Deconstruct To Reconstruct. Logic Of Assemblage and Aesthetic of Metamorphosis in Electronic Dance Music

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Abstract

La musica elettronica può essere considerata il genere che più efficacemente ha incapsulato e articolato i rapporti dell'essere umano con il rumore, le macchine e la tecnologia, incarnando molti concetti e teorie legate alla tecnologia. La 'post-' condizione del XXI secolo ha avuto un impatto sulla musica elettronica popolare, con l'ascesa di quella che è stata etichettata come "deconstructed club", "post-club" e "conceptronica". Questo articolo presenta una critica dei termini sopra citati, sostenendo che la musica dance elettronica ha costantemente impiegato strategie decostruttive e decontestualizzanti in relazione a generi, elementi e codici espressivi preesistenti. Si sostiene infatti che una logica di assemblaggio e un'estetica della metamorfosi siano intrinseche alla musica elettronica popolare, data la sua essenza tecnologica e ricombinante. Se la musica elettronica da ballo si basa su tecniche avanguardiste come l'assemblaggio e il détournement estetico, essa può allora essere concepita come espressione di un'avanguardia popolare o di un modernismo popolare. Inoltre, elementi concettuali sono rintracciabili in essa fin dai suoi inizi. Questo articolo, quindi, si propone di riformulare l'analisi e i discorsi sulla musica elettronica popolare evidenziandone gli aspetti decostruttivi e concettuali, e propone che le sfaccettature più interessanti dei suoi sviluppi recenti risiedano altrove.

Electronic music can arguably be considered the genre that has most effectively encapsulated and articulated human relationships with noise, machines and technology, embodying many technology-oriented concepts. The 21st century has brought about a post-condition that has had an impact on popular electronic music, with the rise of what has been labelled "deconstructed club", "post-club", and "conceptronica". This paper presents a critique of the aforementioned terms, arguing that electronic dance music has consistently employed deconstructive and decontextualizing strategies in relation to pre-existent genres, elements, and expressive codes. Indeed, it is argued that a logic of assemblage and an aesthetic of metamorphosis are intrinsic to popular electronic music, given its technological and recombinant essence. If electronic dance music is based on avantgardist techniques such as assemblage and aesthetic détournement, it may be conceived, then, as an expression of popular avantgarde or popular modernism. Moreover, conceptual underpinnings may be found in popular electronic music since its inception. This paper, therefore, aims to reframe the analysis and discourses on popular electronic music by considering its deconstructive and conceptual aspects, and proposes that the most interesting facets of its recent developments may, in fact, lie elsewhere.

Parole chiave/Key Words

Electronic dance music; aesthetic of metamorphosis; logic of assemblage; conceptronica; deconstructed club.

Musica dance elettronica; estetica della metamorfosi; logica dell'assemblaggio; conceptronica; deconstructed club.

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1. Introduction. Noises, Technology, Music

This paper aims to show how popular electronic dance music has carried the legacy of avantgarde movements and can be seen as a concrete instance of several philosophical and media concepts. In particular, it proposes that, since its inception, it is possible to find conceptual underpinnings in electronic dance music; and that it shows a dialectic of (genre/conventions/forms) deconstruction and reconstruction at play. The latter can be subsumed under what I call logic of assemblage and aesthetic of metamorphosis.

If there is a common thread running through any kind of electronic music, it is the expansion of the "musical" domain The starting point of this revolution could be traced back to *The Art Of Noises*, a book published by Italian futurist Luigi Russolo in 1916. With his radical proposal of expanding the realm of 'sounds' to include 'noises', Russolo started a deconstruction of the whole Western music system, envisioning a new conception which in turn paved the way for new ways of music making and performing. Russolo's text starts with the premise that modern life has brought with it a plethora of new sounds - noises - dependent on the renewed sonic landscape of the industrial city. He contends that «ancient life was all silence - in the 19th Century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and reigns sovereign over the sensibility of men» (Russolo, 1986, p. 23). He later provides a vivid example of a typical sonic experience in a modern city:

> Let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes. We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air or gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws, the starting of trams on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We will amuse ourselves by orchestrating together in our imagination the din of rolling shop shutters, the varied hubbub of train stations, iron works, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants, and subways (Russolo, 1986, p. 26).

This exposure to noises has affected human perception of music. Having been accustomed to the sounds of nature and to 'classical' music, after the discovery of (industrial) noise humans started to feel the need for music to tread new paths and reflect this mutated sonic environment. New machines equal new sounds-noises, which equals new music. As Russolo writes, «the evolution of music is comparable to the multiplication of machines, which everywhere collaborate with man […] Today, the machine has created such a variety and conten-

tions of noises that pure sound in its slightness and monotony no longer provokes emotion» (Russolo, 1986, p. 24). Russolo stresses how modern machines and noises reshape sensibility, engendering new sources of sensual pleasures and enjoyment, and thus prompting the need for new sounds as a means to reach novel aesthetic pleasures. He firmly believed that «by selecting, coordinating and controlling all the noises, we will enrich mankind with a new and unsuspected pleasure of the senses» (Russolo, 1986, p. 27). Later on, he adds that «futurist composers should continue to enlarge and enrich the field of sound. This responds to a need of our sensibility» (Russolo, 1986, p. 28). Russolo himself put his ideas into practice with the *Intonarumori*, a family of experimental instruments made to emulate noises.

