Heroes of the Night: Djs and Electronic Dance Music in Hong Kong

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Abstract: This article considers the DJ and the electronic dance music that s/he propagates, using ethnographic material from Hong Kong, collected in 2013. The narratives of my informants are organized around three tensions that recur in the history of Western music and popular culture: the tension between rationality and emotion, between art and technology, and between authenticity and commercial success. I argue that these tensions arise from false dichotomies akin to 'category errors'. Nonetheless, these tensions are keenly felt by musical practitioners, for they reflect the challenge of maintaining artistic integrity and coherent identity in a capitalist society confronted by rapid technological change.

Introduction

This article considers the DJ and the electronic dance music that s/he propagates, using ethnographic material from Hong Kong, collected between January and November 2013. Both the profession and the music are rather esoteric, but their distinctive features highlight broad issues of how technological advancement interacts with artistic aspiration and the dynamics of popular culture. I treat DJs and electronic dance music, not as aberrations in Western musical history, an overdone trope, but as the latest steps in its onward march. Part I of this thesis gives a historical and social context, finding evidence beneath the surface differences between 'classical music', performed for the intellectual contemplation of a passive audience, and electronic dance music that provokes bodies into dancing in mindless ecstasy. I argue that the latter music uses mathematics to drive emotion, and thus represents a contemporary resolution of the tension between rationality and emotion that Max Weber identified as driving Western music as a whole. Part II is a brief discussion on methodology that explains how I came to collect cases from Hong Kong to illustrate the data, I address two further tensions that today's DJs must confront in considering their own identities as artists and performers.

The tension between art and technology is addressed in Part III, 'The Art of Smashing Plates'. This traces how the role of DJs has evolved with the advancement of technology and how their desire for the smoother integration of musical tracks led them to demand greater control over more aspects of the music, which in turn drove further technological advancements. Meanwhile, the overwhelming array of music available online left a role for DJs as arbiters of taste, although this role is now under challenge, given the low cost of entry by competing arbiters. Some DJs respond to the options that technological advancement opens up by looking backward to earlier technologies to construct an identity. Others look forward, embracing each new technology as a more powerful tool for new forms of artistic expression.

The tension between authenticity and commercial success is addressed in Part IV, 'Walking the Tightrope Between Soul and Market'. This tension confronts all artists who have to make a living, but plays out in a more complex fashion in a globalized society, especially for art that is easy to transmit, reproduce and manipulate.

The concluding part argues that the tensions analyzed in this article all arise from false dichotomies that are akin to the 'category errors' that have afflicted the Western philosophical tradition, according to Gilbert Ryle. The tensions are nevertheless keenly felt by musical practitioners because they reflect the challenge of maintaining artistic integrity and a coherent identity within a capitalist society in the face of rapid technological change.

Part I: Social and Historical Context

The Evolution of Musical Modes of Production

Adapting Marx, I define the *musical mode of production* as the way in which talent and creativity are channeled by the prevailing technology, aesthetic hierarchy, value system and political economy. Together, these factors determine what music is played, where, when, to whom, who profits, who gets the credit, where the boundaries are drawn between creator, performer, patron and audience, and – most importantly – what is accepted as 'music'. The following five sub-sections recount the transformation in the musical mode of production from the art music of the 16th century to the dance music of today.

Capitalist Music: From Composer-Entrepreneur to Recording Artist

The bedrock of both opera and electronic dance music is capitalism, but of two very different types. Western musicians began to chafe at aristocratic domination in the 18th century; by its end, they were no longer 'musician-valets' but 'musician-entrepreneurs' who solicited funds from multiple wealthy patrons and/or collaborated with businessmen to put on popular concerts (Attali 1985: 47). Thus, whilst Bach toiled away at the court of Count Anthon Gunther and was ordered to "appear promptly on Sundays, feast days, and other days of public divine service…at the organ entrusted to you" (ibid: 48), Beethoven secured from three Austrian nobles a lifetime stipend (as long as he remained in Austria) so that he could dedicate himself to creating "great and sublime works ennobling the arts" (Blanning 2008: 34). Through the legal instrument of copyright, composers were eventually able to profit from the conversion of their music into signs (i.e. sheet music), where previously only publishing houses had profited. And with "the emergence of an anonymous public as a major cultural player" (ibid. p. 74), their performance space shifted from church and palace to public concert houses and theatres, while their music shifted from re-presenting the glory of God and king "by making it visible, tangible and audible" (ibid.:76), as Bach and Handel had done, to providing secular exhibitions of individual feeling. Here, remarks Attali, "it was bourgeoisie individualism that was being enacted: it appeared in music even before it began to regulate the political economy" (1985: 57). Propelled by bourgeois consumption, the composer-entrepreneur displaced the feudal overlord as the prime mover of Western music.

As a new class of professionals emerged to create music for public consumption, music ceased to be the soundtrack to everyday life and became a distinct activity — and a highly regulated, ritualized one at that:

> The old bourgeois society was the age of separatism in the arts and high culture. As religion was once, art was "something higher", or a step towards something higher: that is, "culture". The enjoyment of art led to spiritual improvement and was a kind of devotional activity…it was sharply

> distinguished from everyday life and from mere "entertainment". (Hobsbawm 2013: 18-19)

The opera house enshrined aristocratic dominance of the prevailing socio-political hierarchy: "as an extension of the court, the opera house replicated its nice distinctions of rank and elaborate etiquette" (Blanning 2008: 128). However, these architectural ego-trips incurred heavy costs that had to be recouped from ticket sales to the bourgeoisie, so their foyers became a hub for political debate and business transactions. Moreover, confined to seats and laced into ornate corsets, wigs, and footware, the musical public could experience the music only at an intellectual level, thus perpetuating the notion that 'beautiful' music was an object of contemplation. Lastly, the opera was an ideal setting to instill in the bourgeoisie audience a new type of allegiance: nationalism. German composers set about inventing a 'national style' with particular enthusiasm, and opera was inundated with 'folk' melodies and instruments, as well as mythic national heroes. The opera house was where Western society could bask in its newfound collective glory, reaffirmed by the music and drama onstage, and the social rituals offstage.

The commoditization of music and music-related entertainment during the 18th century required a mass of affluent middle-class consumers who could afford concert tickets, plus technologies like the pianoforte and sheet music that let them 'consume' the music at home. With these innovations, the 'public' could now conceptualize itself as such. So emerged the 'popular' music of capitalist society. Music became a consumable object alienated from its creator, and the musician was incorporated into the division of labor as a composer-entrepreneur: 'the artist was born, at the same time as his work went on sale' (Attali 1985: 47).

The alienation and commodification of music was carried forward by the gramophone in the 1920s, then intensified by the digitization of music in the 1990s. Recording technology and mass production ushered in what Attali calls the era of 'repetition': 'the death of the original, the triumph of the copy, and the forgetting of the represented foundation' (ibid.:89). As focus shifted towards perfecting the copy, music became an industry like any other: driven by capitalists creating products for their exchange value. The composer-entrepreneur was subsumed in the record label, which also commanded a workforce of sound engineers, singer-songwriters, session musicians, producers, vocal coaches and marketing executives. This enterprise was held together and given superficial unity in the public eye by elevating the performer to stardom. In certain respects, then, popular music was assimilated into what Adorno and Horkheimer call the culture industry: the mass production and standardization of cultural material that is "business made into ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce" (2002: 95), where genre differentiation is dependent "not so much on

subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape" (ibid.: 97).

The Arrival and Significance of the DJ

Now appeared the disc jockey – on the radio first. Before technology allowed him to mix two songs together, he had to craft a narrative during voiceovers. In the face of overwhelming and arguably artificial choice, the radio DJ provided cohesion and direction. Contemporary electronic dance music was born when DJs began remixing pop songs to suit discotheques; the history of dance music in general is a procession of scenes and communities rather than a hallowed lineage of composers. In classical music, as well as contemporary rock and pop, to be labeled as 'derivative' is the ultimate insult. In dance music, derivation is the lifeblood of the system, from the smallest cowbell sample, to the vocal loop swiped off an old fifties soul record, to the endless re-rubs, remixes, re-edits, dub versions and VIP (varied-in-production) mixes that a release of a single is bound to spawn. This ethos of borrowing upsets the fundamental organizing principle of capitalism: private property. Within the dance music community, intellectual property is hard to bind to a particular object, work or person, because so much of the value added comes from the cross-fertilization of ideas between musicians.

The DJ is nothing without the affirmation of his audience, while his musical material relies on a swathe of musicians who he does not know and may never meet. These musicians may, in turn, sample heavily from the works of others, and so on. At the same time, the DJ serves as the crucial interface between crowd and musical producer. Most importantly, musical technology enables him to become a performer in his own right: the crowd comes to listen and dance to him. By bringing songs to life in the context of other songs, he not only selects but also innovates, constructing and relaying an immersive sonic experience that the crowd embodies through dance.

The DJ is but one figure in the contemporary musical landscape, and what he does is inextricably linked to that of other actors in the field such as the producer, the club-owner and the party-goer. However, the DJ deserves special attention for two reasons. The first has already been emphasized: in the domain of dance music and clubbing, the DJ serves as the crucial interface between demand (festival goers, partiers) and supply (producers/artists, venue-owners). S/he is to electronic music what the composer-entrepreneur was to classical music from the 18th century onwards – its leading figure – but one whose prowess is measured, not by the originality of his/her creations but by his/her ability to recombine the creation of others.

The second reason goes beyond his/her immediate environment: the DJ was the first musical figure whose artistic credibility stemmed from the creative appropriation of the

works of others scattered through time and space. S/he alone had the audacity to splice and dice pop songs on reels of tape to adapt them to the needs of the dancefloor. In other words, the DJ pioneered the *remix*, enacting it in dance music before it was realized in broader society, which soon took to remixing all kinds of pop cultural material in digital form: YouTube mashup videos, fanfiction, anime music videos, wikis, open-source software, internet memes of the kind found on 4chan and 9gag, even the commonplace act of quoting or hyperlinking – all are instances of remixing.

(Dance) Music Goes Digital

The structural shift of greatest concern to the DJ, is the quantum leap in the sophistication and reach of the technology at his/her disposal. This includes both the actual equipment that a DJ uses in a performance (mixers, turntables, software controllers), as well as where, how and in what formats s/he sources his musical material from. Although MP3s were around in the 1990s, DJs did not make use of them until CDJs (turntables using CDs instead of vinyl records) became widespread in the early 2000s. Software that simulated the turntable experience appeared around the same time, but was not popularized until several years later, in the mid-to-late 2000s. In under a decade, the DJ went from painstakingly sourcing his vinyl collection EP by EP from grotty warehouses and mail-order catalogues to having millions of songs, old and new, at his fingertips, obtainable and usable in an instant. He has also seen the automation of what was once his core skill – aligning two tracks of different speeds to create a continuous flow of music, also known as *beatmatching.* This can now be achieved by pressing a single 'sync' button.

