“The Politics of Dancing”:
Rhythm, Repetition, Affect and Utopianism in Electronic Dance Music

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“‘The Politics of Dancing’: Rhythm, Repetition, Affect and Utopianism in Electronic Dance Music.”

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Abstract

Electronic Dance Music (hereafter EDM) is a cluster of musical styles, including house, techno, trance, drum ‘n bass and dubstep, which share the common characteristics of being mainly or entirely created using electronic production methods and of being primarily intended for dance-based performance settings (e.g., nightclubs or dance parties). This thesis takes up a number of themes associated with EDM, namely: repetition, affect through sound, utopianism and rhythmic ambiguity, while looking at them from various—ethnographic, philosophical, music-theoretical, historical—analytical perspectives. Said themes revolve around the following central thesis: how does the sound—i.e., the temporal structures, the rhythms and the timbres—of EDM relate to the marginal cultural spaces from which it emerged? After setting up a brief historical overview of the musical practice of EDM, one of its most conspicuous and contentious characteristics, its repetitiveness, is addressed. Looking at the emergence of repetitive and non-goal-directed musical forms in Western art- and popular music over the second half of the 20th century, the burgeoning popularity of musical styles based on additive and modular musical processes is traced back to the influence of non-Western musical cultures and the non-normative constructions of identity and desire they embody, constructions which notably resonate with the “queer” identities that frequently populate EDM scenes. In the next chapter, loud and overwhelming sonic presence and an emphasis on music’s affective capacities is positioned as a vital aspect of EDM’s cultural practice. Here, a number of conceptual frameworks that focus on the material and affective dimensions of music and art are discussed, as well as the role of the body as a resonator for sonic affect. Then, EDM’s alleged potential to produce utopian experiences by temporarily suspending everyday normativity is addressed. Utopianism is discussed in the context of EDM by looking at the social and political stakes involved in such experiences with regard to notions of community, exclusion and oppression. Finally, the last chapter draws on musicological discussions of rhythm and meter to argue that EDM’s prominent and often metrically ambiguous rhythms constitute a multifarious interpretive space that reflects the necessity to cope with increasing cultural diversity in postmodern urban society and which affords a decentralized constructions of subjectivity to produce experiences of self-transcendence.
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Preface

The completion of this thesis marks the end of my Arts, Culture and Media studies at the University of Groningen. The past four years have been a quite intense and rewarding period. I learned a lot, and the broad scope of the curriculum enabled me to explore a variety of academic fields. During my master’s I got the chance to study in Helsinki for a semester, which is where my initial idea for this thesis took shape. I would like to thank a number of people who have helped in various ways with the writing of this thesis. Dr. Kristin McGee has been a very helpful and patient supervisor, providing constructive feedback during the writing-process, and an inspiring and supportive professor during my studies in general. Also, I would like to thank dr. Luis-Manuel Garcia for generously taking the time to advise me on this thesis project—even when it involved me bothering him about it at Panoramabar on Sunday evening. His great expertise and knowledge on the subject have greatly improved the end result. Also, I want to thank my friends: Anton, for putting up with the noise and reclusion of a techno-loving, thesis-writing roommate, Sil for coffee at “de harmo” and for buying me dinner when I was broke, Hidde, Job, Bok, Banaan, Rik, Libbe, Karst, Marta, Julian, Ben, Annika and everyone else who made my time in Groningen or Helsinki awesome. Lastly, I cannot thank enough my parents, who have patiently and generously supported me in every possible way throughout my many years of studying: heit en mem, tankewol!
1. Introduction

“...It’s not about music, but about spaces and situations. How did those particular circumstances, obstacles, politics, cruising and drugs cultivate a certain sound?”

– Terre Thaemlitz/DJ Sprinkles (Baines).

Electronic Dance Music (or “EDM,” sometimes called “dance music” or simply “dance”) is a cluster of musical genres, including house, techno, trance, drum ‘n bass and dubstep, that has come to enjoy worldwide popularity over the last 30 years. All of these genres share the common attributes of being mainly or entirely created through electronic production methods—e.g., by using electronic devices such as synthesizers, samplers, drum machines and/or computers rather than traditional instruments—and of being primarily intended for dancing and listening in dance-based performance settings such as a nightclub or a one-off dance event. As EDM is, to a high degree, electronically mediated, it facilitates the modification and decentralization of a number of traditional creative/musical roles, of the (live) musician, singer or composer, through the use of technologies like digital sampling and electronic sound synthesis or manipulation. EDM’s musical tempo is relatively fast (usually somewhere between 110 and 150 beats-per-minute (BPM)). It is furthermore notably percussive in texture, putting an emphasis on (complex) rhythms, while sonically it focusses on low-frequency sounds such as (synthesized) bass instruments and bass-heavy percussion—i.e., prominent electronically synthesized “kick drums”—as these produce a high level of sonic pressure and can thus be physically felt as well as heard. EDM compositions—usually referred to as “tracks”—are not primarily regarded as separate, self-contained musical pieces, but are designed to function as building blocks for a larger whole. In EDM’s performance setting, individual tracks are segued (“mixed”) by a person called the disc jockey (DJ) in order to create a continuous flow of music, which commonly lasts from at least one hour to up to four hours or more.

Stylistically, EDM emerged mainly out of 1970s disco, while other major influences include post-disco dance styles, synth pop and Jamaican dub. Disco developed into house music by the end of the 1980s, being essentially an electronic and more minimalistic continuation of

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1 Some (obscure) EDM subgenres, such as terror or speedcore, feature tempi up to over 200 BPM.
2 Confusingly, the term “track” is generally used to refer to an individual audio channel within a multitrack recording, while in dance music it is commonly denotes an entire recording or composition.
3 Some DJs, such as Danny Tenaglia, Ricardo Villalobos or Junior Vasquez, are known for marathon sets lasting for up to 12 hours.
disco’s fundamental groove. The elaborate arrangements, rich instrumentation and sophisticated production of disco songs were reduced in favor of a more Do-It-Yourself (“DIY”) approach made possible by affordable electronic music equipment entering the consumer market. This post-disco phenomenon spawned a vast amount and great variety of subgenres, which Mark J. Butler distinguishes into two overarching categories based on their rhythmic structure: genres built on the steady quadruple-meter (“four-on-the-floor”) pulse of disco (e.g., house, techno, trance, hardcore, acid, hi-NRG, etc.) and those based on an asymmetrical, syncopated (“breakbeat”-driven) pattern (e.g., drum ‘n bass, UK garage, dubstep, jungle, etc.) (Butler 2006: 78). Particular EDM genres often remain strongly associated with the urban locales in which they originated, which is apparent in genre-labels such as “Chicago house” or “Detroit techno”.

In various ways, the disco movement of the 1970s provided the blueprint for EDM, since both the modern incarnation of the nightclub and the creative role of the DJ developed in this context. Culturally, disco was closely associated with African-American gay culture; disco’s audience consisted predominantly of gay men who came of age in the 1950s and 60s, a period in which sodomy was still considered a criminal offense in nearly every US state (Carter: 15). This meant that they had often been facing severe hostility towards their sexual orientation. From the 1970s on—the so-called “Stonewall riots” in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1969 are considered a watershed event—the climate for homosexuals gradually started to change and it was around this point that the disco movement flourished and was embraced by the gay community who recognized in it a celebratory type of music inviting communion and dance. Gay nightclubs opened in many American cities and broke the barriers that previously segregated people of differing ethnic origin and sexual orientation. Whereas hip hop opened up a cultural space for young African- and Latin Americans to express themselves, it preserved and perpetuated images of black masculinity that were hostile to queer sexualities. In spite of, or perhaps because of, its notoriety for hedonistic excess, disco provided room for a free expression of homosexuality for people of different races.

By the end of the 1970s, the disco scene gradually perished, involving growing anti-disco sentiments, increasing commercialization and mainstream attention, while the media heralded the “death of disco”. At that point, in the communities from which disco had initially emerged—underground dance clubs like The Warehouse in Chicago and The Paradise Garage in New
York—a new style of music developed from the dance-friendly template of disco, which would eventually become known as house music. Various producers and DJs such as Tom Moulton, Frankie Knuckles, Larry Levan and Ron Hardy had pioneered the creation of extended remixes of disco records aimed specifically at the dance floor, for instance by extending percussive breaks, using methods such as sampling and by adding effects and/or drum machine tracks. Later, aspiring producers started to build these grooves from scratch using relatively inexpensive electronic music equipment: cheap synthesizers, drum machines and samplers. One of the first tracks created this way that gained success was Jesse Saunders’ “On and On,” produced in 1984 in Chicago. “On and On” is often considered to have been the first house track, and it subsequently inspired numerous successors to create their own electronically produced dance records in a DIY-fashion. Meanwhile, a few hundred miles east, in Detroit, a related but somewhat different style of music was evolving to become techno, merging electronic pop music (e.g., Kraftwerk, Devo, Gary Numan) with African-American styles such as funk, electro and the house sounds coming over from Chicago, combined with Afro-futurist themes. Although it remained a predominantly underground phenomenon in North America, house music eventually caught on in the United Kingdom (in the UK, techno was, at that point, usually regarded as a subcategory of house or acid house), where it quickly rose to greater prominence than it ever had in the US. Today, EDM has become a phenomenon seeing massive popularity throughout the entire industrialized world and it exerts a significant influence on today's musical landscape as popular artist such as Madonna and Björk have incorporated EDM influences into their music, DJs and producers such as Skrillex, David Guetta and Steve Angello have risen to superstar status and various pop-artists such as Ke$ha, Nikki Minaj and Justin Bieber are releasing “club-friendly” remixes of their songs.

Despite the global popularity EDM has come to enjoy, its roots lay in so-called underground musical scenes. This often-used but slippery term denotes a conglomerate of cultural practices that symbolically differentiate themselves from the larger mainstream culture through the enforcement of specific aesthetic codes, norms and modes of production, distribution and consumption. The term “underground” implies that these scenes are withdrawn from extensive media attention and public awareness and are thus only known to a limited number of

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4 Some music of this period is now referred to as “proto-house”: avant la lettre house music that developed the characteristics of house before the genre itself became widely established.
informed individuals. A certain degree of obscurity is usually desirable for those involved, as it functions to preserve and maintain the exclusivity and, thus, the relative autonomy of these cultural spaces. Another defining characteristic of underground scenes is an ostensible prevalence of artistic integrity over commercial viability as a measure of success. Even though these two aspects may not be entirely incompatible, profitability and widespread popularity are often viewed with suspicion within underground circles and artists or other actors (e.g., event promoters, label owners) that are deemed to be excessively motivated by economic interests often fall out of favor and are accused of “selling out”. Thus, even internationally famous DJ’s or producers in (underground) EDM scenes often maintain day jobs next to their musical pursuits, as to not be forced to make artistic compromises in order to get by.5

Drawing from a range of existing work, this thesis takes up a number of discursive threads on Electronic Dance Music and its associated (sub)cultures, communities and practices. These are broken down into the following themes: repetition, sonic affect, utopian imagination and metric ambiguity, each of which will be covered in a separate chapter. Whereas the first, second and fourth theme primarily concern the music itself, the third has more to do with its associated communities and cultural practices. Ultimately, I am interested in possible structural analogies or thematic relationships between EDM as music and the cultural practices that surround it. Therefore, these four themes can be found to revolve around the following central thesis: how does the sound—i.e., the temporal structures, the rhythms and the timbres—of EDM relate to the marginal cultural spaces in which it emerged? In other words: what is it about the sound of EDM that makes it appeal to particular audiences? This question, in turn, can be specified into a number of interrelated sub-questions: [1] What role do EDM’s distinctive musical characteristics—a high level of repetition, emphasis on sonic affectivity, rhythmic complexity—play in the construction of non-normative desires and subjectivities? [2] Can EDM be associated with the notion of countercultural “resistance,” i.e., can it be functional in thwarting or subvert the (oppressing) influence of dominant culture on a marginalized group of people? [3] What role does EDM’s utopianism play in producing or strengthening subcultural affinity groups or communities? [4] Can EDM, on an individual level, produce experiences of

5 For example, American techno DJ and producer DVS1 attests in an interview: “…I would like to believe that if it ever came to that point where money was the motivation, I would stop” (“DVS1 Interview.”). Remarks along these lines are frequent in interview with DJs, producers, event promoters or other actors within EDM scenes.
self-transformation or -transcendence? In addressing these issues, I draw from scholarly work on said issues within EDM(-cultures) as well as popular sources on EDM (e.g., magazine articles, interviews). Furthermore, I analyze EDM recordings in order to illustrate the claims made and to put theory in dialogue with practice. I also look at ethnographic accounts of EDM cultures (e.g., Amico; Buckland; Fickentscher; Garcia 2011; Hutson), and discuss these in the context of the broader theoretical frameworks of philosophy, music history and -theory, critical theory, gender studies, cognitive science and psychoanalysis.

Considering the genre’s history, the question arises: to what extent does the marginal social position of disco and early EDM’s audiences automatically endow it with subcultural value and, thereby, social resistance? For instance, did the synthetic and mechanical aesthetic of house music constitute a rebellion against the norms embedded in the hitherto ubiquitous “authentic” live-performances? Did the artistic appropriation of technology and the futuristic themes of techno music provide a way of coping with daily life in a late capitalist society? The idea of a society’s music reflecting its social relations had been proposed as early as the 1940s by Theodor Adorno, who argued that Western art music mirrors society and therefore carries ideological consequences. He thus endowed the abstract language of music with subversive potential. Adorno’s politicization of instrumental music has been widely influential, for example for Susan McClary, whose feminist critique of Western music echoes Adorno’s allegations: “music does not just passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated.” (McClary 2002: 8) French economist Jacques Attali goes as far as to argue that music depicts emerging power relations even before they manifest themselves in social reality:

Mozart and Bach reflect the bourgeoisie’s dream of harmony better than and prior to the whole of nineteenth-century political theory. There is in the operas of Cherubini a revolutionary zeal rarely attained in political debate. Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix say more about the liberatory dream of the 1960s than any theory of crisis. The standardized products of today’s variety shows, hit parades, and show business are pathetic and prophetic caricatures of future forms of the repressive channeling of desire. (Attali: 5-6)
While endowing art music with ideological efficacy, Adorno explicitly denounced mass culture and popular music as standardized, banal and regressive.\(^6\) The notion of popular music having the potential to challenge dominant ideologies gained academic currency during the 1970s, as in the emergent field of subcultural studies, scholars saw in non-normative cultural formations a potential for political resistance and self-empowerment of marginalized groups in opposition to an oppressive hegemony\(^7\) by their display of transgressive norms and behavior—which can also be expressed in music. British sociologist Dick Hebdige, for example, described youth- and subcultures as social phenomena that temporarily cause a rupture in the semantic—i.e., meaning-generating—structure of the dominant cultural order. Resistance is thus defined as the capacity to thwart the influence of a ruling class or dominant (e.g., capitalist) ideology.

Unlike many other musical subcultures, however, dance-centered genres such as disco and EDM music have seldom explicitly articulated oppositional stances and have therefore, in contrast to musical subcultures such as punk or the American protest folk singers, often been accused of passively reproducing the status quo. For example, Hughes remarks that: “Even at the height of its popularity, [disco] was widely condemned […] [and] musical styles that suggest the vital continuity of disco into the present, such as house music, suffer from guilt by association.” (Hughes: 147) Likewise, subcultural scholars have dismissed the (primarily British) rave culture of the 90s as empty and apolitical escapism and distraction from ongoing oppressions (e.g., Redhead). Often, academic accounts of EDM state that it engenders mechanisms of non-subjectivity and abandonment (e.g., Hutson; Reynolds 1998), or, as Hutson puts it: “a presocial state of nondifferentiation and communitas.” (Hutson: 55) EDM is thus framed in postmodern terms, as a depthless collage of mechanically repeated, synthetic, artificial sonic textures, decontextualized sounds that decentralize both the author as well as the listener and negate subjectivity (Hutson; Reynolds 1998). This implies that it is essentially a meaningless and empty form of music, lacking in substance and thus also in subversive potential or political efficacy. However, various authors suggest that the aversion that has often been directed at disco and house stemmed from something other than a tangential dislike of the music: “The attacks on disco gave respectable voice to the ugliest kinds of unacknowledged racism, sexism and

\(^6\) It needs to be noted that writing about popular music, Adorno is mainly referring to the jazz music of his time.