His interest in sound and noises was carried on by the French pioneers of *musique concrète*, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, who can be considered the forefathers of popular electronic music. While not properly making electronic music, the two and their peers were seminal in the exploration of new technological affordances in the service of music. They would record sounds and noises on magnetic tape, and then splice, loop and edit it with their studio machines. The result was a music in which the potential of sound - severed from its recognizable source and heavily altered - to signify nothing but its own physical and perceptual qualities was fully explored for the first time. *Musique concrète* sonic experiments became possible because of recording and playback technologies. Tape recording and manipulation not only did bring new sounds, but also, crucially, new ways of structuring and playing them. This new conceptual approach to music making, which turned the musician/composer into a technician/scientist, will become full-fledged later in the twentieth century with popular electronic music: «at the end of the nineties, the innovations that began with GRM's founders have been fully integrated into the everyday working practice of almost all musicians working across the entire musical spectrum. The breakbeat, created entirely from the manipulation of records on turntables or from recorded segments spliced together manually or digitally, is the epitome of *musique concrète*» (Young, in Shapiro, 2000, p. 15). While *musique concrete*, and art music in general, had no direct impact on popular electronic music[1] - which instead follows the path traced by disco, dub, hip hop in regard to the dancefloor functionality, the deconstruction and reconstruction of songs, the heavy use of sampling, the role accorded to the studio producer and the DJ - it nevertheless represents

the main precursor of the logic of assemblage and the aesthetic of metamorphosis that, as we shall see, are carried out in popular electronic dance music.

2. Electronic Music and The Concepts It Embodies

The coupling of electronic music and recording technologies ushered in new approaches to sound. Sound recording meant that what has always been an event irreversibly unfolded in time could now be stored, remodeled, replayed. Until then, the previous main music technology was notation, a system based on clear split divisions between composer and performer[2]. While notation was not abandoned by electronic composers within the so-called 'art music' circles, electronic artists working in the popular music sphere could do without it. Thus, the recorded form of a song/track/piece became *the* work itself, and the work was a matter of conjoining heterogeneous machine-made or machine-altered fragments, whether they originated from sound synthesis or from sampling pre-existing sources. This is a clear instance of how technology drives music innovation[3], and how electronic music - primarily popular, dance electronic music - can be conceived as an assemblage. Indeed, as I will show, there is a logic of assemblage and of metamorphosis running through electronic dance genres.

Electronic music, before and beyond its extreme fragmentations in (micro)genres, acts as a technical apparatus that ignites sensations, affects, psychophysical states of being. DeNora (2004) famously conceived of music as a technology of self; we can argue, then, that electronic music works as a technology of self-enhancement, self-dissolution, self-modulation. A technology for the self to be more attuned to perceptual shifts, a technology to feel oneself feeling. Here we see echoes of McLuhan's (1994) claim of media as sensory extensions. Mankind has always externalized its perceptual and communicative faculties, with each new medium functioning as a substitute for and an extension of the human sensorium. In turn, «any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex» (McLuhan, 1994, p. 4). McLuhan saw in the advent of electric media the start of a process of human perceptions restructuring, and the contraction of the world into a global village. Electronic and digital media have then brought the assault on the senses and our relationship with space and time to even higher heights. In this respect, electronic dance music is first and foremost music as a technology of intensities and modulation of sensations; it is an affect engine that has materialized through sound and technology the *Future Shock* Alvin Toffler was already diagnosing in 1970.

Perhaps it is not by chance that electronic music has embodied and materialized many radical, often technology-related concepts of media theory and philosophy. It is itself applied theory. Its production-performance-fruition practices and its imaginaries are already theoretical - although often without acknowledging and explicitly addressing its conceptual underpinnings. One can think of Deleuzian-Guattarian concepts such as the rhizome, becoming, intensities, and desiring machines, which resonates with the structure of many dance genres, the way they are played and experienced collectively on the dance floor, and the affective processes they entail. All these concepts can by subsumed under the crucial word that is 'flow'[4].

Another important concept is that of affect. Massumi correlates affect with intensity, stating that «intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin - at the surface of the body, at its interface with things» (Massumi, 1995, p. 85). Which better way to describe the experience of getting lost in sound - indeed, to be carried by a flow of sound - if not as a continuous modulation of affect-as-intensities? Is it not what happens when sound waves propagate through air and encounter the surface of our bodies, igniting autonomic kinetic responses? Intensity is «a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time» (Massumi, 1995, p. 86), which seems to capture exactly that «temporal sink» we fall into when totally absorbed in sound. Massumi also uses the term 'transduction' to designate «the transmission of a potential that cannot but be felt» (1995, p. 104) which happens when affect comes into play. After him, the concept of affect has been explicitly linked to popular forms of electronic music, especially those with an emphasis on low-frequencies. Goodman, for example, is concerned with an «ecology of vibrational affects» (2009, p. xviii), that «contagious nexus of bass, rhythm, and vocal science, and their tactics of affective mobilization» (2009, p. xx). Dance music is first and foremost affective music, oriented more to engendering sensations and intensities through the sheer force of sound waves rather than with meanings in the textual-literal way. Goodman highlights several examples of this vibrational ecology, as «Western populations become affectively mobilized through wave after wave of machinic dance musics, from dub to disco, from house to techno, from hip-hop to jungle, from dancehall to garage, to grime and forward» (2009, p. 2). Similarly, Jasen (2016) frames dubstep's aesthetics of low frequencies as «affect engineering», the latter word indicating how the transduction of affects is the result of a complex engine comprised by the DJ, the crowd, and the technical audio system.