Digitization and Its Discontents

The professional artist of modern capitalist society, whether musician or painter, was the by-product of specialization and the division of labor. His/her venerated place in Read-Only culture was guaranteed by the limitations of technology relative to human skill, which created high entry-barriers to his profession in terms of time and resources. His audience remained passive, largely unable to disassemble his creations and adapt them to their own ends: "The mechanization of music reduced the need for traditional musical skills. The combination of cinema, radio and records inexorably turned the music-playing public into a music-consuming public" (Blanning 2008: 202). Capital, and hence power, were concentrated in the hands of a few.

But by "[removing] the constraints that had bound particular analog tokens of RO [Read-Only] culture", digital technology made 'Read-Write' culture possible (Lessig 2008: 38). In music, as in other arts, this has triggered two movements, in opposite directions. On the one hand, digitization has reignited amateurism. Using relatively low-cost equipment, a growing number of people can now access, and hence contribute to, a greater body of

material over a wide range of social media platforms. So cultural production has accelerated and become democratized: niche communities and genres have proliferated and flourished that otherwise would not have seen the light of day – the Long Tail phenomenon. In other words, in music as in other spheres, digitization is transforming industrial capitalism into network capitalism: the capability to generate output, plus the power to leverage it, has been distributed throughout the network. This is reflected in the decline of the 'Big Five' record companies that once dominated the music industry, and the ascent of indie record labels and online distribution platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp, where amateur musicians can broadcast their creations for free.

Unfortunately, the same processes have encouraged the celebration of mediocrity in a mass market focused on spectacle and the hit. Profit-hungry executives can fortify mediocre talents with technological manipulation and marketing savvy to vouchsafe them fifteen minutes of fame and a lifetime of talk-show appearances and tabloid sagas. Trapped in this mass market, music is becoming deeply unsatisfactory:

> The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 111).

In another era, Justin Bieber, Rebecca Black and other artists of questionable talent would have remained cloistered in their bedrooms crooning into a hairbrush, but true innovators, such as Aphex Twin and Nine Inch Nails, would also have been consigned to obscurity, and their valuable contributions lost. Thus, music bears witness to the major contradiction within popular culture in the digital age.

Electronic dance music has not been immune to this. As elaborated in Part IV, certain DJ/producers have been swept up into the vortex of David Guetta-style celebrity, producing, remixing and performing their way to becoming 'musical brands' in their own right. They command astronomical fees on multi-stop global tours, which hail their mix CDs with the fanfare previously accorded to the works of major recording artists. This began in the late 1990s with the eruption of trance into the mainstream, and has resurged in the late 2000s under the confusingly generic banner of 'EDM' led by 'DJ-slash-producers' such as Skrillex, Zedd, Avicii and Deadmaus. A musical culture that once prided itself as the exclusive pursuit of a select few, has now achieved mass-market appeal. It does not help that 'live' performances by the aforementioned stars of 'EDM' on their whirlwind global tours often amount to little more than hitting 'play'.

Anyone Can be a DJ

On the lips of almost every DJ whom I interviewed was the lament: "These days, anyone can be a DJ". This view is satirized in the article, 'Clubbed to Death EP. 1', on the Midnight & Co. Tumblr page: "We've reached a tipping point: There are now more DJs on Earth than actual clubbers! DJs will now be charged to get into nightclubs to watch people dancing" (Midnight & Co. 2013). Beneath the sarcasm is a valid and pressing concern: when technology closes the distance between amateur and professional, the position of the latter is jeopardized – to an extent.

In the age of mechanical reproduction, the DJ pioneered the techniques of hybridization that would pervade the age of digital reproduction. But what happens when such techniques are no longer novel but instead are ubiquitous, and the DJ's skills can mostly be automated and are therefore easy to replicate? Brian Eno, father of ambient music, has suggested one possible outcome: "The technologies we now use have tended to make creative jobs do-able by many different people: new technologies have the tendency to replace skills with judgment – its not what you *can* do that counts, but what you *choose* to do, and this invites everyone to start crossing boundaries" (Blanning 2008; Warner 2003: 22). In this study, Part III focuses on what boundaries are being crossed, how, by whom, and under what circumstances; Part IV asks how this affects electronic dance music, how people conceive of it, and its relationship with mainstream music.

Talking about Dance Music

The recent past often proves the most elusive to document: compared to the four centuries that classical music took to reach maturity, electronic dance music only really began with seventies disco, and remains in its infancy. Scholarly works on electronic dance music have generally been confined to either cultural/youth studies, or to minute structural appraisals of the music itself. At one end of the spectrum, we have analyses of nightlife subcultures that utilize neo-tribal theory to explain: how and why they emerge (Goulding et al. 2002, Riley et al. 2010a, 2010b); the role of nightclubs in the burgeoning 'night-time economy' of post-industrial urban centers (Hobbs et al. 2000, Hollands 2010) and their conversion into commercial enterprises (McRobbie 2002); how the mushrooming of genres and sub-genres in dance music reflect the development of subcultures in relation to mainstream culture (McLeod 2001); and how 'laptop music' violates the norms of traditional performer-audience relationships (Cascone 2003). On the other end, we have the application of conventional music theory to analyze rhythm and meter in electronic dance music (Butler 2006) and ruminations on the aesthetics of sampling (Rodgers 2003). Elsewhere, and somewhat removed from the mainstream discourse, we find tentative forays into the physicality and the subjective experience of dance music (Ostertag 2002, Jackson 2004), and

the role of repetition in sustaining auditory pleasure (Garcia 2005, Hargreaves 1984, Bahn et al. 2001, Moelants 2002b).

So far, it would seem, the literature has been divided between considering dance music as a musical phenomenon and dance music as a social phenomenon, a division that I hope the above discussion has shown to be untenable. A few texts, however, stand out as syncretic. Some examine how the identities of DJs and dance music producers are affected by technological change. For example, *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology and Electronic Dance Music Culture* (Farrugia 2012), is an ethnographic account of how female DJs in the USA handle being "equated with sexuality of the body, emotion and nature in dance music, while men have been assigned to the realm of culture, technology and language" (ibid.; Bradby 1993: 157). The short article, "Tracking the DJs: Vinyl Records, Work and the Debate Over New Technologies", (Farrugia and Swiss 2005) documents how DJs have reacted to the drastic advances in technology and presages my research in Part III.

Because academia tends to compartmentalize, some of the best surveys of electronic dance music and DJs are compiled by journalists – true enthusiasts, often stalwarts of the scene, whose work encompasses both the musical and the social. Brewster and Boughton's *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (2000) and Reynolds' *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (2000) are comprehensive histories that I refer to extensively in this article. Brewster and Boughton focus on the rise of the disc jockey and his mutation through various music scenes from the swing era to trance, wherein their key idea is that the DJ "is simply the latest incarnation of an ancient role" (2000: 2) previously held by shamans and "pagan high priests" (ibid.). Reynolds provides a near stream-of-conscious narrative of how electronic dance music emerged from a furious interchange between musicians and communities in Europe (Berlin, London, Manchester) and the US (Chicago, Detroit and New York). Sprawling and steadfastly unacademic, it is nevertheless a rich source of theoretical speculation and social analysis.

Few authors have tried to situate electronic dance music in Western musical history or Western thought in general, perhaps because the genre is seen as such an anomaly. To my knowledge, the sole exception is *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (1999) by Gilbert and Pearson. Their history of ideas about music and dance in Western culture situates mainstream musical development in the West within its metaphysical tradition. This distinguishes mind from body and privileges the mind, an approach pioneered by Socrates and Plato, developed by Rousseau and Kant, and upheld by theoreticians as recent and radical as Adorno. Gilbert and Pearson argue that mainstream music fits this logocentric tradition in its emphasis on lyrics and melody, i.e., on mental processes over corporeal responses. They see electronic dance music as subverting this tradition. Employing discourse analysis and deconstructivism, as well as the theories of

Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, they explore the "ecstatic experiences at the heart of contemporary dance culture" to understand why multiple sectors of society, from intellectuals to politicians to parents have reacted to this cultural phenomenon with such hostility. Their analysis is illuminating, but takes place mainly at the philosophical level; rarely do they delve into the actual, lived *practices* of electronic dance music versus classical music and compare the two. It is into this void between the two musical traditions, a byproduct of scholastic hesitation, that I introduce my final proposition.

Beat Science Beats Science: Electronic Dance Music Meets Weberian Rationalization

Like other authors, I have so far viewed electronic dance music and classical music (and the continuation of its ideals in contemporary rock and pop) as fundamentally opposed entities: on the surface they appear to be at loggerheads. But I now argue that we should view them as two way stations on the journey that defines Western music. A hint as to the direction of this journey can be found in the thought of the leading sociologist Max Weber. Arguably, his most famous idea was that the 'ground trend' of post-Enlightenment Western civilization was the movement towards rationalization, i.e. "the submitting of an area of experience to calculable rules" (Martindale et al. 2009; Weber 2002: xxii). Less famous is his observation that this drive was present in every facet of society, including music. In their preface to Weber's little-known essay *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, Martindale et al. (2009) observe:

> Western tone intervals were known and calculated elsewhere. But rational harmonic music, both counterpoint and harmony and the formation of tone materials on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third are peculiar to the West. So too, is a chromatics and enharmonics interpreted in terms **of** harmony. Peculiar, too, is the orchestra with its nucleus in the string quartet and organization of ensembles of wind instruments. In the West appears a system of notation making possible the composition of musical works in a manner impossible otherwise. (ibid.)

The abstract framework of Western classical music is based on the various keys in which it can be played, which are related to one another in a mathematical fashion in the 'circle of keys'. The crucial point about the diatonic scale in any key is that the musical interval between successive notes is not uniform (in the key of C, there is a half-tone between B and C and between E and F, but a full tone between all other successive notes). This irregularity has profound implications: it provides a framework for the expression of complex emotions. For, this irregularity ensures that each key has a 'home' note: tension is created by a departure from home and relaxation by a return. Different chords, comprising of notes of the same key, allow more complex forms of tension and relaxation. Even more complex forms are allowed by transitions between keys. In the hands of a master like Mozart,

Beethoven or Wagner, the tight 'irregular/regular' structure of related diatonic scales allows the expression of complex, profound emotions within a rational framework. Western classical music from the Enlightenment onwards ordained and reaffirmed a world in motion:

> The greatest of all western innovation in music is, that majestical web of structured sound known as diatonic harmony…it created…a world in which form is closed but dynamic and above all progressive in the sense of moving forward to a sensed objective or resolution. In English, this art of forward movement is betrayed in its very vocabulary. One speaks of the "leading note", which impels towards rest and resolution; harmonies change by "modulation" and chord "progressions". (Hindley 2002: 40)

This obsession with progression is also present in electronic dance music, but by integrating tracks and samples in a (potentially) never-ending musical sequence, the DJ promises 'rest and resolution' but never quite delivers it. Tension is there as well, but occurs at a primal level, delivered not as key changes but as the alternate removal and addition of particular frequencies. When the breakdown commences, and the whoosh of white noise overtakes the other elements of the track, our hearts catch in our throats; when the kick drum and bass drop back in, we return 'home' in an adrenaline-saturated blaze of glory. In this respect, electronic dance music fulfills the expectations encoded in Western classical music, but in cyclical rather than linear form, which better suits the dancing body.