\(^7\) Cultural hegemony is a concept put forth by the Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci that is often used in subcultural studies. It denotes the cultural dominance—or the deliberate manipulation of the dominant culture—of a culturally heterogeneous society by the ruling party in order to impose a coherent set of cultural norms as to counter or smother revolutionary sentiments and maintain power.
homophobia.” (Werner: 211) There appear to be considerable issues at stake in the discourses surrounding disco’s reception, and while it may be apolitical in content, it definitely had the effect of dividing and unifying groups of people along very real lines of oppression and division. As Carolyn Krashnow writes:

…such a violent reaction [as against disco] is not just a matter of aesthetic disagreement; underlying the anti-disco sentiment was a fundamental distrust of subcultural production by “others”. As a loosely defined genre coming out of gay, Black and Hispanic communities, disco stood very much outside of the predominantly White, heterosexual male-oriented rock culture of the time.8

Throughout this thesis I wish to investigate how these ideological differences are related to and played out within the musical structures of EDM: in the formal characteristics of the sounds, the rhythms and the way these are structured in time as well as the affective, physical experiences they produce for its listeners. There seems to exist an intrinsic tension in EDM between rhetoric of inclusiveness and acceptance on the one hand and practices of exclusion and rejection on the other. While it is proclaimed in one house track: “You may be black, you may be white, you may be Jew or Gentile. It don’t make a difference in our house”,9 the exclusive door policy on the basis of race, gender, attractiveness and style that was common at the (early) house clubs proved otherwise. As house music DJ and producer Terre Thaemlitz states, while reminiscing on the late 1980s house scenes in New York City: “I think it’s fair to say there were a lot more door policies and exclusionary things going on back then. Race, gender and clothes played a big part on who got in and who didn’t.” (Thaemlitz in Dale) Paradoxically, in order to sustain its utopian race and gender politics, a certain degree of exclusion seemed to be necessary. And even though it is never overtly or explicitly ideological or political, EDM is very much tied to particular social, economic and political realities, which are evident in the ways it is structured, produced, consumed and distributed.

9 Transcribed spoken word excerpt from the classic house track “Can You Feel It?” by Fingers Inc.
1.1 Literature

From the turn of the century onwards, a small trickle of scholarly writing on EDM has increased gradually into a steady stream and it has become a legitimate area of scholarship, as is shown by the establishment of an online, bi-annual, peer-reviewed scholarly journal called *DanceCult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* in 2009. EDM and its surrounding cultures have been approached from a wide variety of different perspectives, including studies focusing on the histories of (specific, local) scenes or styles (Brewster & Broughton; Fikentscher; Reynolds 1998; Shapiro; Sicko), gender and sexuality (Amico; Bradby; Farrugia; Loz; Pini), race and social difference (McLeod), spiritual and psychedelic practices (Hutson), dance (Buckland), the creative role of the DJ (Brewster & Broughton), crowds and intimacy (Garcia 2011) and subcultural resistance (Redhead). Notably, many of these studies address the cultures, communities and practices surrounding EDM from an ethnographic and/or sociological point of view and touch only superficially on the music itself. In recent years, however, there has been a burgeoning interest in a more formal musicological approach to EDM, studying its musical characteristics in-depth—its rhythms, timbres or the use of specific technologies (e.g., Butler 2006; Garcia 2005). As EDM is a globally dispersed phenomenon, scholars often tend to focus on specific scenes and/or timeframes, such as the early house scenes in Chicago or New York (Fickentscher; Buckland), Detroit (Sicko) or the acid-house/rave scenes in the United Kingdom (Hutson, Redhead), while others focus on or compare various locales (Brewster & Broughton; Garcia 2011). Notably, many of these are ethnographic studies, including field observations and/or interviews with individuals involved in EDM scenes (as person-to-person interviews but sometimes also through online surveys or communities (e.g., message boards)) (e.g., Amico; Anderson; Buckland; Farrugia; Fikentscher; Garcia 2011; Hutson), while others are primarily interpretative and/or hermeneutic (e.g., Butler 2006; Garcia 2005; McLeod) or historiographic (e.g., Brewster & Broughton; Reynolds 1998) in nature. Although the body of scholarly writing on EDM can by now be called substantial, there remains a great deal of work to be done, which is not in the least due to the fact that EDM is a very rapidly evolving and dynamic phenomenon with new styles and related scenes emerging and disappearing in rapid succession. Therefore, in addition to these scholarly sources, popular writing and journalism on

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10 See [http://dj.dancecult.net/](http://dj.dancecult.net/).
EDM can be helpful for researchers to obtain up-to-date stylistic information and to function as a primary source through interviews with DJs, producers and other individuals involved in EDM(-scenes).

1.2 Methodology and theoretical framing

In this thesis I hope to be able to bring together a number of commonly disparate theoretical approaches in order to yield new insights on EDM(-cultures). As the brief literature overview above shows, in scholarship on EDM—as well as in more general popular music scholarship, there is often a gap between studies that put an emphasis on the social and cultural contexts surrounding a musical style and those that adopt a more formal and hermeneutic approach, primarily analyzing the music itself. It is my aim to try to bridge that gap by emphasizing that these two aspects are very much intertwined. In the term “Electronic Dance Music,” the word “dance” obviously signifies this music's inextricable relationship to the activity of dancing. Therefore, besides the aesthetic value or social functions it may fulfill, there is always a clearly defined functional aspect to this style of music: it provides a rhythm to dance to. Modernist occidental thought tends to regard music (both classical and popular) primarily as an instance of autonomous, self-contained artistic expression which implies that it can be analyzed merely on the basis of its intrinsic artistic merits. The significance of a particular style of music is not limited to a spiritual realm above or beyond its material presence and social use value, but is always rooted in its function of maintaining or transforming (social) order; a process which is firmly grounded in, as Fink puts it: “specific historical formations of material culture […] in their thickest, most irreducibly contingent aspects.” (Fink: 159) Thus, I believe that to fully address EDM’s significance and potential, its functionality as dance music needs to be taken into account. EDM is inextricably linked to the dance floor, which “has consistently been treated as the authentic locus of musical experience.” (Butler 2006: 19) Such a context inevitably brings social and economic factors beyond the music itself into the game. This is not to say that the music has no artistic merit in itself—e.g. in rhythmic innovation or innovative sound design—and that these can or should be ignored, but the performance context is nevertheless integral to it. Therefore, in analyzing this experience, even while focusing on the music itself, one has to consider these contexts as well.
This calls attention to a notable limitation of this study: since an ethnographic component was beyond the scope of this project, I am forced to rely on the fieldwork of other authors as well as my own personal experiences in EDM scenes as the basis of my claims. Therefore this study has to be regarded first and foremost as a literature study, examining both scholarly discourse and popular sources on EDM, while attempting to contextualize these within broader theoretical frameworks and ground them in other’s fieldwork and my own close readings and analyses of EDM recordings. I am aware that to make claims based on such divergent sources is to necessarily succumb to a certain degree of reductionism and as a result of the limited ethnographic and empirical grounding of this study, I am restricted to a somewhat speculative hermeneutic-analytical approach. While keeping in mind these limitations, I still hope to be able to make some inspiring and generally valid assertions, precisely because of the breadth and disparity of my source material. These assertions can hopefully serve to encourage further study in order to produce more rigorous empirical and ethnographical substantiations for the claims made.

Another methodological challenge, which I found to be a recurrent motif in many EDM studies, is the fact that a great deal of this music’s significance is located in its affective, pre-semiotic capacities (e.g., the bodily experience of dancing to music, the overwhelming sonic impact of the music when heard through a powerful sound system, etc.), which makes it inherently difficult—or perhaps even impossible—to rigorously conceptualize or theorize. In attempts to overcome such challenges, I take a multidisciplinary approach that tries to augment formal musicological analyses with concepts from such theoretical streams as affect theory, gender studies and psychoanalysis in order to account for EDM’s nonrepresentational dimension.

1.3 Terminology

This thesis on a whole addresses the entire spectrum of EDM subgenres. However, a remark is warranted here: as mentioned at the outset of this chapter, EDM’s subgenres broadly fall into two categories: those based on a steady four-to-the-floor pulse and those based on a syncopated “breakbeat” rhythm. The claims in this study are generally most applicable to genres belonging to the first category, most specifically techno and house. These can viewed as the most prominent
genres within EDM; the pillars on which other EDM styles are built. Techno, in particular, can be regarded as a kind of “proto-EDM,” not because it is somehow a pure descendent of some EDM-archetype, but because it is generally the most functional and rudimentary of EDM’s sub-genres,11 in which the unique (temporal, structural) characteristics of EDM are most clearly discernible. Therefore, the close readings of EDM compositions in this thesis are mostly of techno tracks. Nonetheless, many of the broader claims that are made apply to larger clusters or even all of EDM’s subgenres.

As the use of particular terms and genre-labels within EDM is far from consistent, I will try to clarify a number of common points of confusion. Due to the large number of existing EDM subgenres, uninitiated or more casual listeners—being unable to differentiate between the large variety of EDM subgenres—sometimes tend to collapse all varieties of EDM into one well-known genre-label, such as house. Moreover, the term “techno,” is also used ambiguously in (scholarly as well as popular) music literature, where it is sometimes used interchangeably with EDM as a blanket term denoting all its subgenres, while it can also refer to a specific EDM subgenre that emerged out of Detroit, or, in German, for a similar genre that developed at around the same time through intense musical exchange with the Detroit scene. Throughout this thesis I use the term as it is most commonly used, to refer to the Detroit-based EDM subgenre.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

As stated at the outset of this introduction, this thesis is thematically organized around a number of aspects that relate to the central argument in diverging ways. The chapter to follow this introductory one, called “A Brief History of Electronic Dance Music,” comprises a historical overview of EDM’s history. This overview is brief and far from complete, but it nonetheless serves to provide the historical and stylistic context in order to properly frame the arguments made in subsequent chapters. Chapter three, called “‘On And On’: Electronic Dance Music and Repetition,” addresses what is often considered to be one of (most) EDM’s most conspicuous face-value characteristics: its high level of repetition. Here the historical frame is expanded in order to trace the striking increase of musical styles exhibiting highly repetitive and so-called

11 Likewise, Butler notes: “…techno tracks are often [most] static and generic prior to their manipulation by the DJ” (Butler 2006: 228).
non-goal-directed structures in Western art- and popular music over the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, thereby attempting to frame the emergence and popularity of repetitive musical genres such as disco and EDM in a wider development encompassing the increasing influence of non-Western cultures as a result of increasing globalization. Furthermore, I discuss the consequences of such influences with regards to conventional Western conceptions of subjectivity, the production of desire and music’s relation to the body. The fourth chapter, “‘Can You Feel It?’: Electronic Dance Music and Sonic Affect,” conceptualizes the presence of loud and overwhelming sound as constitutive to the proper EDM experience. I explore a number of conceptual frameworks dealing with the material and affective dimensions of music and other art forms, as well as the role of the body as a resonator for sonic affect. “Electronic Dance Music and Utopian Imagination” is the theme of chapter five, which engages with the often invoked notions of utopia in relation to EDM and with its potential to produce utopian experiences by temporarily suspending the influence of dominant culture and everyday normativity. I investigate the discussions of utopia in the context of EDM by various scholars and discuss the social and political stakes involved in such experiences with regard to notions of community, exclusion and oppression. Finally, chapter six is called “‘Turn the Self Around’: Metric Ambiguity and Transcendence” and addresses the role of EDM’s peculiar rhythmic structures in producing experiences of self-transformation or transcendence. It explores some theoretical accounts of EDM’s (and disco’s) prominent rhythms as “overpowering” to build on Mark J. Butler’s claim that EDM’s often ambiguous metric structures constitute a rich and multifarious interpretive space that positions it in a lineage of African musical practice and discusses the production of transcendent experiences as brought about by such music.
2. A Brief History of Electronic Dance Music

A difficulty that arises when analyzing a diverse cultural phenomenon such as EDM, is that the subject of inquiry is often highly fluid and dynamic; it can take on entirely different meanings depending on time, place and context; meanings which are often lost in generalizing and reductive claims. Lawrence Grossberg made a similar remark about the heterogeneity of rock (and roll) in 1984: “Different fans seem to use the music for very different purposes and in very different ways,” (Grossberg: 225) and, “particular instances of rock and roll may represent different things for different audiences and in different contexts.” (Ibid.: 226) Or, as Pini puts it: “We have to resist the kind of totalitarianism which clearly underlies existing club cultural criticism. By totalitarian I am referring to the assumption that club cultures can be reduced to, or read in terms of, a singular meaning structure.” (Pini: 54) Historical, geographical and demographic contingencies can be crucial to the symbolic power of a cultural at a particular time and place, which is, according to Fiona Buckland, even more true with regards to sub- or queer-cultures: “A representation of a single monolithic culture flattens out the differences between people and their experiences in order to discover its laws, while simultaneously fixing boundaries between self and other.” (Buckland: 9) As stated in the previous chapter, my analytical method resists the assumption that a musical style such as EDM can be scrutinized separately from the cultural context in which it functions. Therefore, I will not claim to be able to universally define what EDM is or what it means. Instead, I will restrict myself to doing two things: [1] describe the formal characteristics of EDM and, [2] trace a brief history of the social and historical context from which EDM emerged drawing from the sources available to me. This way, I hope to provide sufficient context to continue my arguments in subsequent chapters.

House and techno are arguably the most prominent EDM subgenres to the extent that sometimes the whole spectrum of EDM music is conflated with either of these labels. What all EDM styles have in common is that they are produced primarily or solely by electronic technologies—synthesizers, drum machines, samplers, sequencers and/or computers—rather than recordings of human musicians playing instruments. To produce an energetic and danceable rhythm, EDM’s tempo usually lies somewhere in the relatively high range of 110 to 130 BPM (Beats-Per-Minute). The emphasis of the music is usually placed on the rhythmic rather than melodic elements, although tracks can sometimes be very melodic as well. Instrumentally, house
and techno are almost always centered around a repetitive, quadruple-meter rhythm articulated by a prominent kick drum at the first beat of each bar, supplemented by hi-hats, snare, claps and other forms of percussion (e.g., shakers, cowbells). This basic rhythm is augmented with electronically generated syncopated bass lines that are reminiscent of those of the disco styles, though often simplified.

Entirely electronic music had been produced as early as the 1940s, when classically-trained composers such as Pierre Schaeffer (Paris) and, later in the 1950s, Karlheinz Stockhausen (Cologne) recognized the musical potential of the tape-recording technologies that had been developed during WOII and started to use these to compose music that came to be known as “musique concrete”. In popular music, however, electronically generated sounds remained a relative novelty until the early 1970s when portable and affordable synthesizers became available, such as the “Minimoog”. Electronic instruments started to appear in the music of popular acts like The Beatles and The Beach Boys, progressive rock bands like Yes and Genesis and German “krautrock” bands. As the synthesizer gained popularity and became more commonplace within popular music, so-called synth pop- and rock bands, relying heavily on electronic sounds, were formed, for instance in the UK: Soft Cell, Japan, A Flock of Seagulls; in Germany: Kraftwerk, Can, Tangerine Dream; in the US: Devo, Suicide, and in Japan: Yellow Magic Orchestra. In terms of popular electronic music production, an often mentioned breakthrough moment was the Donna Summer disco single “I Feel Love” (1979), which featured an entirely synthesized backing track produced by Italian/German producer Giorgio Moroder, and included an extended version lasting seventeen minutes, which was specifically aimed towards the dance floor. Summer’s hit single was one of the first popular music hits to feature an entirely electronic instrumentation. Since it was one of the first instances of popular electronic dance music, it has proven very influential to the development of disco, house and techno.

There’s a marked difference in attitude, however, that sets apart the first house records from full-fledged studio productions like Moroder’s. House producers recognized they could make a crowd dance using little more than an electronically generated rhythm and a bass line—

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12 Meaning “concrete music,” as opposed to the abstract nature of notated music.
13 The Minimoog was a compact monophonic analogue synthesizer that was envisioned by Bob Moog as a more portable alternative to the unwieldy and delicate modular synthesizer systems that had been produced earlier.
14 A term that was devised by the British music press to designate the electronic music- and rock-influenced experimental bands from Germany in the 1960s, such as Can, Faust and Tangerine Dream.
disco’s basic elements—complemented with a few samples and/or synthesizer melodies. These elements could be produced and recorded using relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use equipment. This meant that anyone with few financial resources and little or no musical training could produce music, in a Do-It-Yourself fashion similar to that which had pervaded the punk scene before. When the already successful DJ Jesse Saunders got one of his favorite records stolen, he decided to try to recreate it himself; this led to the creation of “On and On” in 1984, which was released with the help of a friend whose father owned a small record label (Brewster & Broughton: 308). While “On and On” sounded admittedly unsophisticated compared to other records coming out at the time, it still enjoyed moderate local success. This success was an incentive for many Chicagoan house-enthusiasts to try their hand at producing themselves, resulting in a wave of house tracks being made and released in Chicago—often under the patronage of local DJs who would play the tracks in the cities’ clubs. This sudden rise of amateur music production in the city was not only due to a sudden flash of artistic aspirations, but were also made possible by rapid technological advancements: up to the 1980s, electronic musical instruments and recording equipment had been generally expensive, cumbersome and difficult to use. This changed with the release of a series of consumer-oriented devices by the Japanese company Roland, namely the TB-303 “Bass Line” synthesizer (1982) and the TR-808 (1980) and TR-909 (1983) drum machines (Butler 2006: 40). Furthermore, there was the increasing availability of inexpensive, relatively small and user-friendly synthesizers. These developments allowed aspiring producers to produce music by themselves at home instead of having to record in expensive professional studios. Furthermore, as most of these machines were programmable instead of having to be played in real time, one didn’t have to be a proficient instrumentalist to be able to make music with them. Finally, house music and techno music—being fundamentally a stripped down version of disco—were fairly simple in structure and thus didn’t require a great amount of musical training to be able to create.