Another famous concept aptly exemplified by electronic dance music is the death of the author[5], as described by Roland Barthes (1977). While it is true that dance music has its own authors, the overall functioning of the culture as a whole offers an instance of the death of the author in the Barthesian sense. For, if any text bears traces of and is an assemblage of other texts, then we must acknowledge that the practice of DJing consists exactly in creating texts through selection and juxtaposition of previous ones. Meanwhile, production-wise, the standard compositional practice is that of assembling texts of various sizes. Composing becomes assembling, as tracks are made of fragments, traces of traces being programmed anew, previous texts deconstructed and reconstructed either through sampling or style and pattern adoption and mutation. Each track-as-text contains a plethora of texts[6].

Moreover, electronic music seems to offer instances of the cyborg and the posthuman. As Haraway (1985) famously defined it, the cyborg «is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism» (1985, p. 65). Similarly, Hayles argues that «the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines» (1999, p. 3), the posthuman subject being «an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction» (1999, p. 3). Electronic music and DJ culture are thus quintessentially cyborg, posthuman cultures insofar as both its practitioners and its audience interact and are hybridized with machines: the producers, when they interact with software and hardware to create music; the DJs and live performers, whose organic bodies merge with their machines; the audience, as their senses are modulated by the technical apparatus - PA system, light design, visuals, even the architectural space of the venue. Electronic music, thus, is the best musical example of becoming-posthuman, or rather, of de- and re-constructing our commonly accepted notion of what it means to be human. Electronic artists «recognize that the drum machine and sampler are no less organic than an acoustic guitar and a harmonica […] these musicians have opened their minds to the possibility that the supposedly dehumanizing machine might actually make us more human» (Shapiro, 2000, p. 2).

3. The Post-Condition and The Rise of Conceptronica

Since the turn of the century, there has been continuous interest, among various fields, in the new condition brought by the digital. Overlapping between media studies, art,

and music, some concepts that address this overall post-condition are, for example, the post-media (Krauss, Manovich, Weibel), post-digital (Cascone, Cramer), and post-internet (Olson, McHugh). The 'post-' prefix is used to imply both a going-beyond and a naturalization of media, the digital and the internet. These concepts, therefore, speaks of the redefinitions (or the uselessness) of certain categories after the digital. Manovich is particularly interested in DJ and electronic culture. In many of his texts between the late '90s and early '00s, he often refers to DJs and remixers as paradigmatic cases of post-media aesthetics in which the notion of medium is substituted by that of cultural software. Indeed, DJing «depends on actual software and/or software in a metaphorical sense: the operations allowed for by turntables, mixers and other electronic equipment» (2001, p. 11).

It was only a matter of time before theoretical speculations flooded into popular electronic music, whether pushed by the artists themselves or by critics, fan and the discourses on this music. Around the middle of the 2010s, indeed, there has been a surge in releases which would directly address theoretical issues such as the Anthropocene, the posthuman, information overload, late capitalism socio-political flaws, reflections on identity and gender, and so on. The last decade of electronic music has witnessed the rise of a conceptual approach to music-making and -crucially - to music-promoting. The *zeitgeist* of this shift has been captured by Simon Reynolds[7] in an infamous article published online in 2019, which sparked a debate in electronic music circles. Titled *The Rise of Conceptronica*, the essay strived to frame and understand «why so much electronic music this decade felt like it belonged in a museum instead of a club». The term 'conceptronica' was a catchy label that, although far too vague, took off among fans and Internet discourse[8]. Interestingly, it was not the only neologism used to describe the kind of experimental music made by, to name a few, Arca, Lotic, Amnesia Scanner and many artists releasing on German label PAN, Chino Amobi, Holly Herndon, James Ferraro, and many more. Two other terms, often used interchangeably, which became widespread within the electronic community, are 'deconstructed club' and 'post club'. In these cases, the 'conceptual' element of the music did not reside much in the academic jargon used to embellish press releases as in the conscious effort to 'deconstruct' the tropes of club music canonized genres.

The website Rate Your Music defines deconstructed club music as follows:

> In the 2010s, a constellation of producers and DJs in an internet context developed a common approach to merging global and regional rhythms such as Trap, Ballroom, Batida, Jersey Club and Grime, and remixing them with an abrasive Post-Industrial sound, the result being known as deconstructed club. This recontextualizing of club sounds from marginalized communities often addresses themes such as race relations, feminism, queer politics and colonialism, or concepts such as futurism and technology. Identified by aggressive, frantic sound design featuring metallic, explosive percussion or samples of glass smashing, gunshots, etc., deconstructed club paints an excessive, apocalyptic-sounding soundscape, with constant rhythmic switch-ups and atonality.