Weber suspected 'that the drive was powerfully present at the heart of Western man's musical culture to transform the highest of his musical expressions into an equation in mathematics' (Weber 2002; Martindale 2009). That transformation was driven by technology. In classical music, musical notation allowed the representation of a musical idea to be realized by an analog instrument. The inherent inability of notation to capture all dimensions of music, and inherent variations in the physical production of music (each violin differs subtly from the next, just like each violinist) left room for the individual performer to interpret the music. Thereby, 'the Greats' distinguished themselves from the 'Good.' An abstract framework was superimposed onto musical production, but imperfectly so; expression and emotion came from taking liberties with this framework.

Rationalization was in its adolescence in classical music, but reached maturity in electronic dance music, as a glance at the typical producer or DJ setup would confirm. In all computer-generated music, sound is manipulated essentially by applying mathematical operations to the underlying field of 1s and 0s. Electronic dance music is produced with the synthesizer, which generates sound by passing soundwaves through filters, and by the sequencer, which maps the soundwaves onto a grid. Dynamics are generated by modulating the velocity and/or amplitude of grid elements; tempo becomes 'beats-per-minute'. Since the abstract framework of mathematical operations yields music via the direct adjustment of

mathematical parameters, there is no room for individual interpretation in the classical sense. Music production technology advances by expanding the set of available mathematical operations and controllable parameters, so that more general characteristics of the soundwaves can be manipulated mathematically and this manipulation can be more finely calibrated. Then music expression becomes a matter of *choice* rather than interpretation (recall Brian Eno's observation): how one decides to arrange the various samples and to adjust the filters and effects so as to produce an atmosphere. Thus, electronic dance does not merely *approach* mathematics, as Weber postulated, it *is* mathematics, but so powerful and fine-grained that it can trigger a deep, visceral response from the dancing crowd.

Weber identified the principal tension of "the protagonists of the aesthetic adventure of Western man" as being the drive "to attain a maximum of logical order, rationality, on the one hand, and…intensified, lyric, free, creative expression, affectivity, on the other" (Martindale et al. 2009: xxix). Around the globe, nightclub and festival crowds gyrate with drug- and alcohol-fueled abandon to some of the most highly systematized, rigidly formulated music ever created. Has the enduring tension between rationality and emotion that Weber identified been finally, incongruously, resolved on the dancefloor?

Part II: Methodology

I was a participant-observer of the DJ tribe: From August 2012 until December 2013 I was a resident DJ in Midnight & Co a nightclub in Hong Kong Central. The club reincarnates Yumla, which had operated in the same location from 2003 to 2011. For the most of its existence, Yumla was the only nightlife venue that prioritized nurturing local DJs over hosting big-name acts from overseas – the *modus operandi* of certain other Hong Kong clubs who claimed to support 'underground' dance music, but in fact had simply latched onto its commercial potential. This history made Yumla/Midnight & Co. an excellent place to start researching Hong Kong's DJ and electronic dance music community, not least because prefacing interview requests with 'I work at Midnight' always ensured a friendly welcome.

I was fortunate that both the timeframe and the objectives of my research overlapped with another ongoing project at Midnight: a web series called *Vinyl Tap*, produced by bar manager Mark Nakayama with Jack as cameraman. Partially out of Tuesday-night restlessness, partially out of a desire to promote the revamped club, they started interviewing local DJs who played 'proper' dance music (i.e., they avoided the Top 40 music that is ubiquitous in Lan Kwai Fong and Wanchai). We ended up developing an effective strategy for working our way through a long roster of DJs. Mark had a set of standard, easy-to-answer questions for every interview to structure the resulting video. These questions would get the interviewees thinking, opening them up to my follow-up questions that addressed specific topics in-depth. All were passionate about their music; some had a wealth of knowledge about the development of Hong Kong's dance music scene, and on the impact of

technological change on the DJ's work and identity. They offered additional insights and strong opinions based on their decades of involvement in Hong Kong's creative/artistic community, their other roles as club owners, promoters, journalists or music producers, and their experience in other countries, which provided useful comparisons.

Part III: The Art of Smashing Plates[1]

Introduction

This Part tells of the impact of technology on the role of the DJ – and how the DJ's objectives drove technological advancement. The DJ began as a mere selector of musical tracks for radio stations, tracks that he linked through chitchat while he changed vinyl records on the station's phonograph. Then the technology arrived that enabled the DJ to deliver an integrated flow of music to an audience that was dancing to its rhythms. With the arrival of digitized recordings, the DJ's desire for seamless integration of musical tracks drove not only the development of the technology of musical integration, but also the process of musical production itself. Thus, to ensure rhythmic regularity, the beats that had been produced by human musicians came to be produced mechanically, then by software. Then technological advances enabled the DJ to reach into a complex musical performance, comprising a range of voices and instruments, and to manipulate particular components of that performance. This enabled even more sophisticated integration of musical performances.

Technology has also transformed the process of musical selection. Music used to be embodied in the vinyl record, on which specialists could discern a physical analog to the music. Digitization dissolved that physical analogy in the CD. Then, with MP3 encoding, even the physical embodiments disappeared into cyberspace. Digitization and the internet enable the selection process to become much more efficient, but the overwhelming choice now available to everyone allows the DJ to retain his original role as a selector of music and guide for popular taste. However, the barriers to entry into this role have now vanished, so he faces a swarm of competitors via blogs and Facebook.

In a story driven by technological advances so powerful as to transform the role of the DJ, what is striking is the grip of the old technology of the vinyl record on the identities even of younger DJs who had never experienced that era personally. So historical memories and cultural artifacts from earlier eras retain a profound influence, even in a highly specialized community that has been utterly transformed by technology. This is the anthropological lesson that this Part draws.

[1] 'Smashing plates' is the literal translation of the Cantonese word for disc-jockeying: 打碟。

Music in the Digital Era

Music Becomes Information

Music is now consumable as 'pure digital information'. This "constitutes a *hypercommodification* of music in which *musical sound becomes a commodity in itself*, unmoored from physical support" (Auslander 2001: 82). If I 'take' a digital piece of music from you, or purchase it online, it is as a copy that neither detracts from the quality of the original nor affects its availability. Digital music (sans Digital Rights Management software) is therefore a non-exclusive, infinitely-replicable commodity that does not deteriorate through use. The Internet makes geographical distance irrelevant and transportation costs nil as an intangible stream of 1s and 0s travel instantly from the site of creation to the site(s) of consumption. The problem of shelf-space evaporates for online dance music supermarkets such as Beatport, which stores millions of tracks catering to every taste imaginable, available globally on the day of their release. For the DJ, location, economies of scale (e.g. in bulk purchasing) and personal connections become less important, although not entirely irrelevant, in determining access. And on the production end, the bedroom enthusiast can, through a combination of cheap home studio software/hardware and online sharing platforms such as Soundcloud or Bandcamp, circumvent the label and the record studio and reach an audience directly.

With recording, music was first severed from the context of its creation and transformed into a commodity, then this commodity was removed from the physical world altogether. All that remained in order for the DJ to embrace this new sonic reality was the technology to help him remix it.

DJ Tools in the Digital Era

Many people speak of a 'digital revolution', but for DJs the revolution had already taken place in the pre-digital era, with the turntables and 12-inch vinyl singles that allowed for the tactile manipulation of sound. Digitization triggered the *evolution* of DJ tools as equipment manufacturers sought to harness the dramatic increase in storage capacity and portability it afforded. This evolution occurred in two stages: first, through CDJs, an analog-digital hybrid that emulated turntables but replaced 12-inch vinyl with CD, USB and/or hard drive input; second, through DJ software such as Traktor Pro and Serato Scratch, which condensed the entire setup into a single computer program.

Compact discs first appeared in 1982 and swiftly usurped vinyl as the audio format of choice for consumers, but was spurned by the DJ for lacking the interactivity of vinyl, and for being unsuited to the "the sub-bass-flooded confines of a nightclub" (Rothlein 2013). When Pioneer pioneered the first CDJ-500 in 1994, it followed the model established by vinyl

turntables (adding a pitch-adjustment slider, for example), and transplanted anti-vibration technology from the equally hostile playback environment of car stereo-systems. Yet widespread adoption did not occur until 'vinyl emulation' was introduced along with the CDJ-1000 in 2001, and CDJs began to resemble more closely their Technics forebears (ibid.). A *jog dial* simulated the tactile control of vinyl; activating 'vinyl mode' enabled users to 'scratch' the CD.

To this was added 'features that couldn't exist outside the digital realm' (ibid.), which gave DJs increased versatility to 'play' with their mixes. A small digital display showed essential information about the track being played: BPM (to the nearest whole number on earlier models, more accurately on later models), a pixelated waveform of the track, the time elapsed, and a dial enabling users to scroll through their track directory. To the pitch-adjust slider was added a *master tempo*, which locked the pitch of a track during changes in speed. Beginning with the CDJ-1000, cueing was digitized as well: a DJ could set multiple *hot cues* throughout a track and trigger them at will. A critical extension of this was *looping*, a form of ad-hoc sampling whereby two cue markers (*cue-in* and *cue-out*) defined a track fragment for indefinite repetition. This allowed a DJ to prolong mix-in and mix-out sequences and utilize fragments of other tracks to add complexity to the mix. Arguably, it was CDJs that afforded the club DJ more sophisticated modes of selection, intervention and modification, which allowed him/her to participate as creative artist at a higher level.

Digital Software and Controllers

The third and most recent phase of DJ technology features the total digitization of a DJ's track collection and his/her capacity to manipulate them; all the DJ tools described above are fused into a single piece of software that can be operated on a computer without any external devices. The software itself has become so powerful and user-friendly that it has significantly altered DJing practices. It now displays quantitative analyses of the music in real time and allows precise manipulation to be automated. The musical structure of a track can now be broken down and visualized in detail as *waveforms*, while advances in waveform calibration now enable *beat-gridding*. This increases the precision of BPM analysis by assigning markers that "point to the location of beats within the track" (Serato.com), which the software can lock onto, while the *auto-sync* function automatically synchronizes one track's BPM with another. These capabilities obviate human intervention in beatmatching, and the constant adjustment necessary to align tracks on vinyl turntables and CDJs.