EDM was never so much intended for home listening, but always with a particular performance context in mind: a club and a dance floor. The music would be played by a Disc Jockey (DJ): a person who plays recorded music for an audience, picking the songs or tracks to be played and mixing these together in order to create an uninterrupted and seamless flow of

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15 Such as the Korg Polysix and the Roland Juno 6.
music. Thus, the DJ is also a connoisseur: someone who selects the music for her or his audience. Furthermore, DJs were able to combine and manipulate parts of existing records. To do this, two (or sometimes three) separate turntables and a mixing board were used. Later, other methods such as cd-players designed specifically for DJing and DJ-computer software were developed, although vinyl remains popular among DJs today. Usually, the sequence of the records to be played is not predetermined, but is decided ad hoc by the DJ, depending on the atmosphere and the reactions from the dancers (e.g., dancing more or less vigorously, leaving or entering the dance floor, cheering or booing), effectively being an improvised performance. In DJing, notions of creativity, authenticity and authorship are shifted markedly compared to other styles of (popular) music. In rock and folk, for example, the center of musical authenticity was usually the recording. In EDM, however, this center is displaced towards the contingencies of the dance floor. Furthermore, the one-way interaction from musician to audience gave way to a reciprocal interplay with the DJ and dancers influencing each other in the unique atmosphere or “vibe” that is created.

As stated earlier, house can be viewed as a direct descendant of disco. The label “disco” derives from the French word discothèque (literally: “record library”): a venue where prerecorded dance music would be played. The disco genre developed in New York City dance clubs, such as the Sanctuary and the Loft, which catered primarily to gay African-American and Latino audiences and where the clientele would dance to an eclectic mixture of funk and soul songs that were combined, manipulated and extended by DJs in ways that prefigured disco music. However, the standard three-minute pop-song format usually proved too short for the dance floor, as “[t]he time scale and the momentum of any physical activity is vastly different from the attention span of listening.”\(^\text{16}\) The New York producer Tom Moulton famously invented the remix by extending and rearranging the most danceable sections of songs using a tape recorder. Furthermore, disco DJs came up with a whole array of techniques and innovations that are indispensable to EDM today: mixing records into each other in order to create a continuous flow of music, extending records by editing them and developing DJ-techniques like beat matching\(^\text{17}\) and slip-cueing.\(^\text{18}\) As disco gained popularity record companies recognized the 12-

\(^{16}\) Albert Goldman, quoted in Brewsten & Broughton: 174.
\(^{17}\) Getting successive songs to play in time with each other by using turntables with playback-speed control.
\(^{18}\) Holding a record still while the platter spins underneath it in order to release it at the right moment for the song contained on it to start right in time. This way, one doesn’t have to wait for the turntable-motor to pick up speed.
inch single as a feasible means of releasing music specifically aimed at clubs. As opposed to the hitherto widely used 7-inch singles, these 12-inch records were able to contain songs or remixes of extended duration without sacrificing sound quality.

In contrast to EDM, disco’s instrumentation was predominantly non-electronic\(^{19}\), although the use of synthesizers and electronic keyboards was already pervasive. Later disco songs were often characterized by elaborate studio arrangements involving large ensembles of session musicians, which were recorded in professional studios. Also, vocals played a much more significant role than in EDM. Besides laying the musical foundations for EDM, disco formed the blueprint for EDM’s performance context as well. Before the advent of the twist and other dance crazes in the 60s, dancing was primarily an activity for couples, but as the new dancing styles were became more individualized and improvised, the focus shifted to a communal feeling that could be created with the entire dance floor. This aspect would be particularly significant to the gay liberation movement in disco throughout the 1970s. It was in the disco clubs that the concept of going out to spend a night dancing in a club was developed. Furthermore, these disco nightclubs helped to breach the barriers of race and sexual orientation. While this may be an idealized view, it is clear that disco and house attracted a prominently gay audience while also being open to heterosexual patrons, creating a hitherto unique social situation where people of different sexual orientation could dance together and be open about their sexuality.

By the late 1970s, however, disco fell into disrepute as record companies took to the style as a means to compensate for declining rock sales: disco remakes of rock songs would be reissued and the market was barraged by an overload of mediocre releases. The mainstream popularity of the genre was epitomized in the 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever*, which presents a conspicuously innocuous (and heterosexual) rendering of the disco dance floor, transforming it from a genre predominantly associated with a gay, black and Latino subculture into a straight and white mainstream phenomenon. At the same time an anti-disco backlash was gaining momentum among broader audiences, carrying slogans such as “disco sucks” and “death to disco”. Rock artists who would add disco elements to their sound would be accused of being “sell-outs”. These sentiments culminated in the often-mentioned event of the “Disco Demolition Night”: on

\(^{19}\) The exception that proves the rule being, of course, Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love”.
July 12, 1979, during the break of a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers at the Comiskey Park stadium in Chicago, thousands of disco records brought in by the attending audience were blown up on the field. Subsequently, riots sparked and the second half of the game had to be called off (Butler 2006: 37).

As disco largely disappeared from the public eye it retreated back into underground clubs like the Paradise Garage in New York City and The Warehouse in Chicago. The latter allegedly lent house music its name, although the exact source of the term is uncertain and one can find various stories pertaining its origin. According to Brewster and Broughton, the term did originally not so much refer to a particular style new of music but rather to the particular way in which existing records were played and combined at these clubs. The term is also said to have referred simply to the records “of the house,” meaning the records that would be in the collection of a club which DJs would play there, a collection constituting the signature sound of that particular club. Or it could simply be any record that was danceable but at the same time underground: “If a song was ‘house’ it was music from a cool club, it was underground, it was something you’d never hear on the radio.” (Brewster and Broughton: 294) As the Warehouse opened, the New York DJ Larry Levan was initially offered a contract at the club, but since he did not want to leave New York he suggested his contemporary Frankie Knuckles instead, who took to the job. Both the Paradise Garage and the Warehouse were influential in developing the concept of the modern club as they favored dancing before socializing and put the music at the center of attention by facilitating a powerful sound system. At the Warehouse, Knuckles initially spun a mix of disco, soul and funk records, English and German synthpop and Italian italodisco. To retain a continuous danceable groove, he would turn to technical innovations such as adding pre-programmed drum tracks to the mix and making edits of songs using a reel-to-reel tape recorder. As the popularity of disco declined by the end of the seventies and the amount of new music coming out decreased, he saw himself forced to push these techniques further, reconstructing existing records in order to keep the dancefloor happy.

These techniques were perhaps not revolutionary in themselves and Knuckles may not have been the first to use them, but at that particular moment in Chicago it sparked a creative fire: “As [Frankie Knuckles’] techniques were copied, often in much-simplified ways by far less skilled DJs using far more basic equipment, the house aesthetic was born.” (Ibid.: 297) The radio-
renowned DJ Farley Keith Williams, a.k.a. “Farley Jackmaster Funk,” for example, instead of preparing pre-recorded tracks on tape at home, took his Roland TR-808 drum machine with him and played it along with his records (Ibid.: 305). While house was originating in Chicago, in another midwestern city a similar style of electronically produced music was developing: techno. Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May, three African-American high-school friends from the Detroit suburb of Belleville are commonly credited as the originators of this style. Detroit lacked the vibrant nightlife of Chicago and the music style was pioneered on local radio shows and at dance parties organized by high-school youths in and around the city. Although electronic musicians from Chicago and Detroit have allegedly interacted and influenced each other, the scenes in both cities remained relatively isolated from each other (Butler 2006: 43).

When Knuckles left the Warehouse in 1982 to open his own club named the Power Plant, he was replaced by another young DJ named Ron Hardy, who extended Knuckles’ techniques into a more manic and eclectic style (Shapiro: 75). By the end of the 80s, however, the Chicago house scene gradually declined, as hip hop caught ground and clubs closed down in response to the cities authorities regulating against after-hours. Frankie Knuckles moved back to New York in 1987 (Brewster & Broughton: 317). On the other side of the Atlantic, however, British DJs started picking up imported records from Chicago and Detroit and started to introduce the styles in the UK clubs. DJs such as Paul Oakenfold tried to bring the clubbing experiences they had on the party island of Ibiza to their homeland, organizing illegal after-hours events (Redhead: 54). The music was quick to rise to great popularity in the UK, where the period 1988-1989 was coined the “Second Summer of Love”20 due to the widespread emergence of often illegal rave21 parties all around the UK, often stirring controversy because of heavy drug use. From the early 1990s on, such one-off rave event were also held throughout the US and Canadian, increasing in scale and popularity throughout the past two decades (Reynolds 2012).

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20 Referring to the 1967 “Summer of Love” in San Francisco during the height of the hippie movement.
21 The term “rave” in its current usage arose mainly in the UK to designate EDM parties that take place in a non-nightclub environment (e.g., an abandoned warehouse or a field). Raves have subsequently started to enjoy popularity in the US and other countries as well.
3. “On and On”: Electronic Dance Music and Repetition

“Everything which is static is boring to me. Everything which is seemingly static, and then changes if you look closely, immediately becomes extremely interesting.”
– Robert Henke, Monolake (Walmsey)

In a section of the controversial British Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 addressing the prohibition of licenseless open-air raves, British legislation-drafters deemed it necessary to “extend” the definition of music to include “sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” (Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, article 63). The clause is remarkable in its derogatory tone and reductionist conception of the music that was being played at raves and led electronic music group Autechre to include a caption with the release of their Anti EP in the same year, mockingly advising buyers to not play certain tracks were the bill to become law, and “to have a lawyer and a musicologist present at all times to confirm the non repetitive nature of the music in the event of police harassment” (Auteche’s Anti EP liner notes). But, apart from a condescending attitude towards the musical expressions of a youth culture, what this excerpt attests to is the salience of a particular aspect of EDM to non-acquainted ears: its high level of repetitiveness. Mark J. Butler in fact describes repetition as one of EDM’s key musical characteristics: “persisting repetition of rhythmic patterns over long spans of time” (Butler 2001: 99). In EDM contexts, a repetition of such a pattern is commonly referred to as a loop. In the following interview excerpt, techno producer Rod Modell reminisces on a formative moment he had while listening to the Detroit radio-DJ “The Electrifying Mojo”, who is often credited as an having contributed to the development of the techno genre by his inspiring radio shows (Sicko: 52):

I remember one night, my friend and I were listening to [The Electrifying Mojo], and there was a little loop playing. We listened for 6-7 minutes and couldn’t believe it was just this little fragment repeating. Well…. we went outside or whatever and came back 20 minutes later, and it was still looping. This was an incredible moment for me. This little several second long segment was looping for 20+ minutes now. I thought this was seductive. Something amazing about this moment. I realised that without the distraction of constantly changing notes, I could enjoy the music more. I knew what was happening next. I found solace in the repetition… like I could finally put my guard down and enjoy the song. I didn’t have to be wondering what was going to hit me next. I was finally enjoying music. I was about 10 years old at this time. It was profound. (Modell in Durston)
While the pervasive presence of cyclical repetition in EDM is notable, it can be traced back to various musical styles predating the emergence of EDM. The previous chapters already covered the paramount influence of disco on the development of EDM. Drawing on the work of Leonard Meyer and on Robert Fink’s revisionist account of repetition in American minimal music, this chapter explores the musical mechanics and aesthetic consequences of repetitive and non-teleological music on the basis of the occurrence such musical structures in 20th century avant-garde art music and considers the ramifications these structures have for the constructions of subjectivity and desire in music. Furthermore, discussing the work of Mark J. Butler and Luis-Manuel Garcia on rhythm and repetition in EDM, I investigate how these repetitive structures function specifically in this music.

John Cage is often situated as the epitome of the conceptual side of the American musical avant-garde and as a progenitor of musical postmodernism. For example, in the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson or Roland Barthes, Cage is revered as the musical embodiment of a conglomerate of developments in Western society that “constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism” (Jameson 1991: 1). Barthes, for example, argues that the music of Cage embodies a break with the mechanisms that had been central to Western art music for centuries:

[…] listening to a piece of classical music, the listener is called upon to “decipher” this piece, i.e., to recognize (by his culture, his application, his sensibility”) its construction, quite as coded (predetermined) as that of a palace at a certain period; but “listening” to a composition (taking the word here in its etymological sense) by John Cage, it is each sound one after the next that I listen to, not in its syntagmatic extension, but in its raw and as though vertical signifying: by deconstructing itself, listening is externalized, it compels the subject to renounce his “inwardness.

(Barthes: 259)

What is alluded to here is essentially the postmodern maxim of the “death of the subject” and its place within music. The music becomes oblivious to historically mediated musical structures and is purged of reflexivity. Through the discontinuity of the listening experience, the listening subject is unable to position himself in a fixed referential perspective towards the music, as “a cluster of material sounds […] is followed by a silence so intolerable that you cannot imagine another sonorous chord coming into existence and cannot imagine remembering the previous one well enough to make any connection with it if it does” (Jameson 1991: 28). Cage himself was
profoundly influenced by Erik Satie (Nicholls: 28)—often coined the “father of modern music”—whose music displays various characteristics that in retrospect seem uncannily prophetic: an objectively detached musical aesthetic, repetitive structures, unresolved seventh- and ninth chords, and, most crucially, an overall negation of the sense of tonal causality—no longer using tonality in a “functional way”. What the 20\textsuperscript{th}-century American avant-garde composers are doing is essentially removing the horizontal, syntactic causality of harmonic and melodic relationships through time, in the words of Henry Cowell, when commenting on a performance of Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolfe’s works: “[H]ere were four composers who were getting rid of glue. That is: Where people had felt the necessity to stick sounds together to make a continuity, [they] felt the opposite necessity to get rid of the glue so that the sounds would be themselves.”\textsuperscript{22} Wolfe himself likewise claimed that, in his music: “[there’s no] question of getting anywhere, of making progress, or having come from anywhere in particular.”\textsuperscript{23} 

Recognizing the radical nature of these new musical developments, Leonard Meyer situates these composers in a historical narrative heralding “The End of The Renaissance,” drawing a dichotomy between \textit{teleological} and \textit{non-teleological} music, the new avant-garde music embodying the latter. The Aristotelian notion of \textit{telos} (literally: goal) which is invoked here refers to a perceived final cause or end in natural processes, which, in the context of this music, refers to the new music lacking a distinct sense of goal-directedness, synthesis of opposites or “this feeling that the work as a whole ‘is going somewhere’” (Fink: 31). Meyer states: “The music of the avant-garde directs us toward no points of culmination—establishes no goals toward which to move. It arouses no expectations, except presumably that it will stop. It is neither surprising, nor, once you get used to its sounds, is it particularly startling. It is simply there.” (Meyer 1967: 72) Meyer is referring here to the music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff \textit{et al}.—the cited book predates the first successes of minimalism, but this radical feature of non-teleology can be easily extended to include repetitive minimalism as it is described by Mertens: “a non-goal-directed trajectory in which the listener is no longer surrendered to the coercion of a musical development.”\textsuperscript{24} (Mertens: 22) While initially remaining

\textsuperscript{24} “Een niet-doelgericht verloop waarin de luisteraar niet langer overgeleverd is aan de dwang van een muzikale ontwikkeling”. Transl. by CD.
an avant-garde phenomenon confined to the New York downtown scene of the 1960s, repetitive minimalism quickly went on to gain great popularity: “Steve Reich […] and Philip Glass […] have—over a twenty-five year period—moved imperceptibly from the experimental fringe to the postmodern mainstream, without having compromised their work to any substantive degree.” (Nicholls: 517) Admittedly, its consonant harmonies and regularly pulsating rhythms are, especially to avant-garde art music standards, quite easy on the ear. But Kyle Gann’s question of what “it [was] about the brazenly simple early minimalist style that seduced hundreds of complexity-loving proto- or postserialists like [himself] to strip down to a handful of pitches?” (Gann) is nonetheless rightly posed. Moreover, the newfound affinity for repetitive musical structures was not confined to avant-garde art music circles. If repetition suddenly seemed to resonate with musical cultures on a broad scale, perhaps something else was afoot?