Usually, the beginnings of deconstructed club are traced back to Venus X's and Shayne Oliver's *GHE20G0TH1K* parties launched in New York in 2009. Three years later, in Berlin, Dan DeNorch and Michael Ladner started a similar club night called *Janus*. At these parties, DJs like Kablam, M.E.S.H., Lotic and Total Freedom would unabashedly play leftfield takes on renowned genres such as house, techno and hip hop, mix them with regional rhythms and genres such as Jersey Club, batida, dembow, and grime, and flirt with pop music. Extremely nuanced sound design plays also a big role. The music made and played by these artists is often heavily-processed, blatantly showing its shiny, artificial surfaces - another term to describe it is 'hi-tech music' (Harper, 2016). The key point was not to play or develop a defined genre, as it was to deconstruct and reshape what club music could be[9]. While these artists - loosely the same as those mentioned by Reynolds - would not necessarily address theoretical issues, the often explicit effort to deconstruct music genres revealed nonetheless a conceptual tendency underpinning such music. As Reynolds writes,

> Conceptual electronic music still draws sustenance from dance music at its most mental and mindless—beats purpose-built for druggy all-night bacchanals. But although it uses the rhythmic tools of body music, it doesn't primarily aim to elicit a physical response. It's music to contemplate with your ears, to think about and think with. In that sense, it's closer to an art exhibition of photographs or video taken at a bygone club than actual club music (Reynolds, 2019a).

Somehow, then, there is a sense that this is post-music: music molded to be not-quite-the-same as other, more established genres. One may object that this has been the case since the advent of sampling and with what we have termed the aesthetic of metamorphosis (i.e. adopting genre-conventions while at the same time reconfiguring them), but it seems that here there is a much more conscious, explicit intent of rupture and discontinuity. This is music which seems to ask to be appreciated - whether by the mind, the body, or both - more for what *it is not* than for what it is. Sure, even experimental electronic music from the '90s was

identified first and foremost by its refusal to strictly adhere to genre conventions; yet, these same producers were often reluctant to build complexes theoretical superstructures. In fact, while «90s IDM and '10s conceptronica are similarly positioned in terms of their relationship with the electronic dance mainstream», Reynolds notes that «this high-powered discourse contrasts with the relatively down-to-earth vernacular of '90s IDM luminaries like Aphex Twin's Richard D. James and Luke Vibert, whose records were more likely to be daubed with puerile humour and porn references than concepts from poststructuralism». Along with the emphasis on concepts, Reynolds finds other two 'turns' that characterize this strain of experimental electronica: the audiovisual/immersive and the political. These turns have not strictly to do with the music itself, but rather with how it is presented to the public and with the race/gender/sexuality minorities these artists belong to and address. As we will see, these turns are much more relevant features than any conceptual or deconstructive aim if we want to grasp the actual shift brought by this heterogeneous group of artists and labels.

Another music critic who has been sensitive to developments in underground electronic music since the early '10s is Adam Harper[10]. He has extensively written on trends and micro-trends variously related to the Internet[11]. In 2016 he wrote on the «New Hi-Tech Underground»[12], while in 2018 he applied the 'post-internet' label - usually an art-world term - to electronic music. For him, many recent experimental electronic music can be termed post-internet insofar as it reflects the everydayness of the Internet, just like the so-called post-internet art was a reflection on the overarching Internet presence in daily life. Harper, however, is wary of the term 'deconstructed' (which was gaining traction around that time), for it is «a label that's somehow both too vague and assumes too much, and which tends to suggest a scene or a sound when a closer look reveals a series of shifting networks and the momentary echoes between them». He also offers a different view than Reynolds' on conceptualism. Indeed, he sees a demise of conceptual tendencies, and instead an increased

> shift of focus in underground musical aesthetics away from conceptuality and toward a new form of authenticity rooted in the personal expression, experience and solidarities of people who experience structural oppression. While conceptual digital music has receded, what has come to the fore has been something more sincere, emotive and more politically direct (you might even say honest). Rather than ironic music for the internet age, some of today's most vital producers make a passionate music for the age of Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and queer struggle (Harper 2018).

4. Logic of Assemblage and Aesthetic of Metamorphosis in Electronic Dance Music

I will now attempt a 'deconstruction' of the discourse around deconstructed club and conceptronica, based on the assumption that most electronic music, whether aimed at the club or not, has been deconstructive and conceptual since its early days. The recent wave of artists labeled as deconstructed club producers, thus, would not represent a radical rupture in electronic music history, but rather a re-actualization, under new guises and tailored to the last decade-and-a-half aesthetics, of the recombinant (and often conceptual) approach which has characterized electronic dance music since its beginnings. Indeed, what I call logic of the assemblage and aesthetic of metamorphosis have been integral part of popular electronic music making, to the point that they have been naturalized and almost unnoticed anymore.

We can say that since dub pioneers like King Tubby and Lee Scratch Perry mastered the art of the mixing board-as-instrument (Veal, 2007) in the early Seventies, popular electronic music has been revolving around decomposing-deconstructing and recomposing-reconstructing sounds, tracks, genres. Dub premiered the operational logics of assemblage and metamorphosis (e.g. dub turning reggae songs inside out and often making various 'versions' of a single tune), becoming the conceptual benchmark for music making and remixing in the soon to become digital era. DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) eased and extended the producer's degree of control on sound manipulation. Whether working with digital software, hardware - samplers, drum machines, synths - or both, producers could find novel ways to experiment with electronic sound. The two main ways through which such a logic of assemblage or metamorphosis takes shape are sampling and referencing other music.