Since the software automates the DJ skills that had been key in the era of vinyl turntables and CDJs, new skills and practices have moved front and center. A software interface often allows up to 8 input sources, which can be assigned to conventional track-playing decks and samplers (also known as *remix decks*), all controllable from a single

device. Sampling and looping has become more intuitive, versatile and accurate: a software sampler can draw from either a DJ's sample collection or tracks that are currently playing on other decks, and reinsert them directly into the mix. The DJ can scan forwards and backwards along a track seamlessly, and manipulate loops by shortening or lengthening them (from 1/8 of a measure to 32 measures). The digital outputs of track- and sample-decks can be routed to effects units built into the software that can be manipulated via external hardware before they flow into the main output. Thus, the software gives the DJ many tools to 'play' with the sound. This has given rise to a new form of DJing – *controllerism* – characterized by the extreme manipulation and deconstruction of tracks *in situ* and their reconstruction as sonic bricolages.

Whilst dance music may have melted into air, (re)mixing it remains a decidedly hands-on affair: witness the great variety of MIDI devices that have sprung up to allow users tactile control over these binary streams of sound. Controllers, as they are called, compress decks and mixer into a single unit, and most DJs find them preferable to fiddling around with a keyboard and mouse – a residual memory of vinyl turntables. Smaller controllers, such as the Native Instruments' Kontrol X1, consist of a range of buttons and dials that can be *mapped* to particular software functions; and its second release features a touch-sensitive strip that can be used to scan through tracks and perform beatmatching. Larger ones, such as the Kontrol S4 or Pioneer's DDJ-T1, mimic a standard CDJ-and-mixer layout with two jogwheels and a 4-channel mixer. Still others, like the Kontrol F1 exploit the software's *sampling* functionality: they allow a DJ to capture pre-recorded musical fragments from either whole tracks or standalone elements like drum loops or vocal stabs. The DJ can then trigger them or arrange them into a sequence, adding musical richness. DJ software also has backward compatibility, turntables can serve as controllers by using specially formatted vinyl records called timecode discs. So too can CDJs by connecting them to a laptop via a USB.

Mixed Feelings

The most common criticism leveled by DJs against digital software and controllers is that automatic syncing eliminates the risk of a DJ 'screwing up' a live set by mismatching the beats of the two tracks. Manual beatmatching, so the argument goes, requires the DJ to work actively to cultivate the collective focus of the dancefloor. Implicit in the denunciation of software is the ideal of the DJ-as-virtuoso, and a 'real' musicianship that is separable from 'inauthentic', corrupting machines (Attias 2013). Of course, this argument is inherently flawed, because once you move beyond the voice and the body, mankind has always relied on physical instruments to produce sound, and all electronic dance music by definition is created and mixed on machines. Yet these machines are not seen as equal, being graded according to an 'index of visibility' whereby:

> Some…are considered more technological in status than others. In this scheme, a drum machine is more technological than a drum, a synthesizer more technological than an electric guitar…Participants and contestants within musical genres frequently fetishize one set of technologies and dismiss others. Such distinctions [render] the technological components utilized in their favored forms *invisible as technologies* – they are more 'real' or 'natural', absorbed wholly into those that play them as expressive extensions of the performing body. (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 112)

In the face of the digital onslaught, some participants in the electronic dance community propound a form of vinyl fundamentalism. Here, turntables are construed as the one 'true' form of DJing, and vinyl is the only medium worth listening to because it has a 'soul' that digital music lacks. In privileging vinyl-playing turntables, making it a signifier of authentic musicianship, proponents position themselves above DJs who must 'rely' on digital music and technology. Such fundamentalism can degenerate into petty one-upmanship of the 'I'm a real DJ and you're not' variety. As Farrugia and Swiss note, "gate-keeping practices…are a primary means by which [grass-roots level collectors and DJs] establish their expertise, the boundaries between themselves and others" (2005: 40).

Hong Kong largely avoided fostering counterproductive vinyl fundamentalism, but the general consensus over the benefits of digital downloads did not translate into a similar zeal for DJ software and controllers. Some older DJs – Roy Malig, Christian Berentson and Adam Wright – who are self-professed vinyl fanatics, happily play CDJs, yet categorically reject software and controllers. CDJs provide 'just enough' helpful information on the screen (e.g. the BPM, time elapsed and a simplified waveform of the track) to facilitate mixing without mechanizing it. Software and controllers, on the other hand, are a step too far; the screen and the sync button lures "buttonistias" (Attais 2013) into a cesspool of bad habits that causes them to lose sight of the dancefloor:

> I have a thing against laptop DJs, which is why I won't go into Serato or other programs. I feel that if someone is staring into the computer screen, they aren't concentrating on the people. I think DJing should be, in part, a performance. Not entirely, because most of the work is done by your ears, but you need to respond to the crowd. With a laptop DJ, you could be looking at porn or checking your email for all I know. And a lot of people are becoming DJs instantly just because they're using sync and choosing songs. Even beatmatching has become a dying art, and to me that's a fundamental DJing skill. (Christian Berentson)

> Sophisticated technology now means that there's a whole host of people who I don't actually want to hear. As DJs, they don't have anything to

> offer: they've got a big chunk of tunes off their favorite DJ's Beatport Top Ten lists, they've got a copy of Traktor, and they don't know to mix, sequence a set, or read a crowd. They just stand there staring at a computer screen, dropping track after track. It's not DJing – there's no passion in it, they're basically playing a computer game. I walked into Bassment [a club in Hong Kong] a week ago, and there was this girl I've seen in the crowd for years on the decks, and she didn't even have a set of decks or timecode discs, just a laptop with Traktor on it. It's depressing. (Adam Wright)

The practices of Hong Kong DJs and their negotiations with new equipment are typical of DJs globally – anchored in the collective vestigial memory of vinyl turntables and what they pioneered: the ability to sculpt recorded sound through hand gestures. Even to younger DJs, vinyl turntables evoke the rough-and-tumble days of disco and early house and techno. The jockeys of that halcyon era were regarded as doyens — not because of their tools, but in spite of them. Imagined nostalgia for a period that they never witnessed firsthand has been potent enough for Midnight & Co.'s two other junior residents, Cameron Yeh and Jack Byrne, to renounce DJ software in favor of CDJs and Technics turntables respectively. Cameron took to DJing seriously after an epiphany at the Miami Winter Music Conference in 2007; he invested in a pair of CDJs and a DJM mixer as a student in Los Angeles, before switching to a Vestax VCI controller in Melbourne. Now, in Hong Kong,

> I don't use a controller – I'm trying to sell my VCM-100. If I really want to mix at home, I just use my mouse [with DJ software]. I usually just listen to music at home and come to Midnight on the weekdays to practice. I like the manual feel of CDJs, and the actual process of beatmatching. I've done a lot with software controllers, and there's nothing wrong with auto-syncing tracks, but [if I did that at a gig] I felt like I was standing around a lot. If I'm beatmatching, I hear it in my headphones and that gives me the opportunity to see whether it works with the previous track, so it gives me a hint as to whether it will work out. The process of matching up BPMs makes me feel like I'm actually DJing. After CDJs, my friends and I started using software a lot, and I guess we lost touch with the whole concept of DJing. Everybody has a preference, and mine is for hardware, not software.

Cameron rarely practices at home, preferring to come to Midnight & Co. on quiet weekday evenings to practice on the CDJs and Funktion One mixer at the club. For him, the process of on CDJs is both liberating and authenticating: it makes him 'feel like a DJ'. Jack takes things a step further. In an email, he outlined a 'moral obligation' to choose CDJs over software when he first picked up DJing, which later prompted him to learn how to spin with vinyl, despite the expense of ordering records in from the UK:

> I taught myself how to DJ on CDJ's in my Dad's bedroom, spending ages and ages practicing. A friend suggested that I move on to or give either Traktor or Serato a go, but I figured that would be cheating. DJing began with vinyl, there was a time when DJ's could only use that format – there were no other options. I personally felt it would be unfair to everybody who spun with records if people like me just decided to start using software and neglected mixing/beatmatching/track selection. So I eventually started buying records, and it was well worth it. It sounds ten times better, and just touching the record, pulling it back/releasing it just feels awesome. Basically, I 'morally' felt like it was something I should know how to do. Resulting in me continuously buying and collecting records because they rock!

Even though Jack may be erroneously conflating software with total automation, his comments underscore the continuing prestige bestowed upon vinyl, turntables and the DJs that use them. His decision to reach into the past to orient himself in the present is typical of many budding DJs, especially those in Europe and America, who have taken to fetishizing a format left for dead by conglomerates. 2012 was the fifth consecutive year for double-digit sales growth for vinyl, and in some countries sales figures have exceeded 1980s levels, whilst the under-25 set has revitalized the traditional record store (White 2013). 'Going vinyl' is a strategy of differentiation that for the DJ has the additional ring of authenticity; as Jack's testimony shows, limiting oneself to vinyl turntables is a means of identifying with the original innovators of the craft. When it is no longer clear to many whether the ends – the overall sound of the mix, and how the audience receives it – derive from human ingenuity or technical power, the means take precedence.

It is difficult to convey the complex interplay between technology and DJ identity. Vinyl turntables, CDJs and digital software/controllers do not fit into a neat progression of control, portability and efficiency. DJs do not rush to embrace new types of equipment simply because they represent an improvement along these dimensions. That the success of the CDJ hinged upon reproducing the analog experience of vinyl turntables is indicative, as is the recent surge in vinyl sales. The vinyl-and-turntables combination remains the benchmark against which most DJs measure new technology. But nor has there been a mass movement towards fundamentalism: celebrating old analog formats and equipment and reviling the new. The human factor that some use to valorize vinyl turntables is not obliterated by DJ software and controllers; it is simply construed differently, foregrounding certain practices like improvisational sampling or harmonic mixing over beatmatching. Automation does not

automatically breed passivity, although, as the next section shows, it certainly facilitates it. Instead, DJs confront new technologies constrained by old loyalties:

> When you use familiar tools, you draw upon a long cultural conversation – a whole shared history of usage – as your backdrop, as the canvas to juxtapose your work…Since so much of our experience is mediated in some way or another, we have deep sensitivities to the signatures of different media. Artists play with these sensitivities, digesting the new and shifting the old. In the end, the characteristic forms of a tool or medium's distortion, of its weakness and limitations, become sources of emotional meaning and intimacy…You can't have a relationship with a device whose limits are unknown to you, because without limits it keeps becoming something else. (Eno 1999)

Signal-to-Noise

In audio engineering, the signal-to-noise ratio measures the effectiveness of a communication channel by comparing the information conveyed by the signal to the background noise also being transmitted. The professional DJ is trying to convey information to an audience in the music that he selects and integrates. But the ironic effect of the advancement of information technology and the fall in the cost of information processing is to increase the noise that contaminates his/her channel from others empowered by the same technology.