In Aldous Huxley’s The Doors of Perception (1954)—a detailed account of the writer’s experiences with mescaline25—the author’s lament for representational art as for those who content themselves with “the ersatz of Suchness, with symbols rather than with what they signify, with the elegantly composed recipe in lieu of the actual dinner” (Huxley: 29-30) is situated by Marcus Boon as being representative of “broad shift away from an aesthetic of the symbol toward one of experience” in the culture of the time, a tendency also to be found in the work of Jackson Pollack and John Cage (Boon: 251). Leonard Meyer goes as far as to describe the non-teleological musical paradigm an expression of “a conception of man and universe, which is almost the opposite of the view that has dominated Western thought since its beginnings,” (Meyer 1967: 72) a posthumanist conception which he deems akin to existentialism, but which also resonated with other contemporaneous philosophical and psychological theoretical currents such as phenomenology and gestaltism as well. If there was indeed some change afoot in mid-20th-century musical thinking, it may well have been related to non-Western influences seeping into the general Western consciousness. The second part of the title of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s seminal work “Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus” (1980) is a reference to the work of the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in which Deleuze and Guattari borrow the word “plateau,” by which Bateson designates a defining characteristic that he perceives in Balinese culture, namely the way in which social

25 An entheogen naturally occurring in the Peyote cactus, known for its mind-altering effects similar to those of LSD.
activities lack any orientation towards a fixed purpose or a release of accumulated tension: “mother-child sexual games, and even quarrels among men, undergo this bizarre intensive stabilization. Some sort of continuing plateau of intensity is substituted for [sexual] climax, war, or a culmination point.” (Deleuze: 22) This absence of schismogenesis of is also observable in the Balinese music in which Steve Reich took interest, which was described by Bateson as displaying similar tendencies: “The music typically has a progression, derived from the logic of its formal structure, and modifications of this intensity determined by the duration and progress of working out these formal relations. It does not have the sort of rising intensity and climax structure characteristic of modern Occidental music, but rather a formal progression.” (Bateson: 122)

As the commonplace metaphor of American society as a cultural melting pot shows, American culture has historically been characterized by the synthesis of a plethora of cultural influences, and for American art music, in spite of essentially being a continuation of a Eurocentric tradition, this was no different. The eclectic Californian composer Henry Cowell was fully aware of “the rich variety of oriental cultures that existed in the San Francisco Bay Area [and had grown up] hearing more Chinese, Japanese, and Indian classical music than he did Western music,”26 and he was far from the only American composer who became enthralled by non-Western music: Philip Glass collaborated with Hindustani composer Ravi Shankar and travelled to northern India in 1966 and Steve Reich studied the Gamelan music of Bali27 during the summers of 1973 and ’74; “because [he] love[d] them, and also because [he] believe[d] that non-Western music is presently the single most important source of new ideas for Western composers and musicians.” (Reich: 69) The main result of his study was for Reich a sense of confirmation: that the characteristics and structures of this music are a viable means of composing but that these structures were already present in his own music (Reich: 106): “Looking back on the tape pieces that preceded Piano Phase I see that they were … the gateway to some instrumental music I would never have come to by listening to any other Western, or for that matter, non-Western music.” (Reich: 53) As Meyer had stated, influence is seldom a one-way reaction: “It is because Western art had already developed ways of perception, modes of

27 Gamelan styles from different parts of Indonesia (e.g. West-Java (Sundanese), Central Java or Bali) differ significantly in style of playing and details of instrumentation. Gamelan from Bali is, for example, much faster and more percussive than the Javanese style.
organization, and philosophical attitudes approximating those of the Orient, that the avant-garde could be influenced by them.” (Meyer 1967: 73) The question is to what extent these cultural borrowings meant directly transporting non-Western cultural or political values into Western society, as the engagements of, for example, John Cage and Philip Glass with Soto Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, respectively, would suggest. Fueled by utopian postcolonial romanticism, it is perhaps alluring for Western audiences to have this music invoke indigenous Asian or African trance rituals or altered states of consciousness induced through meditative musical practices, as it did when critic Tom Johnson coined the term “The New York Hypnotic School” for the minimal music composers (Fink: 13). The allusions to Oriental spirituality were revived at various points throughout EDM’s history, for example in the quasi-spiritual *psytrance* style.\(^{28}\) Hutson investigates the “technoshamanic” dimension of rave culture, studying the “poignant and meaningful spiritual experiences that ravers say they get from raves” (Hutson: 54). Just what these experiences amount to remains however vague.

Reich assures us it is the structural forms rather than their cultural content or connotations that served as an inspiration: “What I’ve learned that can travel is the structure of a piece of music, how is it together. Think about a canon or a round. How does it sound? I have no idea how it sounds. [...] It’s the structural idea that exists independently of any sound whatsoever.”\(^{29}\) He thus insists that, although the structural forms might be inspired by non-Western musical practices, the music nonetheless remains firmly rooted within his native cultural sensibility: “The Balinese tune very differently from us. If someone gave me a game[lan], I’d say, ‘Thank you very much,’ and give it to the trophy museum in Holland or wherever. I’d feel burdened by it, it’s the weight of a culture that’s not mine.”\(^{30}\) And however novel the minimalists’ music may have seemed at the time, Reich acknowledges that he was far from alone in his inclination towards repetitive and static musical structures:

In America in the mid-‘60s, there was something in the air about harmonic stasis. We were hearing Ravi Shankar coming in from India, we were hearing Balinese music, we were hearing African drumming, we were hearing John Coltrane, there was stuff coming in from Junior Walker and Motown. Bob Dylan, “Ain’t gonna work on Maggie’s

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\(^{28}\) “psychedelic trance,” a 60s psychedelic counterculture-influenced EDM sub-subgenre that emerged from the Indian state of Goa—a noted hippie-pilgrimage site—and which is often associated with (Eastern) spiritual practices, partly fueled by the prevalence of LSD over the otherwise ubiquitous party-drug XTC in psytrance scenes.


\(^{30}\) Ibid.
Farm no more”: a lot of stuff on that album, there’s a lot of the one chord. […] So there was this thing in the air coming in from various sources outside of the West, from jazz and popular music pointing in this direction and without that I never would’ve done what I’ve done, Riley would never have written In C, etc.\(^\text{31}\)

Obviously, non-goal directed musical practices had been going on in America for decades in black music. The moment which Reich describes is that at which these structures came into wider awareness, to the extent that high-brow art music composers such as himself were taking them up. Extending the above enumeration further, we might add the disco, psychedelic (acid-)rock, the Beatles’ and the Velvet Underground’s experiments with static, droning arrangements, and, eventually, the emergence of house and techno and the many other subgenres that spawned under the Electronic Dance Music header as instances in which predominantly repetitive musical practices crystalized into delineated styles. Philip Glass surprisingly acknowledges the striking similarities across disparate cultural spheres: “When I first heard Donna Summer, I just laughed. I said, ‘That’s exactly what we’re doing! How could you miss it?’”\(^\text{32}\)

I will now examine some interpretations of the musical mechanics of repetition; what effects does it have on the listener and what are its ramifications for the experience of time, subjectivity and desire? Through its use in a non-teleological context, repetition takes on an entirely different function than it did in conventional Western art music-language. The traditional use of musical repetition is strikingly illustrated by the following passage by classicist aesthetician Roger Scruton:

…listening to a Bach fugue, a late quartet of Beethoven, or one of those infinitely spacious themes of Bruckner, I have the thought that this very movement which I hear might have been made known to me in a single instant: that all of this is only accidentally spread out in time before me, and that it might have been made known to me in another way, as mathematics is made known to me. (Scruton: 150-151)

This presupposes a notion of the musical piece as a transcendent, achronic idea, which is transferred to composer to listener by means of its unfolding in time: a translation from the abstract to the concrete and then back to the abstract into the mind of the attentive and competent listener. It is from this conception of music as a purely intellectual and spiritual exercise that the idea of repetition as a regressive quality emerges: repetition here serves merely as a device to


\(^{32}\) Philip Glass, quoted in Fink: 25.
support the listener's memory. Therefore, abundant repetition might be taken as an insult to the “serious” listener, who feels like being treated as an amnesiac.

In his discussion of musical repetition, Fink traces the idea of repetition as a regressive characteristic back to Freud, for whom the tendency to repeat was associated with the death drive, e.g., in the compulsion of shell-shocked World War I veterans to internally repeat their traumatic experiences, defying Freud's pleasure principle which states that the basic tendency of all organic life is to strive for the attainment of pleasure. In contrast, compulsive repetition of something unpleasing is perceived as an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of matters, to return to an inorganic, primordial existence prior to birth (Fink: 5). The death drive is opposed to Eros: the life-affirming impulse towards survival, reproduction and creation. Following this psychoanalytical line of thought, excessive musical repetition is quickly cast in a negative light, as an expression of regression and infantility. In the words of Susan McClary (paraphrasing Adorno): “if we understand a piece of music as an allegory of personal development, then any reiteration registers as regression—as a failure or even a refusal to keep up the unending struggle for continual growth demanded for successful self-actualization” (McClary 2004: 291). Adorno thus perceived Stravinsky’s often jarring rhythmic procedures as “closely resemble[ing] the schema of catatonic conditions. In certain schizophrenics, the process by which the motor apparatus becomes independent leads to infinite repetition of gestures or words, following the decay of the ego.” (Adorno: 178)

An alternative psychoanalysis-inspired hermeneutic account of repetitive minimalism, inspired by Jacques Lacan and French poststructuralism, is proposed by Mertens, who suggests that the repetition into non-dialectical states constitutes, following Lyotard, a liberation through intense surges of “libidinal energy” and, consequently, a negation of the death-trap of dialectical logic and the ego—the experiential matrix of rationalist ideologies such as Marxism and capitalism (Fink: 6 / 36, Mertens: 148-157). Repetition is here linked to the Lacanian concept of jouissance, which literally translates to “enjoyment” but for Lacan has a more subtle meaning: “a surplus excitation or bombardment of stimulation which the organism has to rid itself of” (Leader: 146). Jouissance stems from the order of the real, outside of language: a directionless, insatiable drive which has no other purpose than to sustain itself—hence: goalless, relentless repetition. Taking the argument back into the popular music realm, it can be argued that
representations of desire and the body are crucial in disco and EDM. Hughes senses this thematic congruity of repetition’s libidinal intensities with the desire-production of the dance floor, when he writes:

The seemingly endless cycles and plateaus that replace narrative structure in a disco mix; the seemingly limitless promiscuity of gay men’s “multiple contacts” that “mix” them as effectively as the technology that splices songs together in the DJ booth; the increasingly unpaired unchoreographed, improvisatory dancing that developed in the discotheque; these things are not unconnected to the inscrutable feminine “jouissance” that became the fascination of both popular and academic culture in the era of disco’s emergence. (Hughes: 153)

Dyer puts forth a similar argument about disco epitomizing a “whole-body eroticism,” while rock expresses goal-directed representations of desire that he deems “phallocentric”: “rock's repeated phrases trap you in their relentless push, rather than releasing you in an open-ended succession of repetitions as disco does.” (Dyer 1979) Once more the idea of an unfocused, polymorphous and immediately gratifying desire-production is invoked in favor of the supposedly constrained, genital- and reproduction-oriented sexuality of civilized Western society. The theoretical explanation of libidinal philosophy as an alternative to Hegelian/Marxist dialecticism is commonly mapped onto the—female, black, gay, queer or oriental—other (Fink: 37). Susan McClary, for instance, takes up the desire hermeneutic in order to interpret musical structures as intrinsically gendered. In her book “Feminine Endings,” McClary analyzes a number of pieces by female composers which, according to her, exhibit the quality of “being in time without the necessity of striving violently for control” (McClary 2002: 122; italics in original), a quality which she also finds in the music of minimalist composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass. This gender and sexuality-based hermeneutic constitutes an appealing interpretation of the musical aesthetics of disco and EDM, which functioned as the soundtracks to the lives of oppressed minorities who were able to express their previously suppressed sexuality through it. The almost puritanical perspective which leads Mertens—essentially parroting Adorno—to dismiss minimal music (along with its “vulgarized derivates disco and space rock”) as: “a camouflaged erotic experience” and a “regression to an infantile form of hallucinatory wish-fulfillment” (Mertens: 157), is representative of a conception of the human subject that finds its origins in Descartes’ bifurcation of body and soul and a consequential depreciation of the flesh as inferior to the intellect. In opposition to this mind-body dualism stands the Spinozan monism which is echoed by the French poststructuralists: “in the age of the rising libido, being right is
not important, laughing and dancing is what matters.\textsuperscript{33}

Although it opens “a hermeneutic window […] onto one of the most high-status theoretical discourses in postmodern academia,” (Fink: 39) however, to define EDM merely in terms of a regression to a primordial state of non-differentiation quickly proves to be a dead-end road, as it leaves the music as nothing but a cultural void, a mere tool to reach a state of pre-Oedipal infancy or apparent schizophrenia, and, emptied of any cultural meaning, it does nothing to endow it with critical potential (Fink: 6). This is also the most obvious critique of postmodernist cultural readings: “Once the surfaces are interpreted as meaningless simulacra, postmodernists often stop interpreting. As a result, such interpretations are not very deep” (Hutson: 60). And indeed, the \textit{jouissance} reading of EDM is hardly representative of its general popular reception. For EDM enthusiasts this music is rife with specific meaning and cultural significance. Butler likewise asserts that through repeated listening to EDM, fans are increasingly able to perceptually distinguish its many sonic layers and signifiers (Butler 2006: 104). Moreover, even though EDM is usually highly repetitive, it is never merely a perennial, unvarying loop of sound, which would suffice to satisfy the \textit{jouissance} interpretation. The course and development of EDM tracks and DJ sets are in fact carefully structured to yield carefully structured and maximally efficacious surges of affect.

While, on the surface, EDM or minimalism may appear to be a far cry from the bare and angular dissonance of the Cagean avant-garde, they appear to resemble each other in their negation of teleology. At this point a curious paradox emerges: repetitive EDM, the highly repetitive music of the pulse-pattern minimalists\textsuperscript{34} as well as the chaotic, aleatory open works of the avant-garde composers seems to fit squarely within the emergent non-teleological category: “the aesthetic effects produced by random methods of composition are, paradoxically, the same as those realized by totally ordered music.”\textsuperscript{35} Thus, both a very low and a very high level of repetition seems to have the characteristic of negating teleology, while a moderate level of repetition would produce a sense of goal-directness. Both aleatory and repetitive music largely

\textsuperscript{33} Lyotard, cited in Mertens: 151.
\textsuperscript{34} The style of the four composers most commonly associated with minimal music (Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Philip Glass and Steve Reich) is not homogenous: whereas Riley’s (early) and Young’s work rely on long, sustaining notes and drone-like structures, Glass and Reich primarily represent what Fink terms “pulse-pattern” minimalism (Fink: 20): layered, short, repeating melodic phrases exhibiting gradual variation.
disable the workings of musical memory and the negation of accumulated expectations that normally shape the listening experience, albeit in very different ways. Often largely atonal or polytonal, the music of the avant-garde composers deconstructs the mechanics of functional harmony through structured or random complexity. The inherited tonal and harmonic patterns of tension and release that had been developed through centuries of compositional practice and which Adorno referred to as the “musical material”—handed down through the singular metanarrative of Western art music—were stretched beyond their own intrinsic logic. Minimal music, on the other hand “at the end of an old, complex, overweighted style groaning with European modernist baggage, and history[,] offered […] a chance to step onto the ground floor of a bold new enterprise.” (Gann) It unapologetically reached back to the familiar language of diatonic harmony after an era in which the atonal establishment had commandingly heralded the “emancipation of dissonance.”36 However, in minimalism, tonality works differently as its musical events—through incessant repetition—are stretched far beyond the temporal window of musical memory and lose their inherent causality, since “dialectical time” is negated (Mertens: 127). But however mutually exclusive Meyer deems the two poles of teleology/non-teleology, it is often clear that a piece of music seldom belongs only to either of them. As Mertens notes, to exclusively emphasize the sensuous or hypnotic effects which minimal music can have on the listener is to reduce it to a mere instrument of psychological influence (Mertens).

As the next chapter will show, the material, sensuous aspects of EDM play a large role in its reception, but as for now we are looking at the effects of its formal characteristics. Repetitive as they may be, the additive, process-oriented structures of EDM tracks and DJ-sets are carefully structured in order to form gradually rising and falling arcs and plateaus of intensity and affect: “the build-up and breakdown of the basic groove is the narrative of electronic dance music.” (Fink: 40) The Regis edit of the track “Variance IV” by Function (2009), for example, relies heavily on this kind of additive repetition. The track is regular in texture throughout its entire duration, while subtle rhythmic variations and augmentations occur so subtly and gradually as to be almost beyond the threshold of perception, a process which is describe by Luis-Manuel Garcia as “looping” distinguished from unchanging repetition: “the practice of layering, adding and subtracting loops, allowing for the seemingly paradoxical effect of an ever-changing same.”

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36 This maxim, attributed to Arnold Schönberg, is commonly quoted to explain the inclination towards atonality as the “emancipation” of intervals that were, in previous contexts, deemed dissonant and required to be resolved into more consonant harmonies.
Thus, even while the rhythmic layers are changing throughout, the overall texture appears rather static.