In the first case we have a direct textual extraction of one or more sound fragments from pre-existing record(s) which are then integrated into the new track, with various degrees of recognizability. Referencing, on the other hand, consists in adopting and bending genre-rules and conventions: rhythmic patterns, tempo range, timbres, track structure, recurrent sonic motifs, preference for particular machine sound (e.g. the 303 acid bassline, the 808 or 909 drums). While genre-conventions are fundamental in dance music genre-obsessed ecology, innovation lies in the degrees to which producers choose to divert from them. It may be through altering a well-established rhythmic pattern, inserting sonic markers from other genres, slowing-down or speeding-up the tempo, cutting off the vocals, and

so on. The result is an assemblage of familiar and less-familiar (to the genre conventions) elements: innovation through metamorphosis.

Meanwhile, on the performing side, assemblage and metamorphosis are key descriptors of what a proper DJ set is supposed to be: a shifting musical flow which connects, rearranges, molds together bits of different tracks and genres in order to create something new. If dub represented the landmark for recombinant techniques in music-making, in those same years disco music became the first genre in which DJs became pivotal, and the practice of remix was born. As David Toop recalls, it all started in the disco era with disco DJs mixing on the one hand and first studio remixes on the other:

> Disco mixing, the merging of records by a DJ, denied the musician as performer, denied the integrity of any individual performance, denied the problems of mixing musical styles or cultural difference, denied the conclusion of a work. Communication, the human problem, could take place in the machine: first, record decks and tape editing, then samplers, then hard-disk drives. Gradually, the DJ became the artist. Gradually, the song, the composition, was decomposed. […] Disco began to work on the principle of decomposing songs into modular and interchangeable fragments, sliced and repatched into an order which departed from the rules of Tin Pan Alley (Toop, 2018, pp. 46-47).

Starting with disco music, «the DJ came to the forefront of music. As a semi-anonymous bricoleur, a cut-up artisan, the DJ could montage any form of music to create a mood, an environment» (Toop, 2018, p. 65).

Such a logic of assemblage works on a double level: as a production and performance methodology, as seen in sampling, layering sounds, and DJs mixing records together. But also, in an abstract sense, in that everything within electronic dance music culture is an assemblage, i.e. the result of a set of interdependent forces acting with, on, or against each other and thus allowing certain genres, codes, practices to arise in certain moments localized in space and time. Assemblages of human and non-human elements, as electronic dance music is determined by the technologies for its production and performance, in turn influencing them to be designed to suit the needs and practices of DJs and producers[13]. On the other hand, popular electronic music is sustained by what we call logic of metamorphosis, that is, genre mutations - through what Goodman (2010) calls «audio viruses» - as aesthetic principle. We see this logic already in many genre and subgenre names which contains hints of such mutations, whether through location markers (e.g. Italo-disco, UK garage, Goa trance, French house), references to other genres (e.g. dubstep, dub techno, techstep, tech-

house, ragga jungle), or textural and 'mood' adjectives (e.g. minimal and industrial techno, electro-house, micro-house, psychedelic trance, liquid drum and bass).

5. It Has Always Been Conceptual and Deconstructed-Deconstructive

Framing the history of dance music as one of genre de- and re-construction, of constant mutation[14], helps us reconsider the aesthetics of deconstructed club music within a wider history of similar practices. For example, before the term deconstructed club or post club came into existence, Harper (2014) coined the term «epic collage» to describe the heavy sampling and unexpected juxtaposition of sounds deployed by some producers which «seem to echo the intense experiences and high stimulation of our technologically mediated environment, and the panic attacks and bottomless terror that follows overstimulation». Writing after Reynolds' piece on conceptronica, Lindblom (2019) instead focuses on deconstructed club aesthetic methodologies, finding two concurrent modes: formal plasticity and synthetic formalism. The former is defined as «a surgical-like procedure that slices open familiar sonic specimens and reconfigures them into cognitively dissonant structures in the form of uncanny, deformed bodies», while the latter «takes the forms of de- and reassembled, alien morphologies that pinpoint the crucial fact that to deconstruct does not just mean taking something apart – but also rearranging it in various novel ways». Reynolds himself states that in this music «discontinuities and ruptures replace steady dance beats. This is how club music should sound, it's implied, in the age of drone strikes and tweetstorms: not lulling dancers into a hypnotic trance, but placing them on red alert». While all of this is undoubtedly true, it must be noted that these aesthetic strategies have all been integral to dance music's tentacular developments[15]. A turning point was determined by the availability, in the early '90s, of digital samplers with bigger storage capacities that allowed more elaborate forms of sampling[16]. Digital techniques such as pitch-shifting and time-stretching, widely used by jungle and drum and bass producers, «turned a few simple funk and fusion drum loops into an arsenal of humanly unplayable rhythmic motifs […] continuously shifting polyrhythmic drumscapes» (Berk, in Shapiro, 2000, p. 198). Jungle and drum and bass - especially the latter's darker and starkly inhuman subgenres like techstep or neurofunk - likewise reflected the darker fears and moods of the '90s with their hyper-convoluted ruptures and broken rhythm, a sonic weaponry consisting of ultra-bass frequencies and cold textures

which assaulted dancers and listeners in a sort of libidinization of paranoia and anxiety. If dancing to house, techno and trance meant letting loose to the beat and being carried by the groove, doing it to jungle and drum and bass implied for dancers to be exposed to a relentless attack of hyperkinetic and alien sounds which were far from blissful and ecstatic[17].