Adam Wright arrived in Hong Kong from Tasmania in the 1990s. Aside from DJing as part of PUSH (with Luke Hall and Frankie Lam) he is also entertainment editor of the *South China Morning Post*. In what he calls the 'vinyl-only' era in Hong Kong, which lasted until the first CDJs arrived in 2003, he observes that a price barrier and a skills barrier acted as a self-selection mechanism for DJs:

> In the vinyl-only era, there was a price barrier: records got shipped in every month, and they were really expensive, so you had to really want to do it. Usually that meant you loved music so much, and wanted to share that music so much, that you were willing to invest a serious chunk of your income on doing it. I was buying about thirty records a month for five years, and I spent a huge portion of my income on it. Once you had a record, there was no waveform, so you had to learn how to read the grooves in vinyl in the light, and listen to your records over and over until you had them memorized. You also had to invest a lot of time in acquiring the skill needed to mix. It took me about six months to learn how to mix with two turntables and a mixer. It was a serious fucking mission. These two things weeded out people who just wanted to be a DJ and look cool.

"The limits of the technology made DJing a tremendous effort, and the DJs who came up through this way are, on the whole, better DJs, because you can put them on anything – one old Pioneer CDJ and an old Denon turntable and a shitty two channel mixer – and they would instantly know what to do." Adam Wright correctly notes that: "There are a bunch of celebrities out there who shouldn't even be allowed near a mixer." The DJ as a cultural icon has come to eclipse the DJ as a technically skilled musician, a consequence of digital automation that allows the Paris Hiltons of the world to take up DJing as an amusing diversion, a hip add-on to their celebrity lifestyles.

What of the small-time DJs playing in cities like Hong Kong that lie outside the main currents of contemporary dance music? How have their social roles changed over time? Dan, who hosted many transformative moments in the city's dance music scene in Yumla and Midnight, regards the advent of social networking as the watershed. During the Yumla years,

> …the bulk of the people were quite knowledgeable. Whilst 2001 was not exactly pre-internet, it was before social networking took hold, so in order to find out about new tracks you would have to go to a place like Yumla or Phi-B where the DJs knew their stuff. [The audience] might have been fans of dance music to begin with, but their first point of contact with particular tracks would have been via the DJs. The DJs were the ones who got the white labels, the mailing list music, and the fresh releases. The audience came to Yumla to acquire that knowledge – to learn, as well as have fun.

The internet first provided a plethora of musician and DJ-oriented sites such as Soundcloud, Resident Advisor and the 'DJ' section of Beatport (where users can create their own charts and post their mixes). Then, general sites like Facebook allowed the creation of 'Pages' that allow an artist to broadcast to his/her 'fans'. These are effective platforms for the promotion, distribution and consumption of music, and now, Dan remarks ruefully, "the point of entry is literally the cost of a laptop and an internet connection in a coffee shop". Music now spreads via social networks, via crowd sourcing and mass dissemination not painstaking cultivation. Dan sees this as the end of the DJ-as-gatekeeper, and of the nightclub as a fixed institution.

Social networking amplifies another development within DJ and producer culture, usually perceived as negative: digital software's automation of what many regard as the 'fundamentals' of DJing (beatmatching being a prime example) so lowers the barriers to entry that 'anyone can be a DJ' – as almost all my interviewees put it. A viable (although not necessarily tasteful) track collection can be assembled, strung together, and published online within a matter of hours: "The basics of DJing have become incredibly simple, so anyone who might have the smallest grain of talent but a lot of promotional savvy can build up

something very quickly", Dan says. This mentality, in his opinion, accounts for the mediocrity of most demo sets that he receives.

Automation has extended into music production, bringing the logic of instant gratification there also:

> When I started producing music, computers were very expensive, so that was obviously not going to happen. You could buy keyboards and samplers, but you had to figure out how to get them all talking to each other. .. Now, everything I used to do manually with Logic and Pro Tools has been replaced with plug-ins. People can press one button in Ableton and a song leaps out; they can press another button on Traktor and all of a sudden they're up there with Richie Hawtin. That just feeds into the whole misnomer that it's easy, then they think that they're clearly geniuses. Stringing together a bunch of samples and uploading it onto Soundcloud is not being a genius.

Thus, it appears that the role of the DJ – especially for those who do not seek superstardom – is eroding on multiple fronts. As online social networking sites have opened the floodgates to the mass production, distribution and consumption of music at virtually no cost, the DJ can no longer pose as an erudite curator who sanctions and arranges the next generation of classics: s/he is merely sifting through a hectic non-stop global garage sale in hopes of picking out a few overlooked gems for re-sale. Another consequence is the replacement of the local nightclub-as-musical-institution, purveying a particular sound via resident DJs, by the nightclub-as-rentable-space, temporary quarters for temporary tribes gathered by temporary enthusiasm for one or other of dance music's sub-genres. Thus, an increasing number of roving micro-promoters – Deeper Sounds HK, Humdrum, Magnetic Soul and Foxtrot, to name a few — now host sporadic events in venues around Hong Kong. Lastly, the skills that earlier generations of DJs *had* to master in order to achieve sonic excellence subjected to the constraints of their machines is steadily being made obsolete by digital technologies that bring sonic perfection closer, but define it more narrowly – with mathematical precision.

Conclusion

DJs who voice nostalgia for vinyl, or exalt its superiority, in effect posit a zero-sum contest between technology and human *techne* (translated variously as 'art' or 'craftsmanship'), in which the advancement of technology threatens to overwhelm, then replaces an innate skill set. But this view miscasts the relationship between technology and skill. Apart from singing and stomping, all music is produced using instruments; each new instrument opens up a new field to develop new skills and modes of musical expression.

Those gripped by nostalgia for wax are arguably restricting their opportunities to create new music, whereas controllerists are seeking to exploit those new opportunities to the full.

Likewise, those regretting the technological advances that have opened up to everyone the new opportunities for mixing and disseminating music because this undercuts the role of the DJ as a guide for musical taste ought to recall that purists once regretted the technology of the vinyl record for breaking the mystical connection between the producer and the consumer of music in the concert hall, even as this new technology vastly expanded the audience for music outside the concert hall. The problem posed by technological advancement in musical production, as in all forms of production, was clearly identified by Umberto Eco: "how we ought to elaborate a new image of man in relation to the system which conditions him: an image not of humanity free *from* the machine, but *free in relation to the machine*" (Hobsbawm 2013: 263-4).

The nostalgia for wax is nevertheless entirely understandable since the technical advances in musical production have transformed the very identity of the DJ, the nature of what he does. The DJ started out as a curator of music, a selector and arranger of musical works. Today he manipulates his selection in a way that no curator of painting or sculpture would dream of: he chops up items up, pastes together bits from different works (after re-tinting some of the bits), and presents the resulting collage as his own. Thus, the DJ is a media *prosumer*, who not only selects what to consume, but also remixes them to produce new works. His core task of combining disparate sonic elements into a continuous flow for the audience has changed little over time. What *has* changed are the instruments that he uses and the flexibility and control that they afford; far-reaching innovations in the instruments have defined new identities for the DJ. This Part has traced how the demands of DJs for more control of more aspects of musical tracks drove the development of DJ technology; how that greater control transformed the DJ's identity from curator to sculptor of sound; and how that new identity is being undermined by the further advances in the technologies that had created it.

Although the DJ community thus stands out for the depth and speed of the transformations of identity wrought by technology, the tensions that result, and the community responses to those tensions, merely replay how other communities have dealt with the stress of technological advancement. Early anthropologists inferred from observing pre-industrial, 'low-tech' societies that humans construct identity and meaning from their legacy of symbols. Similarly, Hong Kong DJs, young and old, look to a past symbolized by artifacts of the original vinyl era, to ground their work in an often daunting and threatening hi-tech environment. But to avoid stagnation, a community must develop the skills to use new technologies and create new identities from the mastery of new skills. So, too, for the DJ community.

Part IV: Walking the tightrope between soul and market

Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm's *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* claims that "The arts walk the tightrope between soul and market"[2]. This claim is filled out by Thornton (1995): "The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world". This Part finds evidence for this idea in the history of electronic dance music, and documents how the idea remains a powerful influence on the values and behavior DJs in Hong Kong. However, the truth is more complex: the music that emerges from the 'soul' of one group in its struggle against mainstream society is appropriated and disseminated by the market to other groups, for whom the received music takes on new meanings according to the social context. So Hobsbawn is also right to ask: "How much passion for a piece of music or a picture today rests on association – not on the song being beautiful, but on its being 'our song'?" (2013: 19). This question is salient for DJs, whose role is to create sequences of musical association within a club with an ambience that saturates all the senses and whose clientele forms a temporary community of dancing bodies.

The next subsection, 'Electronic dance music as subversive', tells how electronic dance music arose from a rebellion against bourgeois society along multiple fronts. Then the subsection 'A Tale of Two Fads' tells how this subversive music took on new meanings when imported into Hong Kong by a cosmopolitan elite. For some locals, it became a way to join that elite; for others, it became part of their identity. Next, the subsection,'The Subverter Subverted: The Internal Contradictions of Underground Talk', reviews the tensions within the electronic dance music community as 'underground' became a commercially valuable label. The concluding subsection situates the soul/market distinction within the broader social context of musical production and dissemination.

Rewriting the rules: electronic dance music as subversive

In its origins, electronic dance music challenged bourgeois society along multiple fronts: socially, as the search by the marginalized for a space where they could be themselves; legally, in subverting property rights by appropriating and mixing musical elements from multiple sources; and experientially, in prioritizing body over mind. These three challenges are now addressed in turn.

[2] The continuation of the quotation from Hobsbawm also fits electronic dance music: it certainly walks the tightrope "between individual and collective creation, even between recognizable and identifiable human creative products and their engulfment by technology and the all-embracing noise of the internet" (Hobsbawm 2013: 6).

Music for the marginalized

It is ironic how indebted Western pop music is to African-American musical traditions – jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll, funk and soul – given their roots in Western racial oppression. Electronic dance music and hip-hop arose after overt discrimination had been abolished, although segregation and inequality remained. Both genres are defined by records rather than live instruments, a residue of when this was a 'taste of necessity': in the early 20th century, blacks could not afford to go to public concerts with live bands, so their musical entertainment came from jukeboxes (Rietveld 2007: 100).