Butler notes how EDM tracks “consist[…] of many different textural layers, each of which has a different rhythmic pattern [and] can appear quite simple when considered individually,” but that “the experience of listening to electronic dance music is neither simple nor monotonous, for it engages one's perception of rhythm and meter in a number of interesting ways.” (Butler 2001: 3) As we can hear in the example mentioned, the tracks is comprised of short repeating and modular rhythmic elements that are quite simple in themselves, but that nonetheless generatively yield variety and complexity when juxtaposed. Listening or dancing to EDM thus entails a mental tracking of these processes as they unfold. One could argue that these processes constitute, in a sense, teleology, since they develop towards a fixed point of completion. However, there is a fundamental difference with conventional musical teleology as, through their regularity, these processes are mostly predictable, that is: there are rarely any sudden “breaks” where the pattern suddenly disrupts the expectations it creates. Rather, there is the unfolding of formal processes and the anticipation of their completion. Garcia describes this mode of listening as “process pleasure,” a concept derived from Karl Bühler’s notion of Funktionslust: a form of pleasure taken in the unfolding of a process rather than in the achievement of its goal, i.e., a pleasure arising from doing rather than making (Garcia 2005). It is clear that repetition plays a cardinal role in facilitating this effect as it functions as the canvas on which these processes unfold. Garcia notes how changes in rhythm or texture usually occur at multiples of four rhythmic bars allowing EDM listeners learn to predict and anticipate the curves of tension that these movements follow (Garcia 2005: 4.3). The following remark by EDM producer Truss attests to the way in which these processes can be intensely affective in their structural simplicity: “To be able to strip something down to its absolute bare minimum and have people absolutely lose their shit to [it] has always fascinated me. So from a listener’s point of view—when you are in a techno club and only a hi-hat comes in and that hi-hat is the best thing in the world and the whole club erupts, that’s always amazed me.” (Manning) EDM does so much not engage with the conventional musical mechanisms of anticipation and surprise, dissonance and resolution, but rather with the appreciation of the structural variety of unfolding

37 An exception to this is the play with metric ambiguities that sometimes occurs in EDM tracks, which I will address in chapter 6.
patterns and interactions between patterns that emerges through the ongoing interactions of various processes.

Arguably, these musical structures afford constructions of subjectivity that are scattered and decentralized and which thus produce a different way of relating to the world—thus a rejection of dominant ideology. For instance, Jacques Attali’s, in his book “Noise: the Political Economy of Music,” argues that the role of music in (Western) society is the channeling of ritual violence by establishing particular codes, that is, by excluding disorderly “noise” from music. Once these codes become appropriated by the dominant culture they lose their intrinsic subversive power, and this appropriation is the modus operandi of capitalist production: “deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning.” (Attali: 5) Drawing from Attali, the subversive potential of this repetitive, and non-goal-directed music can be located in the fact that it disregards the 18th-century paradigm—the semantic code—of functional harmony on which traditional Western music is built and which, according to Attali, is representative of the rise of an economic system built upon exchange: “the political organization of the twentieth century is rooted in the political thought of the nineteenth, the latter is almost entirely present in embryonic form in the music of the eighteenth century.” (Ibid.: 4) Other than the modal paradigm of counterpoint before it, where multiple melodic lines unfold in time according to rules of dissonance control, in functional tonality the internal coherence of a piece is based on an achronic major triad, which, in the words of Susan McClary, merely: “yields a chain of freeze-frame stills […] at the price of silence and death, for text, continuity, color, inflection, expression, and social function are no longer relevant issues.” (McClary 1985: 151) Therefore, EDM’s prevalence of formal processes over harmonic or melodic development can be read as structural subversion of dominant ideology.
4. “Can you feel it?”: Electronic Dance Music and Sonic Affect

“At its simplest level, the body vibrates with the sounds and rhythms, and that vibration can be articulated with other practices and events to produce complex effects” (Grossberg: 238)

The appreciation of sound and of powerful sound systems has been an integral part of EDM culture since its inception. Disco-DJ David Mancuso, who organized the now legendary semi-private “The Loft” parties in the 1970s, already went to great lengths to ensure excellent sound quality (Brewster and Broughton: 143-144): “The one thing the Loft did do was set the standard: getting your money’s worth, providing a decent sound system.” He thus immediately raised the bar for high-quality sound as an integral element of the proper nightclub experience. The importance of sonic intensity is, of course, not exclusive to EDM, but can be argued to be prevalent in any type of music of which the recording is the primary artifact; as Lawrence Grossberg already assumed in 1984: “Rock and roll, whether live or recorded, is a performance whose ‘significance’ cannot be read off the ‘text’” (Grossberg: 233). However, with EDM, one might argue this significance of the textual dimension is reduced in favor of the affective dimension more than in perhaps any other popular music style; as a writer for online EDM magazine *Resident Advisor* claims: “Most of us understand that great sound is a pillar of an epic night's raving to electronic music: power, volume and clarity arguably matter more than in any other genre you could name.” (Titmus) This chapter attempts to elucidate what it is about EDM that makes sound such an important facet of this musical culture and to conceptualize the paramount importance of sound as “sonic affect”. Affect is a slippery term that invokes a lot of different meanings and associations in various fields of inquiry. The concept was conceived by seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza to designate the actions and passions of a body—understood in a broad sense to include the mind—as it is affected by other bodies (Nadler). This chapter takes the assertion that loud sound can act as a source of affect as it impacts the entire body through the force of physical vibrations, which, in turn, can affectively resonate in and between proximate bodies on a dance floor.

Overwhelming sound is a pivotal element in EDM, to the extent that some argue it cannot be properly understood without this experience. In fact, the music is designed to be heard at high

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38 David Manuso, quoted in Brewster and Broughton: 144.
volumes, especially with substantial levels of bass response. American techno DJ and producer Zak Khutoretsky, or DVS1, retells the moment in which attending a techno event with a large sound system turned him to this music:

I had already been going to a few parties, not really understanding what [techno] music was all about, and then I was brought to a party with a proper wall of sound. Speaker stacks taller than me and from one side of the venue to the other. This type of experience, being completely engulfed in the sound changed me forever. You can’t escape the beat, the pressure and the rhythm just move right through you and you have no choice but to move your body. (“DVS1 Interview”)

For Khutoretsky, sonic intensity is not just something that enhances the appreciation of EDM but something that is integral to it and that is a prerequisite for an adequate comprehension of the music. This remark implies that there is some essential aspect of EDM—or, in this case, techno—that only comes across when it is experienced with sufficient amount of sonic affect. Furthermore, Khutoretsky endows the overwhelming quality of the experience with transformative potential. Implicit in this remark is that these aspects of techno music are positive or at least significant, holding the potential for positive self-transformation.

What exactly this sonic affect amounts to is notably difficult to adequately conceptualize, since it falls outside of the humanities’ prevalent analytical paradigm of representation, semantics and textual analysis. Theories for the interpretation of musical texts conventionally focus on a level of meaning that is constructed, as it were, “behind” or “beyond” the material dimension of the music, thereby depreciating its physical manifestation as a mere carrier or medium for this text. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht attempts to fill this lacuna by indicating a blind spot in the humanities’ conventional mode of world-reference that he attributes to an institutional split that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century between schools of research involved with the empirical and measurable methods of scientific inquiry and of those concerned with subjective experience and philosophical speculation (Gumbrecht: 42). As the latter came to be institutionalized as what is now known as the humanities, it gained independence from the empirical accountability of its research methods, be it at the price of “the loss of any non-Cartesian, non-experience-based type of world reference.” (Ibid.: 43) To overcome this lacuna, Gumbrecht proposes the concept of “presence culture,” which entails a mode of referring to the world that is primarily concerned with spatial relationships and tangible objects. In presence
culture, knowledge is no longer just interpreted in a hermeneutical sense, but reveals itself in a "state of being lost in focused intensity," (Ibid.: 108) an immersive state of effortless concentration that is reminiscent of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi’s concept of “flow” (Csíkszentmihályi). While, at first sight, such an approach may appear conspicuously self-evident, it rightly addresses the taken-for-granted hegemony in the humanities of what Gumbrecht, contrastingly, calls meaning culture; the endless search for meaning in artifacts, beyond their material existence:

“Metaphysics” refers to an attitude, both an everyday attitude and an academic perspective, that gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence; the word thus points to a worldview that always wants to go “beyond” (or “below”) that which is physical. […] “Metaphysics” shares this scapegoat position with other concepts and names, such as “hermeneutics,” “Cartesian worldview,” “subject/object paradigm” and, above all, “interpretation”. (Gumbrecht.: xiv)

Gumbrecht’s plea for “postmetaphysical epistemology” remains methodologically vague, but the approach he takes is useful in conceiving methods to adequately conceptualize the aesthetics of many contemporary forms of culture, EDM among them. Applying this paradigm shift to the study of music, I suggest that in understanding EDM it is crucial to consider its physical dimension—as vibrating air—prior any subjective extraction of meaning. The very presence of a medium’s materiality is significant for the aesthetic experience it produces. In EDM, the critical importance of clear and loud sonic impact indicates its emphasis on physical and sensory effects. Particularly crucial here is a focus on low-frequency sounds, a characteristic quality of which is that they produce vibrations powerful enough to be not only registered by the hearing organs, but to create sonic pressure across the whole body. As the sounds are not just heard but also felt, this endows them with levels of significance beyond the faculties of hearing and interpretation, in which the entire body becomes involved and a physical engagement with the music emerges. In any generic EDM track, the low frequencies usually act as the rhythmic center of the music, as every first note is accentuated by a kick drum—often the clearest and most resonant sound in the mix—which is then circumvented by a syncopated bass line, jointly providing the track’s main rhythmic trust—the groove. This interaction between kick drum and bassline can be heard in the most prototypical of EDM tracks, such as the seminal deep house track “Can You Feel It?” by Fingers Inc. As one New York City clubber remarks in Fickentscher: “What propels me are the syncopations between the drums and the bass lines. When it’s good,
and I hear it, it literally makes me get butterflies in my stomach. To get loose you need to be exposed to it a lot. I try to make my body the music, become one with the song.”³⁹ This quote attests to the importance of low-frequency affect in EDM, while stressing the role of the body in experiencing the music. In fact, neurological research shows that the perception of rhythm activates the motor- and premotor-related cortices in the brain, even when the body is not moving (Bengtsson et al.), which suggests that rhythm-perception is not a mere psychological phenomenon, but is in fact strongly related to body and movement on a neurological level. Furthermore, different frequency ranges conjure up associations with specific regions of the body. Higher frequencies, which lack the vibrational power to impact any other sense than the ears, they are primarily associated with the head region: conscious reasoning (Neumann: 25). Bass sounds, when produced at sufficient amplitudes, can also felt in the belly area, which is traditionally regarded as the seat of primal urges and instincts (Ibid.); therefore, intense and overwhelming bass is often connected to irrationality, physicality or the unconscious. The music is not so much mentally interpreted or contemplated but appeals rather to the somatic knowledge contained in the body. This mode of experiencing sound thus defies the need for narrative or interpretation.

Given the proposition that human bodies resonate at a particular natural frequency, loud music could be attuned to that frequency and thus produce sympathetic resonance in the body that is affected by the sound. Garcia describes the phenomenon of sympathetic resonance:

When [an oscillating force] is oscillating at a body’s resonant frequency, […] the body vibrates with increased kinetic energy. When two bodies share the same resonant frequencies, a self-amplifying feedback loop can result. What this implies for sonic affect is that certain levels of intensity and certain patterns of intensity-fluctuation have the capacity to excite certain bodies and incite them to move, respond, express, and/or re-transmit this energy (Garcia 2011: 179).

Furthermore, multiple bodies being affected by the same sounds may start to resonate synchronously. A similar phenomenon called “entrainment” is known to occur when various organisms become synchronized to a common rhythm (a regular vibration is essentially a rhythm exhibiting continuous equidistant pulse): “in response to a periodic input, a physiological rhythm

³⁹ New York-based clubber Archie Burnett, quoted in Fikentscher: 91.
may become entrained or phase-locked to the periodic stimuli.” In the context of music, Justin London defines musical meter as a complex form of entrainment where the listener gets entrained to stimuli occurring at different levels (London: 18). Jordania furthermore argues that, traditionally, music has been used to induce altered states of consciousness of battle trances, making humans less susceptible to fear or pain and producing collective identity which had evolutionary benefits, for example for improving hunting (Jordania).

In order to maximally engage the sensuous effects of different frequency ranges, EDM producers usually aim to take advantage of the entire range of human hearing, filling the highest as well as the lowest frequency ranges. EDM producer Ricardo Villalobos reveals a synesthetic perception of frequency bands: “the room [in the production] has to be there, and it has to be white, meaning it has all frequencies possible from 20 Hz to 20,000—everything the human body can hear, and sometimes even more information we’re not hearing but still feeling.” (Villalobos in Ware) A DJ mixer typically has three (or more) frequency bands on each channel that can be individually boosted or attenuated in order to allow the DJ to manipulate the frequency spectrum of the mix. Sometimes such effects are built into EDM tracks as well; a clear instance of a frequency sweep such as it might by applied by a DJ occurs in the intro of the track “A Time For Us” by American-Chilean DJ/producer Nicolas Jaar. The track gradually builds with a shrill, synthesizer-pad chord sequence, of which the lower and midrange frequencies are gradually removed. About one minute and 55 seconds into the track, we hear the low- and midrange frequencies of the rhythm being filtered away and then suddenly brought back in again, along with the kick drum entering for the first time, thus filling the entire frequency spectrum and creating a sudden moment of affective intensity.

What role do EDM’s repetitive structures play in the articulation of sonic affect? A notable consequence of the weakening of temporal causality in repetitive and non-teleological music is that the music’s sonic materiality appears more vividly when it is not heard in a syntactic relationship to remembered and anticipated musical events: “it seems clear that the more one perceives the relationships among things, the less one tends to be aware of their existence in themselves—as pure sensation” thus “It is to the naïve and primitive enjoyment of

41 In electronic music nomenclature, “pad” refers to a sustained, slowly rising and decaying and gradually evolving synthesizer tone or chord that commonly functions as background harmony or atmosphere.
sensations and things for their own sakes that [the avant-garde composers] seek to return” (Meyer 1967: 74). Fredric Jameson posits this inclination towards disjunctive structures as a constitutive characteristic of postmodern art, as he explains the general prevalence of spatial over temporal categories and the dissolving of narrative coherence breaks into fragmentation. Invoking the structuralist bipartite concept of signifier/signified, Jameson describes the occurrence of the “pure signifier” in postmodernity, comparing the experience of such a signifier to the psychopathological condition of schizophrenia, which, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is seen as a linguistic dysfunction: an inability to unify one’s past and future with the present moment, which is then “reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers […], a series of pure and unrelated presents in time”:

…the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undecipherable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material—or better still, the literal—signifier in isolation. This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity. (Jameson 1991: 27)

It is tempting to link the schizophrenic condition described above to the experience of fragmented, repetitive EDM on a powerful sound system, as described by producer Rod Modell of dubtechno duo Echospace: “The brain responds to this sound like feeling the wind blow or warm sand on your feet at the beach. At a club, when you hear a great track, people have an ecstatic look on their face and eyes closed. They are feeling sensuous sounds. They are floating in a rapturous womb of positive energy. Like a drug. This is what people come to a club for.” (Modell in Franzén)

Julian Henriquez theorizes this experience, of the un-decoded materiality of sonic vibrations as “Sonic Dominance”. Analyzing Jamaican Sound System culture, the global diaspora of which constitutes a main influence for the modern EDM performance context, he defines this as a “condition in which hearing overrides the other senses, displacing the reign of vision in the hierarchy, producing a flatter, more equal sensory ratio.” (Goodman: 27) The overwhelming quality of it may arouse positive feelings of excitement, pleasure and ecstasy,
which echo the calls of the Italian Futurists of the early 20th century saying: “Our ear is not satisfied and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions” while emphasizing how the sensuous qualities of sound: “will enrich mankind with a new and unsuspected pleasure of the senses.” (Russolo) However, overwhelming sound may just as well conjure up negative sensations such as fear, dread and pain. Examples ranging from the emission of high-frequency sounds to ward off loitering youth in public spaces to sonic torture devices used in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay (Cusick) evince that a prolonged and involuntary exposure to particular sounds may very well produce damaging and unhealthy effects. Barthes describes the human faculty of hearing as a function of intelligence: to evaluate space and time and decipher phonic signals (Barthes: 247). Thus, an excessive amount of ambient din (“noise pollution”) has the consequence of choking this faculty. Nonetheless, EDM fans often describe the overwhelming experience of being (temporarily) exposed to loud music as an enjoyable or even ecstatic experience: to fill the aural space completely with repetitive noise constitutes an elimination of the senses’ self-determining agency and thus an experience of (mild) self-loss: “It’s such an amazing experience to truly be a slave to the sounds coming from the speaker.” (“DVS1 Interview”) Grossberg also recognizes this de-indivualizing effect in rock and roll: “The materiality of music gives its affective power to translate individuals (an ideological construct) into bodies.” (Grossberg: 238) The dividing line between tyranny and ecstasy can be thin, and the powerful impact of sound system cultures exists by virtue of its operation on this dividing line: the very loss of self-agency and reduction of the listening subject to an organic mass perceiving sonic vibrations through multiple sensory channels in a wave of overwhelming sound is what constitutes its very liberating effect. EDM producer Rrose acknowledges to balance on fine line between meditative self-transcendence and sonic tyranny: “I guess I often think of creating a juxtaposition or interplay between a meditative state and a violent or oppressive […] state,” and that in attaining this state, the affective force of sensory overload is crucial: “I am attempting to create an immersive space that deals directly with the faculties of sensory perception.” (Rrose in Taylor 2013)
5. Electronic Dance Music and Utopian Imagination

“The politics of youth celebrates change: the work of the apparatus transforms the very structures of boredom into pleasure” (Grossberg: 238)

Throughout the previous chapters I have argued that the aesthetic experience of EDM is rooted in its repetitive structures and sonic-affective capacities, which produce a listening experience in which intellectual comprehension is downplayed in favor of a non-dialectical mode of listening that is inherently resistant to the representation of meaning. I have attempted to relate these characteristics to a productive analytical framework, attempting to refute claims of repetitive music’s regressive qualities by theorists such as Adorno. However, while this did much to give significance to EDM’s musical structures, it also became clear that to take this conceptualization to its final consequences was to deny the music any cultural significance at all. An obvious criticism here is that to impose a singular interpretation to all music adhering to repetitive, non-teleological structures is to succumb to a broad-brush reductionism that collapses a host of culturally diverse musical styles such as house, disco, American avant-garde minimalism and a whole plethora of non-Western musical cultures into a single theoretical dimension. However, as Buckland states “the collaboration between dancers and DJs and dancers and other dancers produced pleasure through valuing exchange; this reflected a utopic imagination” (Buckland: 66), evincing that a substantive aspect in discourses around EDM is that of utopianism. In this chapter I take up this theme in order to position EDM beyond vaguely defined notions of contemporary Western trance rituals, libidinal intensities or simply non-representation. Drawing from the work of Buckland and the concept of utopia as put forth by Ernst Bloch, I sketch EDM’s potential to create oppositional efficacy in the construction of a utopian imagination. If music is “about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those we desire to exist and long to experience,” then the question arises: which desires are expressed in EDM music and how are they articulated within such an ostensibly abstract and nonrepresentational musical idiom?

