergo a mutation marking the emergence of a rogue vortex, spinning off on its own vector through the sonic” (2005: 8). The sense of speed is intensified by the polyrhythmic quality of subgenres within the hardcore continuum, in where the pulse may be around 170 bpm, while, especially in drum’n’bass and jungle, low rumbling basslines tend to be perceived at half the speed. Jean Baudrillard ([1983] 2001: 197) comments, perhaps pessimistically, that “(e)ver since acceleration has become our common condition, suspense and slow motion are the current forms of the tragic.” As such, a social stratification appears in which one is forced to keep up with accelerated culture, in order not to be (tragically) excluded from the metaphorical “fast lane.” Connecting the aesthetic of breakbeats with the “libidinal economy” of capitalism—to loosely borrow an expression from Lyotard ([1974] 2004)—musical acceleration seems an understandable response, to inoculate against the inhuman speed dictated by informational data exchanges, and to deny the ravages of a deceleration in capitalism—which is, according to Benjamin Noys (2014), a contradictory “dual dynamic.” As London is “a global nodal point for the accelerated flow of commerce, information and migration” (Christodoulou 2013: 211), it is perhaps no coincidence then that the tempo within the musical aesthetic of UK breakbeat music similarly pulls in two contradictory directions: the urgency of

accelerated breakbeats, that attempt to keep up with the proverbial “rat-race,” and a deeply vibrating tragic sense of exclusion, articulated in its dub reggae inspired sub-bass lines.

Steve Goodman further suggests that rhythm and pitch (especially bass) exist on a continuum that he calls “bass nature,” in which “the musical distinction between rhythm (infrasonic frequencies) and pitch (audible frequencies) dissolves, each merely constituting bands on the frequency spectrum” (2005: 3). This is also of interest to a parallel development in four-on-the-floor hardcore techno subgenres. For example, initially developed in Rotterdam during the 1990s, gabber house (or “gabba”), a rather nihilistic form of techno, accelerated its tempo to 180 bpm by 1993 (Rietveld 1998), with *Billboard* reporting in 1997 that “200 beats-per-minute is quite typical” (Tilli 1997: 44). Speedcore outdoes this with tempos of 300 bpm, and some extremes are clocking up to 1000 bpm (Balli 2014; Christodoulou 2013). As the music accelerates to a beyond-human speed, an almost meditative drone emerges that holds the listener in a state of permanent present time. Accelerating repetitive phrases thereby, perhaps paradoxically, create a sense of inertia, suspending the dancer in a timeless sonic space, a looped forever “now,” temporarily erasing awareness of past and future. Within each musical attempt to address acceleration, and inertia, some form of machine possession may occur. Or perhaps, reversely, at this extreme, a type of machine exorcism seems enacted, comparable to the tarantella dance in southern Italy, where the musicians attempt to find the right musical form to heal the dancer from possession by the “spider’s bite” (Rouget 1985). Around 2004, while digital networks increased information flows to non-human processing speeds, genres such as dubstep seemed to reject acceleration by stripping out the speedy breakbeats of drum’n’bass, and emphasizing its defiantly dragging high-volume sub-bass. Hereby the perceived tempo halves the actual pulse from approximately 160 to 80 bpm, while the forceful sub-bass demands audio space, giving the dancer an experience of being in the eye of a hurricane.

### **Slowing down**

The crackling sound of digitally sampled old dirty vinyl, a low sub-bass drone-like buzz suggesting the cinematic sound of an alien space ship that slowly moves with the momentum of an extremely heavy mass: “Subtemple,” by Burial (2017), offers no rhythm section. Instead the irregularly repetitive sound of a needle skipping at the

end of a vinyl record, reminiscent of Brian Eno—who, when ill, was unable to remove a record from the turntable his friend had put on earlier, and ended up listening attentively to environmental sounds framed by the rhythm of the click of the skipping needle, which led him to produce what he called “ambient music” (1975). On “Subtemple,” ambience is achieved through an accumulation of multi-layered sounds of incidental voices, the crackling and buzzing, digital samples offering traces from a bygone analog era as they are wrapped in distancing echoic effects. Eventually, a small prayer bell joins in this haunting play of spirits (or, perhaps, it is a sonic remnant from the film *Bladerunner*—1982). A truncated sample of a single female vocal, like a cyborgial remnant of a once human world, repeatedly calls out something that various people interpret as “so get too loud”, or “so get some love”, the last syllable sustained, fading into oblivion. Reviewer Pekke interprets the same vocal sample as “took you so long,” a statement of impatience, so typical of accelerated culture: “someone is in anger and the journey into nothingness continues, as we further dive down things distort into grand halls devoid of any detail with only humid air giving a sense of infinity as a thick fog” (2017). About two-third into the track, a different sampled voice whispers: “All that’s left is the procedure.” Here, in the tragic performance of inertia, the sluggish machine rules. The aesthetic trajectory of this track places it, via dubstep, in a genealogy of electronic dance music genres so typical of London, the hardcore continuum, the music associated to “raves,” those DJ-led dance rituals fuelled by non-stop machine-generated repetitive beats that, with some intoxicating chemical enhancement, move dancers into a state of ecstasy. In “Subtemple,” a ritualistic engagement with a machine-like entity remains, which is now explicitly digital, its almost shape-shifting rhythm no longer emphasizing a mechanistic metronomic beat, even though implicitly a strong pulse remains, sucking the listener, unable to dance in this multi-layered tapestry of digital sound, into a downward spiral. Is this a reaction to the ever-accelerating whirlwind that tragically seems now beyond human reach?

Having discussed specific ritualistic characteristics of electronic dance music in terms of its electronic machine aesthetic and repetitive beats, the argument here is that machinic structures of feeling are produced. Lengthy electronic dance music events enable an affective flow within a vertiginous maelstrom of contemporary data, where amplified bass and repetitive grooves, sprinkled with bleeps and swoops move the body. In versions of techno that are produced at a humanly danceable

pace, one may be able to speak of possession trance in which the dancer ecstatically adopts a cyborg subjectivity. Where the speeds of repetition become challenging, either by being faster than the pace of a human breath and the rate of a beating human heart, or by being so slow as though inertly stuck at the event horizon of a black hole of data density, it seems more likely that the dancer may be exorcized from overwhelming daily experiences of inhuman machine speeds. Ultimately, within the repetitive beats of the machine-aesthetic of electronic dance music, the dancer is inoculated against the assault of accelerated information overload within the contemporary technoculture.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of technoculture is addressed, amongst others, by Robins and Webster (1999), Penley and Ross (1991), and Shaw (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Synthesizers generate sound, and sequencers order the musical structure. Nowadays, the functions of such devices are usually embedded in software-based Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), but modular as well as analog electronic sound generation is still possible, and even gaining popularity with some producer-performers.

<sup>3</sup> See also Reynolds 2010 and 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Audio samples of differentiating textures, rhythms and tempos can be heard on *Ishkur's Guide to Electronic Music* (Taylor 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The popularity of this term in the UK inspired Steve Redhead to publish a collection of interviews with fiction authors he dubbed, in reference to the previous American beat generation, the "repetitive beat generation" (2000), and which narratively produce structures of feeling that complement electronic dance music and its cultural context.

<sup>6</sup> In particular Bristol and Manchester, each with a working class population that includes a significant mix of Irish and Caribbean ethnic backgrounds, arguably social remnants of an English colonialist past.

<sup>7</sup> The subgenre name "garage" refers to dance club Paradise Garage—see also Fikentscher (2000) and Lawrence (2003).