Whereas hip-hop articulated the hyper-masculine culture of the ghetto, early electronic dance music was the refuge of homosexual men of all colors, huddled together in the face of a disapproving public. Italian-Americans (David Mancuso, Francis Grasso, Nicky Siano) dominated the early days of disco, while the innovators of house (Frankie Knuckles, Larry Levan, Ron Hardy) in Chicago and techno in Detroit (Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson) in the 1980s were largely African-American. These DJs and producers carved out a space where music shunned by the rest of society could be enjoyed, and an alternative worldview celebrated. They cultivated a sensibility that defined itself against the dominant strains of Western music, 'classical' and 'pop', indeed, against the individualizing tendencies of capitalist society. In their creative misappropriation of pre-existing pop music, musical formats, and music-making machines, DJs and producers mocked private property rights in artistic creation and reasserted the inherently collective nature of all musical endeavors. The sound that resulted was distinctive in its focus on getting bodies into motion on the dancefloor. This emphasis on physicality challenged the widespread notion that 'good' music was above all an object of aesthetic/intellectual contemplation. I now consider these other two subversive aspects.

Electronic Dance Music as Subverting Private Property

The view of artistic activity in Western society since the 19th century has been shaped by what Wolff terms an "ideology of autonomous art" (1987: 1). This grew out of humanist philosophy and consists of "the concept of genius, and the idea that the work of art is the creation of an autocratic personality" (ibid.; Hauser 1951: 61). Music, because of its abstract and non-representational nature, is particularly vulnerable to this ideology. The "social relations of cultural production" that emerged from Western industrial capitalism 'completed the image of the artist as detached from society' since the artist was forced to live on sales to a market rather than on a patron's commissions (ibid.). Publishers, galleries, critics and journals came to mediate between the artist and his market. This facilitated the myth that "art is an activity which transcends the social" (ibid).

The circulation of musical material within electronic dance music culture challenges the bourgeois ideal of private ownership that is fundamental to the production and

dissemination of artistic output in modern society. Beginning with the remixing of pop songs for discos, "the anarchy of capitalism [threw] up commodities that an oppressed group [took] up and [used] to cobble together its own culture" (Dyer 1979: 413). Many electronic dance music tracks already heavily sample previous works for their vocals, melodies or percussion. Says veteran Roy Malig, "A lot of tracks I hear now are simply looping bassline, a riff, a percussive sound off old funk tracks, and when I hear them I recognize the sample because I've heard the track it originally came from. A lot of the vocals of deep house tracks you hear now are sampling off house tracks of the 1990s."

In a more extreme example, the rhythmic foundation of several electronic dance music genres – breakbeat hardcore, jungle and drum n' bass – are based on a single 5.2 second drum solo, the Amen Break, from the song 'Amen, Brother' by 1960s funk and soul group, The Winstons. Second, producers often pass their finished track (the original mix) onto their fellows (the remixers), who peel apart its layers, take what they like, add what they like, and reconstitute it all as a remix. The final stage of this cumulative process is handled by the DJ, whose basic task is to mix two tracks together so that they appear to the audience as a continuous flow. His prowess rests on the legitimate appropriation of the works of others, and the reinsertion and reconfiguration of their creative output in the context of his/her set. Although the DJ and the producer of the tracks that s/he is playing may never meet (although in many cases DJs have production experience and vice versa), there exists a suspended creative synergy between them: tracks are produced in the knowledge that they will be combined with other tracks in the context of a set. In addition, the old two-decks-and-a-mixer arrangement is now enhanced by digital software such as Ableton Live, which allows DJs to improvise over his/her mix by adding standalone samples such as sound effects. Thus, remixing and DJing are "gradually merging into a single continuum of mixology" (Reynolds 2012: 471).

The outcome is that neither the producer, the remixer, nor the DJ are "'creators' in the traditional sense"; instead, all act as 'filters' for a continuous 'cultural flow' (ibid.). Brian Eno notes that, in an era of information overload, "it is perhaps the connection maker who is the new storyteller" (ibid.). As dance music is usually 'performed' in a club environment, the DJ assumes the role of interface between the audience and a back-catalog of musical material: "the expressive element of what they do resides in the juxtaposition of these artworks" (ibid.:463).

In sum, the bourgeois treatment of any creative output is to compartmentalize it, so that each artistic endeavor appears as autonomous and attributable to a single owner. This ideology of autonomous art facilitates the accumulation and distribution of profit, framed by copyright laws. Electronic dance music, on the other hand, is founded upon the notion of the *remix*. As each actor within the community – DJ, producer or studio remixer – creates, they

constantly reference acts of creation from other places and times. With innovation inseparable from engagement with the wider musical landscape, the concept of private ownership dissolves. In electronic dance music culture, a track is no longer regarded as a discrete unit, but is 'treated as a set of resources that can be endlessly adapted and arranged' (ibid.: 469). This process has intensified with the manipulative capabilities of digital technology. As Dan remarked: "House and techno is about the night – there is nothing egotistical about either. It is music for the dancefloor, music that brings people together, that tries to create a frame of mind where people can let loose for four or five hours." Through the notion of the remix, dance music appears to its creators as a process to participate in, rather than an object to be bought and sold for consumption. This brings us to the third challenge that electronic dance music mounts to bourgeois society's conception of music.

Electronic Dance Music as Subverting High 'Art'

In *Discographies:* Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound (1999), Gilbert and Pearson note that, unlike other art forms such as literature or painting, music is "registered at some level throughout the body" (1999:44) in form of sound waves. As Walser puts it: with music, "the body is seemingly hailed directly, subjectivity responding to the empowerment of the body rather than the other way around" (Walser 1993: 45). Thus, it is impossible to separate music's meanings from our physical experiences of it. Yet, this is precisely what Western philosophy attempted by dichotomizing mind and body, privileging the former (ibid.: 48).

Beginning with Plato/Socrates, who declared that "we shall…adapt the beat and tune to the appropriate words, and not the words to the beat and tune" (ibid.; *The Republic* 1974: 160), music's affective capacity has been 'subjugated to the demands of linguistic meaning' (ibid.: 40). Philosophers as diverse as Immanuel Kant and Theodore Adorno have favored music that is 'beautiful' in that it demands a high level of cognitive contemplation, over music that is merely 'pleasurable' at a visceral level (ibid.: 41). Western musical institutions of the Enlightenment sought to maintain this distinction by "[policing] the body within spaces of performance and audience response" (ibid.: 132), enforcing silence and immobility during performances of 'high' (i.e. classical) music, and shifting consumption from the dancefloor to the concert hall (ibid.: 44). This tradition likewise demanded that music should "offer itself up as an object of intellectual contemplation such as is likely to generate meaningful discourse" (ibid.: 42).

Electronic dance music originally stood closer to African-American tradition of the spiritual, swing and soul than to the bourgeois view of music as high art. Today, most DJs and producers are straight white middle-class males with names like Tom and Will, but the

challenge to the institutions, forms and practices of conventional bourgeois music continues to echo in electronic dance music in three ways.

Firstly, the basic template of electronic dance music consists of 'its ability – by means of the sampler and the sequencer – to turn *any* sound into a rhythmic element' (ibid.:74). The sampler enables the capture and manipulation of fragments of musical material, whilst the sequencer allows their temporal arrangement. Both classical and modern pop music attempt to convey an image or tell a story via a particular melodic and instrumental arrangement, where single voices usually dominate. By contrast, electronic dance music is 'built' by layering rhythmic elements, whose progressive addition and subtraction create *affect* via atmosphere. Thus, with electronic dance music, the lead voice is absorbed into the 'rhythmic syntax' as just another element; *texture*, or what Roland Barthes termed *grain*, is foregrounded. The short history of contemporary electronic dance music offers a spectacular demonstration of this in acid house – an entire genre built around a single, monstrous, warped and infinitely mutating Roland TB-303 bassline.

Secondly, electronic dance music prioritizes percussion and bass, hence the low frequencies that are most palpable. Such music is less an object of contemplation than a corporeal experience. As Reynolds puts it, "bypassing interpretation, the listener is hurled into a vortex of heightened sensations, abstract emotions and artificial energies" (2012: xxv). The audience comprises, not passive observers, but active participants who live the music via dance – their involvement is a crucial component of the total spectacle.

Thirdly, electronic dance music is conducive to collective experience (although it can be enjoyed alone). The 'point of reception' for electronic dance music is usually a club or a party, where the music brings strangers together in a spontaneous community, knit together by the repetitive pulse of the beat, "which escapes the real time passing outside" (Firth 1987: 142).

The Subverter Subverted: The Internal Contradictions of Underground Talk

Pop! Goes Electronic Dance Music

Despite its subversive inclinations (perhaps even because of them, as we shall see later), electronic dance music has been steadily incorporated into 'mainstream' club culture in Hong Kong. In 2009, dance music experienced a worldwide surge in popularity, entering mainstream popular music as an abrasive-yet-uplifting brand of vocal-heavy, melody-oriented electro-house and dubstep. Unfortunately, the wave of artists and DJs that initiated this trend were lumped by the mainstream media outlets under the catch-all abbreviation 'EDM', possibly because this was the first time since raves that dance music had come to the attention of the general public.

'EDM' tracks have no distinctive sound, but for followers of other dance music genres, it indicates a certain blunt, crude aggression ('abrasive', 'in your face', and 'simplistic', were common descriptions of 'EDM' amongst the DJs and clubbers whom I interviewed). A distinguishing characteristic is affinity for 'the MONSTER RIFF' (Reynolds 2012: 504): a recapitulation of the basic melodic phrase of rock n' roll using sawtooth synthesizers, squelchy basslines and epic trance-like string pads, locked in place by a 4/4 kickdrum that pounds relentlessly, with some simpering female vocals thrown in for good measure.

The 'rifftronica' has enjoyed immense success, particularly in North America. Its leading purveyors – Skrillex, Swedish House Mafia, deadmau5, Avicii and David Guetta, to name a few – see their releases earn Grammys and top the Billboard Hot 100, and play to stadiums packed with adoring teenagers on multi-stop global tours that generate millions in revenue: the ten 'EDM' DJ/producers which topped Forbes' 'Electronic Cash King' list in 2012 earned a total of USD$125 million in one year (Greenburg 2012). Like contemporary pop music, 'EDM' revolves around its stars. Whereas other strains of dance music emphasize mass participation, and the fusion of crowd, DJ and producer, 'EDM' is the one-way consumption of a spectacle by a mostly passive audience. For iconic DJ/producers of 'EDM' as for modern pop stars, music has become the means to present the performer, "part of the process whereby a human individual or group is totemized" (Scruton 2000: 110). "Music properly constructed", Scruton goes on to say, "has a life of its own, and is more interesting than the person who performs it" (ibid.). But as music is subsumed into the image of the star, it loses the transcendence that both classical and dance music strove to attain, albeit in very different ways.