I first consider the assertion that house and disco are shallow forms of escapism that are unable to articulate any effective form of criticism. For instance, Richard Dyer explains the difficulties of his having a penchant for disco while being a socialist: “It’s not just that people whose politics I broadly share don’t like disco; they manage to imply that it is politically beyond the pale to like it.” (Dyer 1979) Likewise, Buckland attests that club culture is often seen as “a dangerous distraction by which people immerse themselves in hedonism rather than politics.” (Buckland: 92) These positions are partly linked to the valorization of what is perceived as the authentic (musician-)composer, first in art music and later in rock and folk as they emerged as the normative genres for promoting new conceptions of authenticity including sincerity, directness and the privileging of the unmediated and the live over the supposedly constructed, electronic and artificial nature of disco. These assertions are related to particular aspects of disco’s recording and performance practices, such as: extensive division of labor in its production process (often involving separate personnel for composition, lyric-writing, production and performance) decentralizing the creative act; highly commercial production and distribution networks (major record labels, high-end and expensive recording studios); frequent use of electronic instrumentation (synthesizers, samplers, drum computers); the assembly of groups by producers rather than them being formed by performers themselves; lyrical themes almost unexceptionally dealing with glamorous romantic relationships and the heavy reliance on studio production techniques resulting in a slick, “artificial” and effects-treated aesthetic as opposed to the “raw immediacy” of folk and rock. This appreciative bias, of preferring live performance-based styles such as rock over technological- and studio-based styles such as hip hop or disco, is often referred to as “rockism” in music journalism. Hughes furthermore suggests that these allegations indirectly expressed homophobic sentiments (as illustrated by the then-ubiquitous exclamation “disco sucks”) as public opinions on the post-Stonewall American urban gay male community constructing a public image for themselves were reflected onto disco (Hughes: 147).

As already stated in the introduction, the Birmingham School of Subcultural Studies located the oppositional potential of youth subcultures such as punk primarily in their ability to symbolically disrupt hegemony in an aggressive and antagonistic manner, actively and

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43 The term “rockism” is believed to be first coined by British singer Pete Wylie and was subsequently adopted by various music journalists (Morley).

44 The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham is a research center that focused on popular (youth) culture and whose work played a major role in theorizing the emancipatory and socially progressive aspects of subcultures. The center was closed in 2002.
deliberately aiming to interfere with the dominant ideology, and thus dismissed dance as a subcultural activity that was predominantly passive and inconsequential. For example, in the readings of British rave culture as empty escapism and celebration of meaninglessness (e.g. Redhead, Hutson), it is readily dismissed as passively compliant to hegemony by facilitating escape into an empty fantasy of bliss and enjoyment. Garcia notes how these criticisms stemmed from an exclusive focus among these theorists on the oppositional, conflict-oriented aspects of countercultures while denying the political agency of positive affect and of productive desire as catalysts for subcultural activity and alliance (Garcia 2011: 136). Throughout this chapter, I aim to rebut this criticism, not by suggesting that EDM scenes commonly formulate political or subversive agendas, but by locating the oppositional efficacy of EDM within this positive affect: in the negation of the inhibiting and normalizing effects of everyday normativity and the collective conception and production of new social configurations, which may or may not have their ramifications in real life. Various scholar recognize EDM’s utopianism, but I particularly am informed by the work of Fiona Buckland, who, in her ethnographic work on queer club culture, posits utopianism as an effective instrument for queer world-making (Buckland: 65).

When looking at the narratives of the contexts from which disco music initially rose to prominence, we see this music’s significance to the communities of marginalized—urban, young, gay, black and Latino—individuals. As Fickentscher argues, for these people, the dance venue acted as a “public, yet safe forum for gays to assemble, mingle, and socialize on their own terms,” (Fikentscher: 96) as it “could embody and rehearse a powerful political imagination, which, while not always utopian or even complete, had agency in queer world-making.” (Buckland: 65) The impact of these experiences is enhanced by the ways in which norms and behaviors around socialization, appearance, sexuality, intimacy and intoxication came to differ from those experienced in daily life. For instance, Garcia observes how, in a nightclub, “societal touch norms are modified and partially suspended.” (Garcia 2011: 111) While, in content, EDM or disco may not explicitly articulate oppositional or subversive positions, the contexts in which it was performed and consumed constituted more than trivial amusement45 and were instrumental in the social emancipation of mentioned marginalized groups, thus carrying sociopolitical importance. In an article polemically titled “In Defense of Disco” (1979), Richard Dyer argues

45 By which I do not mean to contend that something “fun” cannot have political efficacy or that opposition and fun are somehow mutually exclusive, quite the opposite.
that the very appropriation of disco by the gay community constitutes a subversion of what would otherwise be an uncritical reproduction of capitalist ideology. Although many post-Marxist critiques of post-industrial capitalism (Jameson, Žižek, Fischer) have it that capitalist ideology has permeated every aspect of the physical and mental space and thus defines the very horizon of experience, Dyer argues that musicals and other forms of entertainment (for instance, popular music) are neither unambiguously supportive nor entirely resistant towards dominant ideology, but are always positioned in a field of tension between compliancy and opposition. As the only real relevance for a capitalist is not a commodity’s content, but its exchange value, entertainment relates to desire in a peculiar feedback loop: it articulates possible fulfillments of real desires while at the same time defining and delimiting these very desires, thus perpetuating dominant ideology while simultaneously articulating an alternative to it (Dyer 2006: 26/27). Although disco may be, in itself, predominantly apolitical, it has been taken up by the gay community in ways unintended by its makers, subverting its original meaning or purpose: “The anarchy of capitalism throws up commodities that an oppressed group can take up and use to cobble together its own culture.” (Dyer 1979) Fiske discerns a similar process that he calls “exocorporation”:

…the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system [as] there is no “authentic” folk culture to provide an alternative, and so popular culture is necessarily the art of making do with what is available. (Fiske: 14-15)

While disco music was predominantly created with the productive resources of a capitalist framework, that did not mean that its content was necessarily in agreement with that particular ideology, or that it might not in fact be hostile or subversive to it. Nonetheless, these initially subversive utopian aspects may furthermore again be appropriated by the dominant culture, as they constitute, as Amico puts it: “the vanguard of artistic creation, and [are] frequently disseminated into and further commodified by, the ‘dominant culture ex post facto’” (Amico: 370; italics in original)—for instance, as “Saturday Night Fever” or Madonna’s “Vogue”—thereby divesting the originally subversive cultural expressions of their symbolic power. The processes of subcultural opposition and subversion are entwined in a complex and dynamic

46 Hence the much-quoted remark by Jameson, often reiterated by Žižek: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”
process of ongoing appropriation and re-appropriation, rendering their subversive effects slippery and context-sensitive:

Historically and contemporaneously, the relationship between marginal lifeworlds and dominant lifeworlds was neither static nor passive: they did not merely coexist, but constantly created and recreated themselves in relation to each other in a dynamic, interactive, and contested process. Making something out of the resources available, seized, or stolen from any context was a practice of queer world-making, which, in appropriating the meanings of these artifacts and loading them with personal or communal meanings, in effect queered them. (Buckland: 74)

A globally dispersed musical subculture is far from a homogenous cultural space that easily allows for a coherent reading. While being cautious of reducing EDM to a singular meaning, I am presently interested in investigating the subversive potential of EDM scenes and the question of how this potential relates to the actual sound and structure of the music and the significations and references that it invokes in the particular contexts in which it is experienced. I will investigate how these characteristics of the music serve to construct subversive meanings and produce and enhance utopian experiences. Expanding on the analyses made in the previous chapter, I suggest that the specific temporal structures of EDM serve to facilitate a peculiar form of representation that is deliberately ambiguous and fluid and which serves to achieve utopian effect on the level of feeling rather than conscious signification, which in turn resonates with the abstract and nonrepresentational nature of the music.

The concept of utopia generally pertains to a world or society of perfection and harmony, which is indefinitely unattainable in its ideality (e.g., Thomas Moore, William Morris). I more specifically refer to the concept of utopia as it is put forth by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who perceives utopian aspects even in cultural artifacts that are condemned by conventional Marxist critique as submissive to ideology. Bloch argues against a rationalistic dismissal of all myth, legend and ideology in favor of a benevolent “double hermeneutic”: to employ, apart from ideological critique, a charitable scrutiny of their emancipatory potential. Here Bloch emphasizes the constructive potential of a positive utopian vision, rather than the mere negative and denunciatory ideology critique, which was the predominant modus operandi of Marxist critical theory. Utopia appears here not as a delusionary, starry-eyed vision of some perpetually deferred future but as a vital and urgent incentive for concrete change, addressing the real hopes and desires of the individual. “[E]xpectation, hope, intention toward yet unrealized possibility”
are impulses which Bloch holds as intrinsic to the human mind. Although to consider the gap between what is and what could be is, as Dyer notes, “ideologically speaking, playing with fire,” (Dyer 2002: 27) even when cultural artifacts unambiguously function in the service of dominant ideology—e.g., disco music being produced and distributed within an unequivocally capitalist framework—for them to be appealing and persuasive they need to contain emancipatory promises that cannot be entirely extinguished by ideological legitimization. Expanding on Bloch’s utopianism, Jameson asserts:

Works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated. […] [They] cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression; we will now suggest that anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness, so that the works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimization of the existing order—or some worse one—cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice. (Jameson 1979: 144)

Even though EDM may function within an ideological framework and social reality that perpetuates oppressions along divisions of, for instance, gender, race or class, its subversive potential is located in its ability to conjure up utopian imaginations creating a moment of escape from the quotidian and oppressive everyday reality. As Dunja Brill notes: “While philosophers like Bloch envisaged the fulfillment of the Utopian impulse through grand political ideologies like Marxism, many young people in our postmodern culture obviously seek to realise this impulse in the small micro-cosms of subculture.” (Brill: 185) Although these activities are primarily undertaken for the sake of leisure or escape, they exhibit distinctly utopian aspects which have the potential take on a political agency that has effects in everyday lived realities: “On the dance floor of an underground dance venue, away from the scrutinizing eye of society, a vision of an alternative and more egalitarian society can be pursued, tested, revised and experimented with.” (Fikentscher: 6-7)

What does it mean to define oneself or others as marginal? Fikentscher defines marginality as: “a social status marked by a condition of ongoing negotiation with, and/or reaction or opposition to, one culturally defined dominant system of values and beliefs, by one or
several so-called subcultures that rank lower in terms of cultural power.” (Ibid: 8) However, one should be cautious of too readily positioning minority cultures in this role: “recent reassessments of ‘subcultural’ formations situated within the postmodern era have suggested inherent complexities, contradictions and a fluidity of self-definition […], thus problematising a strict conflation of ‘subcultural’ with ‘subversive’.” (Amico: 359) Although gay subcultures may represent a subaltern minority group, their cultural expression might not be unexceptionally subversive to hegemonic culture. For instance, in his participant research, Amico finds that: “the vast majority of the men I interviewed, while highly cognisant of the heterocentric discourses surrounding them, did not see themselves or their social spaces […] as sites of ‘marginalisation’.” (Amico: 371) Thus, on closer scrutiny, these social formations cannot be unproblematically assessed as marginal or oppressed. Nonetheless, whether it is expressed by a community that regards itself marginalized or not, as Dyer points out, the romanticism of disco’s utopia contains inherent political aspects:

...romanticism is a particularly paradoxical quality of art to come to terms with. Its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and experiential capacities—not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life. Given that everyday banality, work, domesticity, ordinary sexism, and racism are rooted in the structures of class and gender or this society, the flight from that banality can be seen as a flight from capitalism and patriarchy as lived experiences. (Dyer 1979)

Furthermore, Buckland notes how the impulse towards a utopian imagination was all the more urgent for the predominantly queer communities that populated these scenes, since they were people of whom many had been structurally excluded and oppressed: “Many queers are worldless, cut off in many instances from family, church and other institutions of community building. They have to fashion their worlds from their own bodies out” (Buckland: 38).

As stated before, in spite of the oft invoked allusions of notions like a “tribe” or “nation”, EDM scenes seldom form coherent, homogenous groups united around a clear set of goals or values. Rather, they are varied and diverse conglomerates of individuals that find differences among themselves as much as they may find commonalities. Subculture-scholar Lawrence Grossberg coined the term “rock formation” to designate the relatively uniform countercultural movement that formed around rock music after the second war: “that assemblage of affective
alliances, progressive political commitments, and an essentialized image of youth on which the baby boomers built a short-lived counterculture and a rather more enduring ideology of the transformative power of unregulated pleasures.” (Hebdige 2008: 41) In spite of its scale, this movement seems to have been fairly coherent in its adherence to particular progressive political commitments and collective ethical and ideological values. The possibility of the formation of this kind of social movement, however, seems to have collapsed under the weight of the increasing cultural diversity and ambivalence that surrounds people living in the postmodern era. The contemporary definition of rock music has come to have, in the words of Dick Hebdige, “no intrinsic, fixed, or guaranteed meaning. It has no intrinsic or social belonging.” (Hebdige 2008: 85) However, Hebdige sees in 90s rave culture a momentary resurgence of “a critical moment of contestation in the wider culture” (Ibid.):

…rave wasn’t about being rooted and organic, squatting in the mud at Woodstock. In the 60s the metaphors of alliance and bonding were all based around kinship and the family—brotherhoods and sisterhoods and so on—whereas rave seems to be more about networking, being mobile and on the move. It’s more about casual, temporary alliances with strangers, and maybe that can include love like in the 60s, but this is love in the age of AIDS.47

Hebdige discerns a particular mode of alliance among ravers that is notably different from that of the rock formation: one that is fluid, temporal and somewhat reticent in defining itself. To indicate this notably fluid form of social cohesion, Garcia devises the concept of *liquidarity*, a portmanteau of the words ‘liquid’ and ‘solidarity’, designating “a state of fluid cohesion that generates a sense of inclusion uncoupled from identity or other forms of particularized belonging.” (Garcia 2011: 120) At the dancefloors of EDM scenes, a “something” emerges “that signals the impending arrival of a social formation while remaining at the horizon of actualization,” (Ibid.: 166) since the actualization of this formation is hampered by the diversity of its potential members. Buckland also observes groups of people that are gathered around their non-normative sexual orientation, but that appear nonetheless divided by other lines of segregation which impeded the emergence of a coherent community: “The margins revoluted against the center, only this time the center was not mainstream hetero-sexual culture, but gay culture, dominated as it was by white, middle-class gay men.” (Buckland: 88) Even while hitherto marginalized individuals converged around a celebration of their shared queer sexuality,

47 Dick Hebdige in “Land of 1000 Dances - Eine kleine Geschichte der Clubkultur.”
other differences between them emerged as mechanisms of division and exclusion, often leading to disappointment or disillusionment. In the following comment Terre Thaemlitz substitutes the troubled notion of “community” (or, for that matter, “tribe” or “nation”) for a more restrained sense of convergence of that can be understood as a shared “affinity”:

There was a sense of affinity, […] but ‘community’ is complicated because it implies something beyond simply being there. It implies a kind of camaraderie or intimacy. For me, those intimacies or those connections weren’t necessarily something that happened with people inside the club, [but] more outside of the club. […] I feel like if you just say, ‘Did you feel like part of the community?’ I think that implies something that is a little more harmonious than the kinds of realities that most people go through even when they feel they are a part of something. (Thaemlitz in Taylor 2009; italics in original)

Garcia, likewise, suggests that, in EDM scenes: “there [is] a worry that, should a term like “community” or “society” or “family” be attached to this something, it would collapse under the weight of expectations that those labels would generate.” (Garcia 2011: 211) Given the existence of these, often incommensurable, differences, the effectiveness of the affective power of a utopian experience is dependent on a general sense of vagueness as to what it amounts to.