Thus, what is really at stake with conceptronica/deconstructed club music is not so much the novelty of their aesthetic techniques as it is the explicitly theoretical framework in which the music is packaged and promoted. Reynolds himself is aware of that, as he wrote in a following article:

> electronica in the past was predominantly non-verbal - it *sonified* more than it *signified*. It worked through freefloating affect and visceral impact […] There was scope for things to be reimagined by the individual listener, or collectively repurposed by social energies. But with conceptronica […] the listener's role is to be the recipient of a meaning placed there by an artist. It's more of a one-way transmission (Reynolds, 2019b).

Pertaining this conceptual stance, moreover, we can find past artists and genres which, more or less explicitly, had a conceptual core too. Cybotron, the duo of Juan Atkins and Rick Davis who pioneered Detroit techno, were heavily inspired by science fiction and Alvin Toffler's futurological ideas. Likewise, much Detroit techno has a conceptual undertone. Think of Juan Atkins' and Jeff Mills' sci-fi imaginary, Derrick May being often defined 'the philosopher of techno', James Stinson's and Gerald Donald's Drexciyan mythology. These, and other cases, fall under what Eshun (1998) calls sonic fictions[18], the main aesthetic device deployed by Afrofuturist artists to build and carry their narratives, often without recurring to pompose and academic jargon-charged press releases[19].

Another example of conceptuality ingrained as a strong backbone to popular electronic music is the German record label Mille Plateaux. Run by Achim Szepanski between 1993 and 2003 (and then relaunched in 2018, before his untimely passing in 2024), the label - which released experimental electronica and was pivotal for the spread of the so-called microsound during the late '90s and early '00s - was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (hence the name, an homage to their *A Thousand Plateaus*). Szepanski even wrote a *Mille Plateaux Manifesto* (2001)[20], and released a compilation named *In Memoriam Gilles Deleuze* (1996) after the philosopher's death[21].

In addition, the genre of Yorkshire bleep can be seen as an experiment in pushing the limits of low frequencies and resorting to non-musical sounds (the so-called 'bleeps' and bass test tones). The same conceptual approach to low frequencies excavation is also at the heart

of dubstep[22]. Meanwhile, hardcore breakbeat, jungle and drum and bass can be said to revolve around the concept of music as an audio maze, a labyrinth of sounds stitched together via digital technology. Generally speaking, we can say that *all* dance music is built upon the implicit conceptual premise that it is a technology for the flow of affect and becoming: becoming-other, becoming-alien, losing the sense of self through technologically-made rhythms[23].

Moreover, electronic music lends itself to theoretical speculation, especially in the overlapping areas between philosophy, cultural theory, sound studies and media studies. It does not come as a surprise that the main popular electronic theorists are also actively involved in the music, whether as DJ/producer or avid fans: Steve Goodman (aka dj, producer and label manager Kode9), Paul D.Miller (aka DJ Spooky), Kodwo Eshun, Simon Reynolds, Mark Fisher. Reading their words and neologisms - such as sampladelia, rhythmachine, texturhythm, rhythm science, audio virology, hauntology[24] - one can sense how electronic dance music does not only engineer affects, but also acts as a concept engineering machine. At its best it conjoins sheer physical-epidermal superficiality - i.e. vibrations impacting skin surface - and deep conceptual content. Contrary to the idea that meaning is abstract, textual and disembodied, electronic dance music shows us that meaning can be embodied, embedded and enacted through the social, cultural and technical apparatus of music-making, DJing, and dancing.

In light of this, we can reconsider recent discourses on deconstructed club and conceptronica within a wider perspective. First, electronic dance music can - perhaps, should - be viewed as an expression of popular modernism or popular avantgarde[25]. Through its repurposing of avantgardist techniques like collage, montage, adoption of unusual materials, and détournement, it is a digitally intensified version of the avantgardist/modernist approach to art-making[26]. In this respect, the artists usually grouped under the 'deconstructed club' or 'conceptronica' tags are to dance 'historical' genres what post-modernism is to modernism[27]. The term 'deconstructed' itself also bears resemblance to Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy and to deconstructivist architecture, both cultural expressions of postmodernism. And, just like deconstructed club came after the heydays of dance music, they came after the glory of modernism and modern philosophy.

6. Recent Turns in Experimental Electronic Music

Our argument that deconstructed club and conceptronica did not represent a radical break in sonic procedures, but rather reactivated many techniques deployed by electronic

music artists, does not mean, however, that we should neglect the actual novelties they brought into the electronic music scene, nor the undisputed quality of the music itself. Following Reynolds, there are a few 'turns' to be individuated in this music over the last ten years. First, the audiovisual turn, noticeable in the crossover between electronic music and visual arts. Not only adopting the latter's vocabulary, but also through spectacular live performances, with visuals being given similar if not the same importance as the music. This is correlated with the settings in which these artists play their music, particularly festival focused on the intersections between music, art and technology. Then there is the post-diasporic turn. Many of these artists come from non-Western countries and/or belong to ethnic minorities. This resulted in a further hybridization of the already heterogenous landscape of electronic music in XXI century, putting new countries onto the world map of electronic music. Think of the N.A.A.F.I. label/collective from Mexico, the SVBKVLT label from China, the Staycore label/collective from Sweden, Uganda's Nyege Nyege Tapes and Hakuna Kulala labels, or the NON Worldwide label/collective. This post-diasporic turn has been favored by the Internet, which has made it easier for artists to reach out to their peers and to record labels, and for the labels themselves to be known across the world. In a sense, it is a worldwide, digitally-enhanced XXIst century update of Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic (1993), where the crossings between roots and routes becomes enmeshed with the hyper digital connections of our contemporary culture. Finally, the political and vocal turns: for perhaps the main innovation brought by this wave of music in the electronic scene lies in the renewed role accorded to the body and the voice of the performer as it comes to embody the multiple crises and fractures of living in current times, especially for gender non-conforming artist (e.g. Sophie, Lotic, Arca, Elysia Crampton, and many more). They