In the words of Cameron Yeh, 'EDM' is "music for people with short attention spans who want immediate gratification". Music as a spectacle can be easily converted into a consumption item. This is precisely what certain Lan Kwai Fong clubs, such as Play and Volar, have done, capitalizing on the 'EDM' trend by inviting to their venues DJ/producers like Skrillex, Diplo and Laidback Luke, as well as conglomerate promoters like Ministry of Sound and Hed Kandi. Since hosting 'superstars' of 'EDM' has become common practice in Hong Kong nightclubs, and since 'EDM' is often conflated with electronic dance music in general, others in the city's dance music community (DJs, club-goers, and clubs) try to distinguish themselves as 'underground', as opposed to 'commercial' or 'mainstream'. However, these two categories are, in fact, connected and implicated in each other in multiple, contradictory ways. Three contradictions are highlighted below.

'Underground': Musical Quality or Social Construction?

In Hong Kong, as in all electronic dance music communities, the labels 'underground' versus 'mainstream' or 'commercial' are constructed through discourse: be it drunken banter in the early hours of the morning, snide remarks about rival clubs or DJs, or a sober discussion of 'epically' good producers and labels. When participants in Hong Kong's EDM community discuss what types of music they enjoy and play, they engage in self-positioning. The clubs of Lan Kwai Fong and Wanchai often serve as a negative hegemonic Other to 'rebel' against by championing 'underground' dance music, i.e., music untainted by commercial values. 'Underground' thus claims authenticity from its autonomy from commercial values, but – and this is crucial – this is *represented as quality of the music itself.*

The contradiction built into the underground's rebellion against all things 'commercial' was identified in the following terms by DJ Miko Van Chong:

> If you've been working your arse off, and finally you come out with a single that establishes you [as a DJ or a producer], people suddenly go off you, just because you've become famous. You liked this tune last month because it was good, why do you hate it now just because the person who made it has become famous?

Here, Miko refers to the tendency for dance music subcultures to disown the genres, artists and DJs that they engender once they achieve commercial success, and to see their 'crossing over' into the mainstream as indicating that their music is no longer any good (McLeod 2001: 70). For example, writing about the 'house music revival' of the late 2000s-early 2010s, *VICE Magazine's* Clive Martin and Josh Baines rip into the label Hot Natured for 'killing' house with their slew of crossover hits (one of which, 'Forward Motion', reached the Billboard Hot 100):

> If there's one thing we can all agree that the house resurgence really doesn't need, it's a boyband. Alas, it's now got one in the form of Hot Natured, made up of Jamie Jones, Luca C, Lee Foss and Ali Love…Peddling the kind of sleek, easy-going house that you usually only hear in women's clothes shops, you've got to wonder who would actually listen to Hot Natured out of choice. (2013)

This points to a second difficulty with the underground/mainstream dichotomy: the 'rebellion' of the underground is constantly re-aligning itself with the logic of consumer capitalism and the construction of the self through consumption.

'Underground': the Business of Rebellion

As in all pop music discourses, esoteric knowledge can be converted into cultural capital by projecting an aura of exclusivity (or what Bourdieu calls 'distinction'). As

Thornton suggests, "Club cultures are *taste cultures.* Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media, and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves" (1995). Cultural capital is realized through the practices of a rigidly defined 'music policy' on behalf of clubs, going to the 'right' parties and knowing the 'good' DJs. The use of the 'sound of the underground' as a status symbol or identity marker sucks it into the capitalist production and dissemination of cultural material.

To the extent that the 'underground' provides cultural feedstock for the 'mainstream' by finding novel ways to rebel against it, it has also come to signify *that which has the potential for commercial success*, either literally by generating profit, or as socio-cultural capital that can be utilized by individuals to define their identities. Even Midnight & Co. has not been exempt from this. Its somewhat esoteric music selection, its devotion to nurturing local talent and its seeming disinterest in profit has, ironically, made it attractive to those looking to elevate their status by 'consuming the underground':

> The people that come to Midnight have heard about our reputation. They don't necessarily know the music policy, but they've heard that this is the place for "underground" dance music, and they want to be able to say to people that they've been here – we get a lot of that. People tell me that this is their favorite club, and I wonder whether this has become a place that people say that they like coming to, just to be cool. Underground sells, underground is popular. You get the yuppies and the guys that have lived abroad [the promoters] who understand the concept of underground being cool, and they know that being cool is important. (Mark Nakayama)

> Hey, you work at Midnight? That's cool. I've heard it's one of the best places to hear real underground dance music in Hong Kong. I am so over Lan Kwai Fong. The music's shit. (Recently arrived CUHK exchange student from Australia, during idle conversation.)

No outfit in Hong Kong better exemplifies the use of the concept of 'underground' to garner popular appeal than small&Tall, three promoters – Jason Swamy plus DJ duo 2Gweilos – who, through their overseas connections with labels and artists, bring 'underground' DJs and acts from abroad to perform in clubs and venues around Hong Kong. Their Facebook page reads:

> small&Tall is a new concept for a *modern underground house music* for HK. A night that tours round a variety of party-friendly venues where the music, the destination, and atmosphere are what matters. You might find us in a dark warehouse or tiny sweatbox one week, or on deck of a junk boat

> or at a beach party the next. But always without any compromises on track selection or sound quality. (Retrieved 04/05/2013, emphasis mine)

Since 2011, small&Tall have paraded house-and-techno titans through Hong Kong, including Damian Lazarus (head of Crosstown Records) and Jamie Jones (head of Hot Creations, no. 1 on Resident Advisor's list of Top 100 DJs in 2012), as well as fixtures on the European summer festival circuit like Dyed Soundorom. They also bring artists such as Eats Everything, Nicolas Jaar and Subb-an who have been hyped as 'up-and-coming' DJs by the media and their more established peers. Unlike Yumla/Midnight & Co., they make no attempt to promote local talent. Rather, parties are organized around acts brought in from overseas, with local DJs supporting rather than taking the limelight. In hosting their venues, they partner with corporations such as the W Hotel Group. Such events are marketed as 'underground', even though, as Mark Nakayama succinctly put it:

> If you have enough money to bring an overseas act to Hong Kong, or you've decided to invest a certain amount of money in a particular DJ, you know that that DJ or act will guarantee you a return. And when that happens, it follows that that DJ can't be too underground anymore, can it? If you're popular enough to fill an overseas club, how underground can you be? If you charge $250 per head, like at Kee Club [an elite "member's only" club on Wyndham Street which has since fallen on hard times], without even a free drink, how underground can you be?

From Mark's perspective, small&Tall's use of the term 'underground' is hypocritical, as they bring in overseas artists who have already achieved some recognition, knowing that that will guarantee an audience in Hong Kong. Yet, these DJs and artists arguably *are* 'underground' relative to the more prominent 'EDM' figures mentioned previously. Thus, 'underground' and 'commercial' only acquire real meaning when deployed in local contexts. What is decisive is the frame of reference.

Underground Genre Wars: the Metaphysics of Techno Versus Deep House

A third difficulty with the underground/commercial dichotomy lies in how the Midnight & Co.'s DJ community rank electronic dance music genres by reverting to abstract rationalization. For example, although Dan admits that he was 'into deep house a few years back', he now sees it as music that is

> Easy for people to dance to. I consider it warm-up music, but don't care for it late at night. Deep house was cool and interesting a while back but now it's turned into a trendy, hipster sound, which is very bland. There's a lot of egotistical personalities attached to the deep house scene, e.g. Seth Troxler, and a kind of chichi, rich, hipster crowd that follows deep house because its

> very acceptable but feels edgy and underground, but it's actually not – it's one shade away from Hed Kandi [a worldwide dance music conglomerate]. And you've got people who've spent a hundred bucks to get a ticket for Burning Man [a 'hippy' music and arts festival in Black Rock Desert, Navada]. Those aren't ravers – they spend two weeks in a villa in Ibiza – who can afford that? It's become champagne show-off hipster music, and musically speaking the scene has become incredibly boring and stale. (Dan Findlay)

Here, Dan suggests that deep house is now "aesthetically worthless' because it is determined by social forces (the 'hipster crowd') instead of transcending them (Firth 1987: 133). He describes himself as currently being into 'industrial, heavy-sounding techno', which is characterized by a cold, futuristic sound that focuses on the dense layering of atonal rhythmic elements. He finds that "techno is a bit of a scary word for people in Hong Kong" because it is harder to appreciate, but he enjoys it for its "great production value". Thus, Dan is contrasting the relative accessibility of deep house with the relative inaccessibility of techno. He implies that the latter is more 'underground' because it requires deeper knowledge and understanding of dance music to appreciate.

In a separate interview, Adam Wright of PUSH (who regularly guest DJs at Midnight) repeats Dan's views almost verbatim:

> If you look at footage of these big summer festivals in Europe, where artists from labels like Crosstown Rebels or Hot Creations are playing – *no one's really dancing*. Everyone's in sunglasses, everyone's posing and looking cool, smoking, drinking and talking to each other. If you compare that crowd to another crowd at the same festival, and maybe even on the same day, where, say Ben Klock or Loco Dice or Carl Cox is playing, you notice a gradual increase in the energy of the crowd as the music becomes more ferocious. Techno demands your full attention and involvement. Deep house is pleasant to listen to, to the point where you don't have to think about it.

With the progression within each track occurring in easily discernable chunks, 'even someone with a layman's knowledge of dance music can tell when the next tune is going to come in.' Turntable and mixer acrobatics become less crucial in crafting an atmosphere: in effect, this task is pushed upstream to the producer. The DJ's role – if he so choses – can be reduced to that of fitting together a jigsaw puzzle. In this manner, deep house approaches the standard pop song, which is 'rounded off, closed and self-contained' by its "strict musical structure (AABA) in which the opening melodic phrases are returned to" (Dyer 1979: 414). By contrast, a typical techno tune is

> So simple, and *really* repetitive, particularly with the new style of industrial techno that's popular at the moment. In the course of the six minutes that the track is playing, there won't be any sort of progression in the melodies or the rhythm, and there won't be the introduction of anything really seismic that radically alters the vibe of the track. It will be simple, incremental additions and subtractions of layers in the track…usually just adding an extra percussive element like a hi-hat or some white noise. (Adam Wright)

Techno tracks are large, static blocks of sound that undergo micro textural mutations over a long period of time. They are not intended as complete songs, formulated along the reiteration of a basic melodic idea. Rather, they are *tools* that the DJ can use in his/her set. In this view, an effective techno set relies heavily on the intuition, creativity and finely honed mixing skills of the DJ in order to bring out the best of each track and give overall direction to the mix. Techno demands mental exertion of both its audience and its practitioners. The sublime inflections of individual tracks – no matter how harsh or grating they come across over a warehouse speaker system – is another reason for admiring techno producers over mainstream 'EDM' artists, according to Jack Byrne:

> I think that typically people who produce techno are a bit more…educated in music production…than the people who produce the harder sound. So even though that kind of 4/4 music can sound similar and get boring, you can just hear within each song the number of layers, and the amount of effort and thought that has gone to it, which you can't detect in the screeching variety of music.