Following philosopher Owen Barfield, Charles Keil argues that a substantial non-syntactical aspect of musical experience is located in communion and participation: “collective mental states of extreme emotional intensity, in which representation is as yet undifferentiated from the movements and actions which make the communion towards which it tends reality to the group. Their participation is so effectively lived that it is not yet properly imagined.”48 These utopian moments in which new social realities are formed are not yet “collectively represented” while they happen, and are thus necessarily non- or pre-representational, or, as Raymond Williams formulates it in his discussion of “structure of feeling,” they are “moving along the cusp of semantic availability.”49 They do not so much express anything as much as they produce and actualize the social reality they constitute, as elusive but visceral instants of what can thus be called utopian imagination in which order emerges from chaos and new social realities are forged. This utopia represents an intensity of affect and experience that might not be maintained—or even be desirable to be maintained—throughout day-to-day lived experience, but this is not the point: the perpetually existing discrepancy between the situation as it is and that

49 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford University Press), 134. Quoted in Seigworth: 21.
which is desired constitutes a continuous incentive for change in social, personal and political realities. The effectiveness of this sense of utopia is largely dependent on the erasure of incongruences that potentially might be a source of dissent, an assumed sense of unity among its participants that, for it to persist, is based on a pervasive sense of vagueness. The situation is distinctly utopian in the sense that it is perpetually deferred, as an attainment of its ideal would inevitably uncover incommensurable differences that would distort the collective assumption of congruency. Meanwhile, the egalitarian ideal remains imaginary because, while it may offer a relief from ongoing oppressions along divisions gender and race, it nevertheless unavoidably puts other mechanisms of differentiation and exclusion in its place. As Buckland describes them, these were ranks of status based on physical attractiveness, extravagance, indulgent display of consumerism, *fabulousness* or *fierceness*\(^{50}\); the matrices of differentiation that undergirded utopian fantasies.

The mechanisms of commodity production tend to erase difference in order to increase market size and thus the utopian vision turns into its opposite as it becomes entrenched in capitalist production: “No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core. […] music leads a deafening life, it has become a locus of repetition. It itself becomes undifferentiated, goes anonymous in the commodity, and hides behind the mask of stardom.” (Attali: 5) Attali’s argument points to a crucial aspect of the oppositional value of cultural subcultures. Beyond Bourdieu’s orthodox protectionism of cultural capital and connoisseurship, what is at stake are the social differences and inequalities on which form the very foundation of a particular subculture’s existence. As Terre Thaemlitz remarks: “Treating subcultural musics as though they are meant for ‘everyone’—whether this is being done by fans, or the labels and online distributors themselves—is the biggest sign of people not understanding the media they are dealing with.”\(^{51}\) Once more, the ideal of “the house nation” turns out to be a false ideal:

For anything to have a metaphor of nationalism, I think, opens doors to all kinds of things that a lot of the people in the house scene wouldn’t necessarily want to associate with. I think that the idea of tribalism—the idea of

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\(^{50}\) Buckland describes the “currency” of fierceness as follows: “In queer club speak, this term was the highest compliment anyone could give another. It was a special legitimation, a mark of high regard” (Buckland: 37)

\(^{51}\) Terre Thaemlitz, quoted in Taylor 2009.
nationalism, as it functions within dance cultures that are ostensibly fighting for diversity—that’s the kind of hypocrisy that people don’t want to tackle.\(^{52}\)

Here we discern an ongoing tension between, on the one hand, the utopian ideal of inclusiveness and belonging and, on the other, the struggle for difference and diversity—and nowhere is this more clear than around the often stringent door policies of clubs which function as a bottleneck for exclusion: “The door of a club was a theater of anxiety revolving around belonging and status” (Buckland: 49-50). Garcia describes the infamous and ostensibly arbitrary door policy of one of his fieldwork sites, the famous Berghain nightclub in Berlin:

The club’s bouncers are notorious for enforcing a stringent but elusive door policy, the precise parameters of which are never divulged by the staff and can be inferred only from observing the fate of those ahead of one in line. There exists a constantly churning discourse within EDM networks about how to avoid being turned away at the door: don’t look too glamorous; look queer; don’t act like a 118 tourist; don’t look too young; don’t show up as a group of straight men or women; dress eccentrically; go alone; if you don’t speak German, don’t speak your native tongue in line and learn how to say “Hello” and “One, please,” in German; and so on. (Garcia 2011: 117)

The relation between capitalism and EDM is a complicated one. While explicit critiques of capitalist ideology are rare within EDM culture, its utopian imagination can be argued to break with the efficiency- and productivity-oriented ideology of capitalist routine (Garcia 2011: 261-265). Often, this happens through excessive indulgence and consumption (or by at least invoking images of it) rather than by eschewing it, and thus club culture can be associated with lenience, conspicuous consumption and excess. Dyer, for example, posits romanticism, eroticism and materialism as three aspects of the utopian excess in disco music. I’ve argued in the previous chapter that in EDM, the same open-ended non-teleological structural properties that invoke the polymorphous, libidinal eroticism that Dyer reads in disco. Furthermore, he acknowledges disco’s irredeemable materialism: “[disco] is a riot of consumerism, dazzling in its technology (echo chambers, double and more tracking, electric instruments), overwhelming in its scale (banks of violins, massed choirs, the limitless range of percussion instruments), lavishly gaudy in the mirrors and tat of discotheques, the glitter and denim flash of its costumes.” (Dyer 1979)

Jameson distinguishes two different “languages or terminological systems” in Bloch’s descriptions of Utopian fulfillment: “the movement of the world in time towards the future’s

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
ultimate moment, and the more spatial notion of that adequation of object to subject which must characterise that moment’s content” (Jameson 1971: 146). The utopian aspect of EDM’s “timeless states”\textsuperscript{53} is then located not in the former, the music’s temporal movement towards a deferred fulfillment which Jameson discerns, for instance, in the classical sonata form, but rather the cyclical, spatial notion of the convergence of subject and object, where: “the presence of a founding voice [the subject] is sacrificed into a digitally complex wall of reconstituted sound.” (Hutson: 54) The unity of subject and object, which is experienced in these timeless states, thus constitutes a liberating, utopian experience.

The ambiguity about what exactly the common utopian ideal amounts is crucial for its effectiveness. This stands in contrast with the explicit sloganeering of politically engaged folk or rock, in which it is much more explicitly stated what should change and how. EDM as a musical subculture did not set out to reform or overthrow dominant culture by means of collective action. Rather, it worked to create a parallel social reality along with the dominant order which acted as a space for the individual to negotiate the paradoxical demands and double binds—between rejection and fitting in, between exclusion and catering for “passability”—placed upon them by mainstream culture. The utopian ideals of house music are articulated in a way that pertains to a change of feelings and affect more than any concrete change in the material reality, perhaps tacitly assuming that an affective change in consciousness will pave the way for concrete material changes. Concomitantly, there is a strong sense of the ideal reached for being utopian in the sense that it is forever unattainable, but nonetheless worth striving for. By refraining from an explicit critique of injustice of any kind, EDM articulates an utopian alternative through non-representational signs—on the level of feeling—by maintaining an upbeat optimism in the face of social, racial and sexual injustice and offering a glimpse of what an egalitarian utopia without racial and sexual injustice might feel like. Within the restrictions of the club’s door policies, that is…

\textsuperscript{53} I culled this description from an interview with electronic musician Robert Henke, or Monolake: “I would say my roots as Monolake are certainly the Basic Channel [seminal dub techno act and record label] idea of ‘timeless states’. The idea of an endless groove.” See Burns.
6. “Turn the Self Around”: Metric Ambiguity Transcendence

“Dancing, since prehistory, is a transformational experience. And it can be a trancelike experience. I think that’s why people over the world are into going out and dancing in a collective group...”
– Jonny Sender in “Land of 1000 Dances: A Small History of Club Culture”.

In the preceding chapters I examined EDM’s repetitive and non-teleological musical structures, its emphasis on sonic affect and their role in the creation of a utopian imagination. In this final chapter, I consider various aspects of EDM’s (repetitive) rhythmic and metrical structures and their implications. Informed by Walter Hughes’ essay “In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco,” I consider the positioning of the prominent beat in disco and EDM as “overpowering”. Next, I turn from the collective utopian experience to the individual by drawing on the work of Mark J. Butler, who analyzes EDM’s often metrically ambiguous rhythmic structures. I suggest this interpretive ambiguity to repudiate the autonomous mode of self-experience that is ideologically related to subjectivity as it is conventionally perceived in Western art and culture, while engage with the frequent invocations of transcendent, spiritual and/or psychedelic experiences within EDM(-culture) by arguing this ambiguity to have a (possible) effect of decentralizing ordered subjectivity and opening up the self to (mild) experiences of transgression and transcendence. EDM culture is generally rife with these allusions to dissociative, psychedelic experiences and altered states of consciousness. The most obvious examples of these are the widespread use of mind-altering substances at EDM events, or the self-explanatory EDM subgenre-label “trance”. Butler furthermore notes the decentralized aspect of the EDM experience: “Clubbing is not like watching a film or reading a book, where one’s attention is (at least ostensibly) directed towards a single object or experience. Rather, there is total sensory overload.” (Butler 2006: 173) Furthermore, as Buckland argues: “the promise of improvised social dancing [to electronic music] was not just to realize a material body, but to transcend the body and its politics as obstacles, producing notions and practices of political agency, community, and utopian imagination.” (Buckland: 122) Here she suggests a potential of music and dance to facilitate a transcendence of the material realm that offers a potential of transformation of real-life situations, features that can be argued to relate to EDM’s often ambiguous rhythmic organization, the experience of which facilitates an “opening up” of
the self and produces experiences of transcendence and transgression—experiences that are sometimes even considered psychedelic or spiritual. These dissociative, disorienting qualities can thus be seen as constitutive elements of EDM’s style and “a culturally specific strategy for creating meaning through musical sound.” (Butler 2006: 175)

As stated at various points throughout the preceding chapters, one of the most salient characteristics of EDM—and its ancestor disco—is a continuous emphasis on a quarter-note pulse pattern, colloquially referred to as the beat. Hughes offers a polemic account of the unremitting beat in disco as a coercive force overpowering and disciplining the dancer. He thus interprets disco as: “a disciplinary, regulatory discourse that paradoxically permits, even creates a form of freedom.” (Hughes: 147) This account of the beat as overpowering is also present in popular discourse around EDM, for instance in the quote by Zak Khutoretsky (DVS1) which I already cited in chapter four: “You can’t escape the beat, the pressure and the rhythm just move right through you and you have no choice but to move your body.” He goes on to add: “It’s such an amazing experience to truly be a slave to the sounds coming from the speaker.” (“DVS1 Interview”) Like Hughes, Khutoretsky connects the beat in EDM with notions of power and discipline as a pleasurable experience: “[d]ancing becomes a form of submission to his overmastering beat.” (Hughes: 149) Lawrence Grossberg, likewise, sees the history of rock and roll not just as an ongoing celebration of unhinged freedom, but as the production of its own constraints and regulations different from that of the dominant culture: “[rock and roll] plays with the relation of desire and its regimentation by always circumscribing its own possibilities for the production of pleasure.” (Grossberg: 234) In the predominantly gay disco scenes about which Hughes writes, the beat enforces a relinquishment of any previously adhered to subjectivity in order to adopt an imposed “gay” identity. The undoing of subjectivity that is imperative to a collective experience of this repetitive music at high volumes constitutes a transfer from the imposition of power from the dominant ruling party to a voluntary disciplining of the self. The queer dancer disciplines her/himself in order to evade being disciplined into the normative culture. On a thematic level, the annihilation of subjective agency in submission to the beat is also a recurring theme as house and disco lyrics (e.g., Sylvester’s “Can’t Stop Dancing” or J.M. Silk’s “Let the Music Take Control”) often invoke themes of recruitment or evangelism (Hughes: 150). Thus, the often-heard criticisms that were directed towards disco—of it being
fake, spurious and hostile to authentic subjectivity—actually evince a normative framework that is fundamentally divergent from that of dominant discourse. For instance, the passive aspect of being controlled defeats the commonly perceived role of masculinity, of being in control: “the disco dancer begins to lose his social identity as a man; and he becomes recategorized alongside the black woman and the machine that together relentlessly draw him into the empire of the beat.” (Hughes: 151)

Hughes account of the beat in terms of being controlled and disciplined is not uncontested. Although the shared musical experience may be one that is inextricably connected to the wielding of power, power is always two-sided: “Normally power is considered as being owned and used over others, as with oppression or subjugation. As distinct from this, power can also be considered as being shared with others, as with peaceful and collective endeavors.” (Bull: 453) The power of the joint entrainment into a repetitive beat can be turned around and function to produce and empower a community. Furthermore, although the strong presence of a beat is ubiquitous throughout disco and its descendant styles, the extent to which it is emphasized varies strongly throughout different styles and scenes. For example, Buckland, “generally observed less variations in dancing” at hard-house54 parties (Buckland: 72), which she attributes to the “beat-heaviness” of the style allowing for less improvisation in response to it. To dance to repetitive sounds does not mean to surrender helplessly to a compelling and unremitting impulse to dance, but to engage with this impulse in a creative, improvisatory and self-fashioning manner which then allows for self-expression: “The beat not only penetrated the dancer; dancers penetrated the beat, inserting their kinespheres into it.” (Buckland: 79) Informed by Buckland’s observations, I will explore the contrast between EDM’s overpowering beat and the ways in which it is appropriated and transgressed to construct a unique interpretation in the act of self-fashioning. Furthermore, I engage with the work of Butler on EDM’s rhythms to argue this particular tension to be played out, not only in the perception and interpretation of the music, but in its construction as well: in the structural reciprocity between, on the one hand, a continuous pulse and a rigid metric framework and, on the other hand, the frequent syncopations, rhythmic embellishments and the interactions between multiple—sometimes structurally incommensurate—rhythmic layers.

54 A sub-genre of house music that is notably faster and has a more prominent beat than other house styles.
As I have argued throughout chapters 3 and 4, respectively, both repetition and sonic materiality are constitutive aspects of EDM. I contend that these two aspects are interdependent in producing experiences of self-transformation, an argument that is put forth in a slightly different context by feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who argues that material changes are produced by repeated and maintained “performance” of gendered behavior. She thus derogates from the gender-relativist/constructivist notion that gender is a sheer psychic construct and returns to notions of presence and materiality: “What I would propose […] is a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter.” (Butler 1993: 9) Transformation is thus not simply a matter of a decision or mental revelation; it requires maintained and focused effort over time for the material changes to gradually manifest themselves. The repetitive structures of EDM and the experience of dancing to such music are often described as trance-inducing. Dennis Wier states that musical trances are generally characterized by the creation of multiple trance-states, brought about by various repeating rhythmic or melodic phrases, which collapse when something unexpected happens, such as a layer of the pattern being added or removed (Wier: 168). With music that is highly repetitive, then, this trance-inducing effect is strongly magnified, a process that is described as “accumulation-repetition” by performance theorist Richard Schechner: “Performances […] do not rise to a climax; the accumulation-repetition lifts performers, and often spectators too, into ecstatic trance.” (Schechner: 11) Concomitantly, the material presence of the sound is strongly emphasized by its loudness and overwhelming quality. There emerges a peculiar tension between materiality and repetition that appears crucial to EDM: on the one hand, the overwhelming material presence of the sound suggests subjugation to an overpowering force that takes control and forces the dancer to release subjective agency, as described by Hughes, however, while the regular pulse provides a constant grounding—a sense of stability and security—at the same time the gradually emerging and varying textures and rhythmic variations allow a narrative to unfold, as they open up a space in which subjectivity can manifest itself by constructing one’s own interpretation of the sounds and rhythms heard: “The club soundscape's patterns of repetition and variation produced a pleasurable balance between security and novelty. Repetition and variation in movement offered security, novelty, and the opportunity for exchange and empowerment.” (Buckland: 80) In spite of the unremitting and overpowering influence of the beat as an external
force, compelling the dancer to stay grounded, there is always room to actively intervene in this process, to wield one’s agency in directing the coercive force of the beat towards self-expression, the same way rigid and repetitive structures are continuously transgressed by disorienting rhythmic intersections and textural modulations: “playing with the beat is essential to the metrical, textural and formal processes that occur in EDM.” (Butler: 31)

Butler’s work addresses EDM’s rhythmic processes of “playing with the beat” and “turning the beat around”55 in much detail and defines them as constitutive aspects of EDM’s aesthetic mechanisms (Butler 2001; 2006). These phenomena rely on the ability of the human auditory faculties to infer a regular isochronous pulse from varying rhythmic elements (a process called “beat induction”) and also to extract hierarchical layers of cyclical rhythmic groupings from this pulse (“meter induction”), even while these are ambiguous—as is often the case in EDM tracks—or not even objectively determinable at all. From an experimental music-cognition point of perspective, Henkjan Honing acknowledges the possibility that “humans possess some processing predisposition to extract hierarchically structured regularities [i.e., meter] from complex rhythmic patterns” and that “the perception of rhythm should be seen as an interaction between the rhythmic pattern and the listener, who projects a certain meter on it.” (Honing: 86; italics in original) Justin London defines the distinction between rhythm and meter as follows: “rhythm involves the structure of the temporal stimulus, while meter involves our perception and cognition of such stimuli.” (London: 4) The listener perceives rhythmic patterns at different temporal levels, ranging from the (quarter-note) pulse of the main meter, to multiple cyclical groupings of these pulses in a particular time signature, to larger scale developments such as arcs of tension and release that span the course of many cycles and that are constructed using sloping changes in timbre and the gradual addition or subtraction of rhythmic and/or melodic elements.56

As Butler points out, EDM rhythms are often constructed in such a way as to render the dominant meter ambiguous, while deliberately playing on this ambiguity in order to force listeners to continuously evaluate and adjust their interpretation of the meter and in order to construct experiences of disorientation and surprise (Butler 2001: 37). These ambiguities are mostly temporal and are then resolved by the entrance of a “reinterpreting” element—often the

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55 A term referring to Vicki Sue Robinson’s disco classic and designating the (temporal) substitution of the downbeat for the upbeat, thus inducing a metrically and rhythmically disorientating listening experience.