> make music as genre-nonconforming as it is gender-nonconforming, blurring the boundaries not just between contemporary and archival dance genres but between the rave tradition and noise, industrial, and musique concrete. […] They use their voices, they feature in artwork and in videos, and live, there is often a theatrical staging of the artist as a physical being that contrasts with the relatively faceless and disembodied way that left-field electronic music has tended to present in the past (Reynolds 2019a).

This is music «not (or not yet) of any particular genre, not from History or Culture as previously constituted (by the hitherto powerful, of course), but from bodies and the resonances between bodies» (Harper 2018). While electronic music has subverted popular music idolatry of

the performer's and the centrality of the performer's voice, displacing them in favor of the performer-as-assembler figure of the DJ, these artists have been equally innovative for bringing the body and the voice back at the center of electronic music. If lyrics have always been secondary or non-existent in electronic music, here we are faced with the unavoidable presence of bodies - in artworks, videos and performances - and the surplus of meaning brought by the (re)discovery of the voice. As Reynolds wrote, «it's all about mutilating vocal performances and rearranging the shards into new melodic-rhythmic patterns, processing human breath into swirly texture-clouds or smearing it across emotional landscapes» (Reynolds 2019b).

Thus, whether we call it conceptronica, deconstructed club, post-club, or do without these terms at all, we must acknowledge the important shift that has been traversing experimental electronic music at least for the last decade. It would be naive and misleading to search for this rupture mainly in the concepts that may underlie this music, or in the way these artists deconstruct and reconstruct genres and fragments of sound - although this represents a core part of their aesthetics. For we have seen how this 'deconstruct to reconstruct' approach has been integral to electronic dance music through its logic of assemblage and of metamorphosis. Instead, the novelty and the way these recent currents are a testimony of our post-everything times lies in their trespassing of boundaries which have often been taken for granted: between Western and non-Western music; between genres, and genders; between the often disembodied, anti-performative, voiceless nature of electronic music and the irreducibility of bodies, voices, and the lived histories they carry. It is in this sense, then, that this music embodies our contemporary post-condition.

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[1] The closer link is perhaps represented by American minimalism and its use of extreme repetitions. Composers such as Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, with their work starting in the late '60s, can be seen as forerunners of the aesthetic of repetition employed by many electronic dance music genres.

[2] As Holmes observes, "until the arrival of the magnetic reel-to-reel tape recorder, electronic music had only been a live performance medium using instruments such as the Theremin, Ondes Martenot, or the humble turntable. The tape recorder transformed the field of electronic music overnight by making it a composer's medium […] For the early adapters of magnetic tape composition—Schaeffer, Henry, Cage, Luening, Ussachevsky, and Varèse—the medium had the liberating effect of separating the creation of music from the traditional practice of scoring and notating parts" (2008, pp. 123-124).

[3] This, however, should not be understood as reductive technological determinism. On the contrary, innovation and creativity arise when artists explore the affordances of their tools and take them into uncharted territory. This may happen through a 'misuse' of the tools themselves (as happened with acid house and Chicagoan producers tinkering with the Roland TB-303), or through accidents (e.g. the birth of dub in Jamaica). For a cognitive-anthropological perspective on the interplay between tools, creativity, and mind processes, see Malafouris L., *How Things Shape the Mind. A Theory of Material Engagement*. Cambridge-London, MIT Press, 2013.

[4] The resonances of Deleuze and Guattari's theories on popular music are outlined in Hemment, D., *Affect and Individuation in Popular Electronic Music*. In I. Buchanan & M. Swiboda (Eds.), *Deleuze and Music*, Edinburgh University Press. 2004, pp. 76–94. See also Paci Dalò R., Quinz E. (eds), *Millesuoni. Deleuze, Guattari e la Musica Elettronica*, Cronopio, Napoli, 2006.

[5] It must be pointed out that this phenomenon is not exclusive nor did it start with electronic dance music. For example, disco music showed instances of dynamic interplays between the singers the songs were ascribed to and the musicians and producers who worked on these songs in the studio. Library music, also, might be considered an earlier example of the death of the author, as its composers remained mostly anonymous at the time and are being rediscovered in recent years.

[6] Let us consider some of the most widespread ones across genres, such as the amen break or the Lyn break, the hoover sound (e.g. the infamous Rave 'mentasm stab'), the Reese bass, or Roland 808 and 909 iconic drum sounds.

[7] Who has been extensively writing on electronic dance music since the '90s. For his history of such music and culture, see Reynolds S., *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*. Faber & Faber, London, 2013.