Within the DJ community at Midnight, techno tends to be played by the senior residents (Dan Findlay, Basil Tam and Yiannis), whilst the junior ones (Jack Byrne, Cameron Yeh and myself) prefer future garage, deep- and tech-house, which is often 'lighter' and more melodic. The three of us concluded in casual discussion that this is because we have yet to 'understand' techno. That is, we have interpreted techno's relative inaccessibility as indicating a higher aesthetic standard. Thus, the DJs who play at Midnight & Co. distinguish themselves from other groups in Hong Kong's nightlife community by invoking the Western metaphysical tradition that privileges mind over body in music. By suggesting that techno is 'underground' because appreciation of its 'great production values' requires a high level of cognition, while other genres like deep house are 'mainstream' because they are 'easy to dance to', we subordinate its affective quality – its capacity to *move people* – to its status as an object of intellectual contemplation. In so doing, we embrace the metaphysical conception of music that electronic dance music once intended to challenge.

Why techno is accorded such high status (even by those who find it dull) may have something to do with attributes of the genre itself, and the historical context of its development. As mentioned previously, house and techno emerged in the 1980s from Chicago and Detroit respectively, with the latter being an offshoot of the former. The 'Belleville Three' of techno – Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson – stripped house music of its disco heritage, instead being influenced by the cold, futuristic aesthetic of avant-garde European producers such as Georgio Moroder and Kraftwerk. They spent hours sitting in darkened bedrooms in their small, rural town, endlessly contemplating the meaning of the music that inspired them (Reynolds 2012: 4). Thus, whilst there is no mistaking techno's functional origins in providing a new array of sounds to move to, the Belleville Three intended this strand of dance music to be "far more serious and self-aware" (Brewster and Broughton 1999: 321), treating their creations as *objects d'art* whose provenance lay beyond the dancefloor:

> Where other forms are engaged in the routines of copying, emulating, recycling – returning to favorite themes and trusted basslines – *techno hopes for the clarity of pure creation. It has rejected representation in favor of abstraction, thereby trying to achieve something newer and bolder…*[Whereas] dance music is usually explored in terms of club cultures and collective styles, techno is more often discussed with reference to the genius of individual producers and with lengthy critiques of individual records.' (ibid.:320-322, emphasis mine).

Whereas house drew inspiration from the past, "[assembling] itself from disregarded and degraded pop-culture detritus that the mainstream considered passé, disposable un-American" (Reynolds 2012: 15), techno looked to a cyborg future stripped of human warmth. In its most experimental form, the music denies the sensual body in favor of a dark abstraction, with texture replacing melody as the carrier of musical meaning (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 76).

Finally, there is a socio-economic factor behind the invocation of austere white-European music over the voluptuous African-American soul, which provided the sampling material for disco and house. Against the backdrop of Detroit's industrial ruins, Europhilia was a way for middle-class black teenagers to differentiate themselves from their ghettoized counterparts (Reynolds 2012: 5). In turn, this deliberately 'intellectualized' music found favor, not with black America, but with white Europe (Brewster and Broughton 1999: 332). Thus, built into techno is an aspiration towards respectability, benchmarked against the Western metaphysical conception of music as an object to mull over and ascribe meaning to, rather than as an atmosphere that incites hedonism on the dancefloor. Consequently, it appears that Hong Kong's most 'underground' genre best fits into the bourgeois musical culture of the West, at least along one key dimension.

Part V: Conclusion

What is the role of the DJ in contemporary music? Walter Benjamin believed that the commodification of music via the record entailed the "decay" of its aura – "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (1936). If so, then the DJ's main role is to create this aura anew by broadcasting to a crowd of dancing strangers music that remixes recordings in innovative ways. The "detachable" aspect of recordings of musical tracks enabled them to be "transposed to any situation" (Eno 1983: 128): in capitalist society, it entailed the "democratization of aesthetic consumption". Today, democratization has reached aesthetic production. For, the cost of remixing technology is now within the budgets of many people, who can easily create new music using samplers and Digital Audio Workstations in their home studios, then disseminate it for little or no cost over social media platforms like Soundcloud and YouTube. These developments blur the distinction between active producer and passive consumer of music that had defined 'classical' music and its successor, pop music. DJs led the way, first by driving these technological advances with their professional demands, then by pioneering the role of the 'prosumer', while relinquishing some of their role as arbiters of musical taste.

As DJs broke through to new roles, they had to deal with new forms of the tensions that confront all artists: between rationality and emotion, between innate skill and technology, and between authenticity and commercial success. DJs, like other artists, define themselves and their peers according to their positions along the three axes where these three tensions play out. Parts I, III and IV in effect argued that each of these tensions arises from a false dichotomy. I now draw out what is common to these arguments by pointing out their common kinship to the false dichotomy between mind and body that Gilbert Ryle labeled a 'category error' in *The Concept of Mind* (1949), his famous put-down of the Western philosophical tradition. This points us toward a deeper understanding of the interaction between technological advancement, artistic identity and cultural dynamics that this project has examined in detail for the case of the DJ and electronic dance music.

Ryle argued that our concept of mind is fundamentally different from our concept of a body. Saying that 'my thesis was on my mind' or 'my mind was taken up with refuting his criticism' is shorthand for a complex set of mental events; each event takes places within my body; the aggregate of such mental events constitutes my mind. So my mind is a different category or level of phenomenon from my body, just as a cricket match is a different category or level of phenomenon from the bowler, the batsman, the fielders, the umpire, the ball, the wicket and the bat — whose interaction constitutes the cricket match. According to Ryle, the dichotomy between mind and body that has driven Western philosophy is a 'category error' in that it opposes two phenomena that in fact belong to different categories. The analyses of

the above three tensions confronting the DJ that I presented in Parts I, III and IV concluded that each is akin to a category error.

The concern with preserving the emotional core of music, in opposition to the mechanical means for producing and reproducing the music dates back to at least the time of Sousa, who claimed that

> From the days when the mathematical and mechanical were paramount in music, the struggle has been bitter and incessant for the sway of the emotional and the soulful. And now, in this the twentieth century, come these talking and playing machines, and offer again to reduce the expression of music to a mathematical system of megaphones, wheels, cogs, disks, cylinders, and all manner of revolving things. (1906)

Part I argued that the dichotomy between rationality and emotion is akin to a category error, for Western music has long expressed 'the emotional and the soulful' through mathematical/mechanical means. Weber's analysis of the rational foundations of music noted that the structure of the harmonic scale provided a rational foundation for the expression of emotion. I extended his insight to the realm of electronic dance music. Dance music in the age of digitization is not merely an endless, inarticulate jumble of recycled noises for the unwashed masses. It is, as any clubber will tell you, an ecstatic experience, yet one that is produced mathematically and mechanically: "Pop musicians and audiences have grown increasingly accustomed to making an association between synthetic/automated music and the communal (dance floor) connection to nature (via the body). We have grown used to connecting *machines* and *funkiness*" (Goodwin 1988: 263).

This leads to the analyses of Part III and IV. These were based on the responses, opinions and narratives of DJs in Hong Kong that I collected in my research. Many of these utterances referred to the notion of an authentic 'soul', a site of untainted creativity, battling valiantly against the onslaughts of the machine and the market – both onslaughts having escalated with the digitization of music and the advance of music-making technology. Yet, apart from song and stomping, music must be produced via instruments; the advancement of musical technology simply makes more versatile instruments available and expands the range of emotions that musicians can express. So the opposition of human skill to technology is a false dichotomy, akin to a category error. Technology does not crowd out human skill as such; it challenges us to develop new skills – to master new technologies (cellos, music production software) – even as it renders redundant other skills that might have been painfully acquired.

Another false dichotomy can be found in discourses that pit 'soul' against 'market', and uphold art that addresses the soul, while discounting art that commands a high price, on the basis that such art cannot be authentic. If artistic quality is intrinsic to the art, then the

price that it commands is irrelevant to its quality; if the art is the means whereby one soul speaks to another, then the market merely opens up and maintains more channels of communication by sustaining the livelihoods of those whose art speaks convincingly to others. Likewise, with underground music that has achieved mass-market appeal. Authenticity is, by definition, a quality intrinsic to the art, so it cannot be lost merely because the art has become mainstream.

Although the tensions that I have discussed arise from false dichotomies akin to category errors, they are keenly felt by the artists concerned. How to explain this? By historical and socio-economic context. The tension that the artist feels between 'art' and 'technology' arises from the desire to maintain artistic integrity and a coherent identity in the face of disruptive change. As in many other social and historical contexts, this objective is often pursued by invoking symbols that 'conjure up the spirits of the past'; for the DJ, the most potent symbols are technological artifacts that had played key roles in the past, while the greatest threats to identities constructed from these artifacts are new technologies. That is why the symbols invoked by some DJs anxious over the dehumanizing effects of automating more of their skills are the 12-inch vinyl and the belt-driven turntable and why some younger DJs seeking to establish themselves take up older equipment to symbolize continuity with the first DJ innovators.

Likewise, the tension between 'authenticity' and 'commercial success' arises from the struggle to maintain artistic integrity and a coherent identity within capitalist society, where artistic success often attracts imitators seeking a fast buck, as illustrated by the conversion of electronic dance music into a 'sound to draw upon' by pop stars, and the rapid ascent of 'EDM' DJ/producers. Imitators are presumed to be both inauthentic and market-driven: that is why commercial success is often taken as a signal of inauthenticity, while rebellion against capitalist society is often taken as a signal of authenticity. However, the practice and articulation of rebellion can build symbolic capital that translates into commercial success, as illustrated by both Midnight & Co. and small&Tall in Hong Kong.

"We shape our tools," observed Marshall McLuhan, "and thereafter our tools shape us". Societies evolve according to how individuals adapt to, negotiate with, and innovate in the face of technological advance. The anthropological approach is well suited to eliciting and interpreting individual experience in this regard, for it recognizes how individual identity is constructed through symbols. The evolution of the DJ highlights the convolute relationship between art, identity and technology in the post-modern, digital era of capitalism. That is why the progress of electronic dance music has implications beyond the dancefloor.

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