56 The most common of these being a momentary withholding of the kick-drum at the end of a section.
kick drum—indicating the dominant meter (Butler 2006: 169). However, sometimes these ambiguities are maintained over longer periods throughout the course of tracks and DJ sets.

Such ambiguities are commonplace in music with African roots and derive from the rhythmic complexities of African percussion music. Erik Davis coins the term *Black Electronic* to characterize the electroacoustic spaces that emerge from the historical-cultural context of “The Black Atlantic”57: “the remarkable acoustic spaces that emerge when the polyrhythmic sensibility found in traditional West African drumming encounter [...] electronic instruments.” (Davis: 56) Davis describes the process of appropriating rhythmic interpretation similar as in the improvised social dancing to EDM, an engagement that he deems peculiar to musical traditions with African roots and that is rooted in polyrhythm: “a ‘system of beats’ whose deep aesthetic, philosophical, and even spiritual dimensions now subtly undergird electronic space.” (Ibid.: 57) Because of this music’s ambiguous structures, there is no central element to it. The listener—or dancer—is never coerced into a fixed point of reference towards the music but is free to adopt varying numbers of perspectives in organizing the rhythmic surroundings, and is thus, rather than being a passive listener, “actively engaged in making sense of the music.”58 This argument is convincingly made by Butler in the context of EDM, by thoroughly analyzing the ambiguous metric structure of EDM tracks: “the persistent repetition of both asymmetrical and even patterns encourages multiple perspectives on rhythmic and metrical structure, thereby undermining any sense that there is a singular structure underlying the music.” (Butler 2001: 37)

The positioning of the subject in a set perspective in relation to the world can be argued to correspond to a mode world-reference that emerged with the invention of first-person linear perspective (Doran). Here we encounter particular modes of subjectivity associated with the different senses, in which the faculty of sight is associated with a centralized, coherent subject—the Cartesian *homunculus*—perceiving the world: “vision and light is typically associated with rationality and judgment throughout the history of Western philosophy” (Garcia 2011: 105) and was positioned in McLuhan’s “Gutenberg Galaxy” as the dominant of the senses ever since the emergence of print culture as it induces a mode of cognitive organization that foregrounds linearity and a temporal flow of experience passing through a centralized, infinitely narrow point

57 A term put forth by Paul Gilroy to describe the transnational cultural construct of the African diaspora across the Atlantic ocean.
of perception that is human subjectivity. The power of hearing shakes the foundation of such subjectivity by shattering the centralized perspective into a multidirectional space that defies generalized abstraction in favor of the particularity of the embodied presence. We are thus forced to take in account every possible perspective as an equally valid possibility, which produces an experience of reality in which the subject is immersed in experience rather than observing reality from outside. In terms of temporal organization, this paradigm shift entails a “crisis of homogenous time,” (Erlmann: 272) where the experience of Newtonian time as a universal and absolute phenomenon collapses into multiple temporal processes occurring simultaneously and subjectively.

A clear example of a metric ambiguity occurring in EDM is the track “Growth” (1994) by Detroit-based DJ and producer Jeff Mills. The track features a fast, repetitive synth pattern loop of 6 16th note lengths that by itself would suggest 2/4 compound meter (i.e., triplets). It is however accompanied by a prominent “standard” EDM quarter-note kick drum pattern that negates the triple feel and establishes a 3/4 meter as the start of synth pattern coincides with a kick drum every third quarter-note. Alternatively, one can also interpret the track as being in either 2/4 or 4/4 meter—as duple or quadruple meters are pervasive in EDM—with the synth pattern being displaced in every measure to coincide with the first note every 6 or 3 measures, respectively, or even as an instance of polymetricality, i.e., two meters of different length occurring in conjunction without either one being dominant. None of these interpretations can be objectively established as more valid than any other, and the cognitive metric structuring can be influenced by the way the track is contextualized as part of a mix or by previously acquired listening habits: “the persistent repetition of both asymmetrical and even patterns encourages multiple perspectives on rhythmic and metrical structure, thereby undermining any sense that there is a singular structure underlying the music.” (Butler 2001: 37) Thus, a listener might also choose to shift from one cognitive interpretation to the other or opt to not settle on any definitive metric structure while listening, thus keeping the metric organization in continuous flux. This once again serves to emphasizes the decentralized nature of EDM as there is no single element that is more prominent than any other, no clearly discernible figure/ground or melody/accompaniment structure, but only a contingent network of part-to-part and part-to-whole relationships.
Butler calls attention to another salient rhythmic characteristic of EDM, which is the use of patterns in which the pulses are asymmetrically, rather than evenly, spaced (i.e., 3+3+2 or 3+5 instead of 4+4 or 2+2), which serves to produce a sonic texture that is rhythmically dense, i.e., multiple rhythmic elements in different timbral ranges that interact in complex ways (Butler 2006: 82-83). While most house and techno tracks contain a steady, evenly spaced rhythmic element indicating the main pulse (conventionally, a quarter-note kick drum), there are notable exceptions to this rule, an example of which is the track “Bad Hands Break (part II)” (2007) by British producer Surgeon, which it is built around an uneven (3+5) kick drum pulse. Butler remarks how such asymmetrical meter divisions are common in some musical repertories such as Balkan folk music and sub-Saharan African music and argues that in EDM these asymmetrical patterns are likewise perceived as structuring metrical elements rather than recurring syncopations of the main pulse (Butler 2001: 28). This shift of perspective yields a highly sensible perspective on EDM: in the mentioned track by Surgeon, most listeners will infer a steady quarter-note pulse from the asymmetrical pattern since this is the common rhythmic pulse in “four-to-the-floor”-oriented EDM, but since the uneven kick drum pattern persists for the duration of the entire track it is perceived as adhering to an individual metric unit among other (even and uneven) metric divisions, e.g., the prominent snare drum on every backbeat. Butler puts it as follows: “I would argue that [asymmetrical patterns] should not be treated as transient foreground phenomena superimposed onto an underlying regular structure. Rather, [...] these rhythms have a distinctive presence of their own and should be considered structurally significant in their own right.” (Butler 2001) This phenomenon highlights another fundamental aspect of EDM, namely the simultaneous occurrence of differing metric divisions, both even and uneven, yielding a kaleidoscopic and multifaceted rhythmic gestalt rather than a cacophony of incongruent metric divisions (Butler 2006: 166).

Such a perspective allows us to perceive EDM tracks as continuously evolving networks of tensions between reciprocally interacting rhythms and metric divisions with which listeners are actively engaging through cognitively shifting focus between different layers of temporal structuring elements (Butler 2001: 19). Taking in account Buckland’s observations in New York nightlife scenes, the activity of dancing can be seen to function as a corporeal analogy to the cognitive act (the “mental dance”) of constructing a unique, individual interpretation of the
music, using it as a vehicle for self-expression: “listeners deal with the apparent abstraction of EDM by grounding it in the physical motions of dance.” (Butler 2006: 34) This is not so much a conscious process but one that engages the body and the information stored in the sensory-motor faculties: “The body ‘dances’ the music—the nerves fire and the mind notices slightly after it happens.” (Oliveros: 126) Buckland vividly describes the physical correlate of the mental engagement with EDM rhythms as it is expressed in dance. A dancer whom she observes gradually disentangles herself from the overpowering influence of the beat and starts to actively intervene with it, thus making it her own:

As they became more involved with the music, dancers transformed its structural qualities to varying degrees in movement. […] Many dancers I observed engaged fragments of a movement repertoire that were sometimes idiosyncratic in relation to the central pulse of the music. […] Finally, the music and space could become vehicles of autonomous invention. This improvisational mode required a high level of concentration, involvement, and imagination. […] Through movement [the dancer] played with the music; her laid-back attitude and pulse sometimes seemed to counterpoint the insistent and unvarying beat. Yet, within social improvised dancing, I was fast learning that unexpected gestures, attitudes to rhythm, and qualities of movement were part of the form itself. (Buckland: 82-84)

The deconstruction of the meter into a plurality of perspectives and the mental and physical act of building a coherent interpretation from these various incommensurate layers reflects the fluidity and multiplicity of lifeworlds in a heterogeneous and globalized society through which the postmodern subject has to construct her- or himself. Reflecting on the deliberate sense of vagueness that is constituent of the utopian imagination in EDM’s scenes, Garcia writes: “Despite all the uncertainty and fluidity, a partygoer can swim his or her way through this pool of swirling relations and still feel connected to something solid.” (Garcia 2011: 158) This “something solid” is a vaguely defined sense of solidarity and belonging that is fleeting and evanescent, but that nonetheless serves to momentarily overcome difference by bracketing or suspending its confrontation. This overcoming of incommensurate difference can also be found in the ambiguity and decentralized nature of EDM’s musical structures. Even though every dancer is dancing to the same beat, in the same instance everyone is constructing his or her own interpretation of it. Attali envisions the music of the future to be founded on the coexistence of two conditions: “tolerance and autonomy. The acceptance of other people, and the ability to do without them.” (Attali: 147) EDM thus reflects the simultaneous coexistence of difference and
unity. It becomes about juxtaposing disparate lifeworlds; about finding common ground through diversity and coherence in heterogeneity, coherence that is perhaps fleeting, or even imagined, but that is nonetheless intensely affective in its transience.
7. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis I’ve attempted to engage with and negotiate between various discursive themes related to EDM from a number of—ethnographic, philosophical, music-theoretical, historical—perspectives. Thus, I have attempted to yield new insights while obviating gross generalizations and observing the stylistic diversity within the spectrum of styles and cultural practices that the EDM label encompasses. After the first two chapters, which offered an introduction and historical context, in chapter three (“On and On”: Electronic Dance Music and Repetition) we saw high how EDM’s repetitive musical structures are based on additive and modular musical processes that differ markedly from those discernable in much of Western popular and art music. Listening—or dancing—to EDM, then, involves attending to these processes while the often incessant repetition constitutes a canvas on which they unfold and can be perceived. Moreover, it was suggested that these non-goal-directed structures reflect certain non-normative conceptions of subjectivity and desire, which appear to resonate with the “queer” identities that frequently populate EDM scenes. Chapter four (“Can you feel it?”: Electronic Dance Music and Sonic Affect) thereafter posited loud and overwhelming sonic presence as a crucial aspect of the cultural practice of EDM, thereby putting the focus on its affective capacities and they ways in which these become vital to its aesthetic efficacy. Once again, this is an aspect of EDM that helps to bring about a dissociated experience of the self as the intensified and often disjunctive experience of sonic materiality is foregrounded over narrative continuity and perceived diachronic causality. The next chapter (Electronic Dance Music and Utopian Imagination) revisited claims to EDM’s notably abstract and nonrepresentational nature by addressing the utopian sensibilities with which it is alleged to conjure up. The viability of notions such as “community” in EDM scenes were explored and it was noted how such notions often produce a utopian imagination, even while remaining grounded in the ideology of the dominant culture. This utopianism, however, commonly remains on a level of feeling rather than crystallizing into concrete incentives for action. Finally, in the previous chapter (“Turn the Self Around”: Metric Ambiguity Transcendence), EDM’s metrically ambiguous rhythms were argued to open up a plurality interpretive perspectives that reflects the necessity for coping with increasing cultural diversity within postmodern urban society and which yet again affords decentralized constructions of subjectivity and produces experiences of transcendence of self.
The recurring motives that surface throughout these chapters cohere around notions of non-normative subjectivities and desires in relation to EDM. What this implies, and what I’ve attempted to emphasize throughout these arguments, is that EDM structurally and thematically reflects the lived experiences of often marginalized groups of people that fall outside the dominant—in this case, Cartesian, heteronormative, capitalist—ideology, and that it can be instrumental in emancipating and substantiating these oppositional cultural spaces while at the same time preserving their own heterogeneity. In making such claims I am particularly informed by the ways in which theorists as Adorno, Atalli and McClary argued for instrumental music’s intrinsic ideological content. In answering the questions posed in the introduction, we’ve thus seen how EDM’s association with “underground” cultural spaces is reflected in various ways in its musical structures and surrounding practices: in its repetitiveness and metric ambiguity and its facilitation of an overwhelming sonic experience. Whereas musical youth- and subcultures are often associated with the symbolic resistance against an oppressive dominant culture, this link is notably less self-evident with regards to EDM culture and it is therefore often depicted as passive and inconsequential recreation. Nonetheless, I have attempted to show that EDM’s utopian qualities do possess social and emancipatory efficacy, and that the affective intensity through which these potentials are constituted and rendered effective is afforded by EDM’s peculiar structural characteristics, which serve to decentralize subjectivity, induce experiences of disassociation and thereby facilitate the imagining and rehearsal of new forms of subjectivity and collectivity. These utopian moments of shared intensified experience can thus serve to collectively envision or enact new or revised social configurations. At the same time, however, this utopianism is clearly sustained by its own ambiguity, since EDM scenes seldom adhere to collectively defined social or political agendas. While the experience of affectively charged collectivity may appear intensely visceral, it often turns out to be fleeting and evanescent. Insofar as it has political agency, it is thus more effective in (temporarily) suspending the influence of common normativity than it is in permanently opposing or thwarting this influence. Nonetheless, the repeated rehearsal of such utopian situations may serve to empower individuals and perhaps, in the long term, effectuate emancipatory ramifications in their lived realities.

For its central arguments this thesis is deeply indebted to some invaluable previous work on EDM, among which Mark J. Butler’s rigorous music-theoretical work on rhythm and meter in
EDM, Fiona Buckland’s ethnographic accounts of queer club culture and Luis-Manuel Garcia’s work on repetition in EDM and intimacy on EDM dance floors. Thus, the present work’s contribution to the field of EDM studies consists in attempting to bring into encounter various discursive threads on EDM and connecting the dots connections between them. However, this also goes to show that academic work on EDM is somewhat dispersed, as there is no coherent meta-discourse to provide an agreement on what EDM ultimately “is”. In fact, a perpetual displacement of such an a definition as to what is “real” and “fake” EDM seems intrinsic to the very dynamic of EDM culture and, for that matter, most underground subcultures. As I based my claims on a wide variety of sources and fieldwork, many of the explorative claims made in this thesis would greatly benefit from substantiations by thorough ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation in EDM scenes. Therefore, a great deal of work remains to be done.

Furthermore, because of its abstract nature, music theory-minded EDM scholars are often notably at loss to explicate what happens musically in EDM tracks in a precise and objective manner. This is obviously due to the lack of commonly agreed upon and specific analytical methods and terminology with which address and describe such elusive but crucial aspects of EDM (see, for example, Butler 2001: 8-11 for a concise discussion of this problematic). Throughout the present work some preliminary and scattered attempts have also been made to address and explicate the connotations of particular electronically generated or manipulated sounds as they circulate within EDM productions, for example, by contending that particular frequency ranges are, through their affective intensity, subconsciously associated with certain parts of the body and mental modes (see page 40-41). I believe that EDM scholarship could greatly benefit from a more coherent and systematic approach in defining the sonic and structural signifiers of EDM, and some preliminary but inspiring steps in this direction have been taken by Dyer in his attempt to explicate the ways in which disco music sonically signifies romanticism and utopia (Dyer 1979), and by Garcia who offers some insights in how the sonic textures of certain EDM-tracks index touch and tactility (Garcia 2011: 89-97). As verbal descriptions of tracks within EDM discourse seldom rise beyond on the level of unspecified and tacit implication, a more rigorous systematic approach to such matters could yield highly illuminating insights. For instance, here we could think of how sonic indices in EDM signify notions of gender, utopianism or sexuality.
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Discography


Videography