[8] Genres and subgenres naming is an obsessively recurrent practice in electronic dance music community, often due to the need by critics and fans (more than the artists themselves) to define certain (sub)genres in opposition with others. See McLeod K., *Genres, Subgenres, Sub-Subgenres and More: Musical and Social Differentiation Within Electronic/Dance Music Communities*, in «Journal of Popular Music Studies» 13, 2001, pp. 59-75; for theoretical reflections on genres in popular music, see Fabbri F., *How Genres Are Born, Change, Die: Conventions, Communities and Diachronic Processes*, in S. Hawkins (ed.), *Critical Musicological Reflections*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 179-191; and Holt F., Genre in Popular Music, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007. For issues of genre in Internet-born and Internet-spread music, see Born G., Haworth C., *From Microsound to Vaporwave. Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre*, 2018, in «Music & Letters» Vol. 98 No. 4, 2018, pp. 601-647.

[9] Many of the artists presented in this article by Reynolds had already been analyzed by Phillips (2015), who wrote about the 'neofuturist aesthetic' identifiable in their music. See Phillips M., *The Neofuturist Aesthetic. Technology and counterfuture in the electronic avant-garde*, 2015 https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/2015-neofuturist-aesthetic.

[10] He is also academically trained as a musicologist and popular music scholar.

[11] He famously was the first to write an in-depth article on vaporwave.

[12] However, a certain contradiction must be noted when speaking of new, "hi-tech" aesthetics while at the same time the artists associated with such a label are still, for the most part, using the same tools that have been integral to electronic dance music production since the '80s. On this point, see Butler M., *"Everybody Needs a 303 Everybody Loves a Filter". Electronic Dance Music and the Aesthetics of Obsolescence*, in Messaris P., Humphreys L. (eds.), *Digital Media. Transformations in Human Communication*, Peter Lang, New York, 2006, pp. 111-118.

[13] A crucial event was the introduction of the 12'' single, also known as 'disco mix' to facilitate DJ mixing during the disco era.

[14] The main example being what Reynolds calls "hardcore continuum" with its sonic evolution-through-mutation from hardcore breakbeat to darkcore, jungle, drum and bass with its myriad of subgenres, UK garage, grime and dubstep.

[15] For academic overviews and analysis of electronic dance music, see Butler M., *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006; and Attias B.A., Gavanas A., Rietveld H.C. (eds), *DJ Culture in the Mix. Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, Bloomsbury, New York-London, 2013.

[16] As an example, Sharp credits the advent of the Akai S1000 sampler for the rise of more complex sampling in jungle than in its predecessor, hardcore (Sharp in Shapiro 2000: 139).

[17] However, even within house and techno there have been instances of an aesthetic of violent sonic assaults and alien sounds: in the dark psychedelic 303 basslines at the foundation of acid house, in the militarized aesthetic of Underground Resistance, in the harsher, harder techno made by Jeff Mills and his epigones, or the industrial-tinged sound of Birmingham techno.

[18] For a more recent take on sonic fictions, see also Schulze H., *Sonic Fiction*, Bloomsbury, New York-London, 2020.

[19] For an history and analysis of afrofuturism within the electronic dance music context, see Attimonelli C., *Techno: Ritmi Afrofuturisti*, Meltemi, Roma, 2008; and Steinskog E., *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies. Culture, Technology, and Things to Come*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

[20] Szepanski's Deleuze-inspired philosophical thoughts about music are also expressed in Reynolds S., Diefenbach K., *Technodeleuze and Mille Plateaux. Achim Szepanski's Interviews (1994-1996)*, Everything Else, 2017.

[21] The previous year, another compilation of experimental electronica, *Folds And Rhizomes For Gilles Deleuze* (Sub Rosa 1995) was released as a tribute to the French thinker.

[22] It is worth mentioning that the slogan for the infamous DMZ dubstep parties was "come meditate on bass weight".

[23] "Robotnik vacancy, voodoo delirium, whirling dervishes, zombie-dom, marionetten, slaves-to-the-rhythm: the metaphors that house music and 'jacking' irresistibly invite all contain the notion of becoming less-than-human. Other aspects of the music exacerbate the sense of attenuated self-hood" (Reynolds 2013: 26).

[24] Fisher's concept of hauntology, taken from Marx and Derrida, and applied to the popular music (and popular culture at large) of the first decade of twenty-first century has been particularly recurrent in musical discourse both within and outside academia. See Fisher M., *What Is Hauntology?* In «Film Quarterly», 66(1), 2012, pp. 16–24; and Fisher M., *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books, London 2014.

[25] As also argued by Fisher 2014 and Bolter 2019. For more thorough inquiries into popular modernism/popular avant-garde in relation to popular music, see Graham, S., *(Un)Popular Avant-Gardes: Underground Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*, in «Perspectives of New Music», vol. 48, no. 2, 2010, pp. 5–20; and Graham S., *Modernism for and of the masses? On popular modernisms*, in Heile B., Wilson C. (eds), *The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music*, 2018, pp. 239-257.

[26] While emphasis on deconstruction may seem to refer to postmodernism, electronic dance music practices of collage and montage, estrangement through the use of loops and extreme repetitions, non-usual sounds, formal innovations, implicit or explicit critique of mainstream popular music, and even utopianism in rave culture, all seem to situate it closer to the modernist spirit.

[27] This statement is also made by Nikolayi (2019), who sees deconstructed and post-club music as post-modernism, their vision «dissonant, dystopian, and dissident, using a mix of high- and low-brow cultural signifiers in order to reclaim the club floor co-opted by mainstream electro-pop and EDM».

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