# Subversive Sites: Rave, Empowerment And The Internet

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> These nomads chart their courses by strange stars, which might be luminous clusters of data in cyberspace, or perhaps hallucinations. Lay down a map of the land; over that, set a map of political change; over that, a map of the Net, especially the counter-Net with its emphasis on clandestine information-flow and logistics - and finally over all, the 1:1 map of the creative imagination, aesthetics, values. The resultant grid comes to life, animated by unexpected eddies and surges of energy, coagulations of light, secret tunnels, surprises. (Hakim Bey, 1991:107-108)

## Introduction

I am currently working on a PhD at the Department of Geography, Sydney University, looking at the spatial politics of popular music scenes in Australia. My thesis takes me through two key areas - the empowerment strategies and cultural politics of Aboriginal community musics, and the spatial strategies of youth dance cultures as part of a 'rave' scene in NSW. In this paper, I hope to begin to explore a fragment of the latter - the spatialities that emerge through the establishment of a 'cultural apparatus' surrounding illegal dance parties in Sydney. In particular, I will develop some observations of a music subculture that employs strategies ranging from spatial fixity to fluidity as part of its oppositional politics. Computer-mediated communication - the world wide web or 'internet' - has been a central tool in the social construction of space within this mostly electronic music culture, fulfilling many functions - as a noticeboard of clues to the location of future events; as an open space for the creative expression of composers and visual artists; as an uncensored outlet for discussions of raver's concerns about their 'scene'; as a shared virtual photo album of past events and as an embodiment of the left-anarchist ideals of the Temporary Autonomous Zone that have informed more politicised elements within the subculture. Before I come to the role of the internet within the dance music scene in NSW, I will first contextualise the subculture within a summary of contemporary thinking about geography, politics and music.

## A geopolitics of dance

Rave culture has emerged as a potent musical practice of the 1990s in Australia. By using the term 'rave', I am referring to the discrete scenes of informal and irregular underground dance parties that have blossomed within NSW over the last decade. Whilst the field of electronic dance music has during this time expanded to encompass kaleidoscopic mutations of sound, and has seeped into many more diverse spaces - from nightclubs, cafés, and loungerooms, to the music banks of advertising agencies - I am mainly concerned with the rave itself - as the central defining *locus* of subcultural meaning. With it, many of the accepted norms of Australian rock 'n' roll scenes have been challenged, with sporadic midnight to dawn parties in non-conventional locations; broadcasting repetitive, electronic beats adorned by the swirling loops of synthesisers and few vocal and lyrical lines. Rave culture, and its emphasis on DJs and pre-recorded material, has signalled a shift in the codes of authenticity and musical credibility of 'live' rock performances. Unlike other musical subcultures, where performances take place in formal, regulated environments (such as concert venues, live pub music, disco nightclubs), the sites for the performance of

underground raves in big Australian cities such as Sydney have deliberately included spaces normally used for industrial and manufacturing production - old warehouses, factories, carpet showrooms - or spaces whose meanings are inverted from those in the wider mainstream, suburban 'world' - bowling alleys, train stations, basketball gymnasiums, circus tents. For example, *Helter Skelter*, a rave held in Sydney West only a few weeks ago, playfully appropriated the space usually known as 'Horse World' during daylight hours.

These spatial strategies are made explicitly credible within dance scenes - in particular the subversive appropriation of cracks in the urban landscape. Ravers have consistently portrayed their subculture in terms of the specific sites chosen as venues, and the transformation of these sites into imaginative landscapes. This is clear with the names given to events, such as Happy Valley, Field of Dreams, Bent in Space, Utopia; and with the common practice of mapping the layouts for rave venues on flyers and in advertisements as part of marketing strategies for the event.

FIGURE ONE: SPATIAL FLYERS - *Utopia*

These flyers illustrate the centrality of spatial discourse within rave scenes in Sydney, promising unique, lost paradises for dancing - oases, other-worlds, and fantasy landscapes constructed within the husks of industrial capitalism. For many ravers I have interviewed thus far into my study, the success or failure of a night raving depends on the effectiveness of the physical site for creating a particular 'vibe' - ravers comment on what the 'space' was like - how the various components of a rave space were laid out - the chillout space, or different rooms set aside for different styles and paces of music - and how these spaces were adorned with lasers, paintings, decorations, and visited by unusual guest stars such as jugglers and fire-twirlers. In other words, ravers are concerned with how the imaginative landscape is *constructed*; geography is brought to the fore within the scene.

To understand rave culture in NSW then, we must ask questions about the spatial strategies employed by ravers themselves, in constructing what Grossberg (1984) calls a 'cultural apparatus' - not simply the music itself, but the matrix of sites, routines, networks, practices, events and participants that revolve around a musical 'scene'.

Commonly, researchers in the field of popular music have brushed with issues of space and place within their work - for example much already published research attempts to understand the relationship between the global and the local - how musical styles that originate in localities are disseminated, understood and reconstructed in global contexts (Mitchell, 1996; Stokes (Ed.), 1994; Lipsitz, 1994). Questions of place and identity are now central to popular music research. Nonetheless, these studies retain a strong socio-cultural viewpoint - with research centred on important issues such as authenticity and imperialism - rather than providing an explicit interrogation of the geographic strategies, spatialities and spatial politics that expand out of musical arenas. Only in the last five years, with the work of cultural geographers such as Lily Kong, Susan Smith and Andy Leyshon have these sorts of analyses emerged (Kong, 1995; Smith, 1994; Leyshon et al, 1995)

Two English geographers, Halfacree and Kitchin, in their analysis of the production of regional identities through the 'Madchester' sound in the late 1980s, draw on the work of French sociologist Michel Maffesoli to understand the value of spatial strategies within popular music subcultures. Appropriated rave spaces such as warehouses and parks reflect Maffesoli's notion of 'lived spaces' (as material manifestations of more metaphorical 'imagined' geographies'), that somehow clamp down subcultural practices in real space. For any subculture to evade ephemerality then, its sites 'need to be material if its associated routines and forms of behaviour are not to contradict and clash with the routines and forms of behaviour of a rival imaginative geography' (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996:53; see also Sakolsky and Ho (eds) 1995).

A small number of studies, again mostly from the UK, have made this connection between rave subcultures and material spatial strategies. For example, Wright's thesis on the Castlemorton Festival in UK establishes the links between one major rave, and debates concerning the use of public space in England, particularly given the oppressive atmosphere generated by the *Criminal Justice Act*, which makes the act of converging in public space in large numbers, and the broadcasting of music with repetitive beats for longer than an hour punishable offences (Wright, 1993) Articles appearing in more explicitly left-wing political arenas have also stressed the importance of raves as potential acts of resistance in terms of material spatial strategies, while others have remained sceptical of the scene's

democratic discourse (see for example, Twist, 1995; Murphy and Scheer, 1992; Redhead, 1990; 1993).

Nonetheless, as we have seen in Sydney over the last 10 years, these strategies remain in tension with a highly capitalist music industry, and the processes of commercialisation that have seen the growth of more regulated, controlled, and conversely less radical environments for the broadcasting of dance/techno music to large audiences. These nightclubs, often given different names on different nights to give the appearance of heterogeneous spaces, utilise a standardised floorplan of rave events, with a main dance floor, lasers, chill rooms, facilities and so on, yet remain a highly controlled, legal space - constructed in opposition to, yet being wholly legitimised by, wider society. The prospects for this process of normalising rave activities continuing has recently been increased with the NSW Ministry of Police's *Draft Code of Practice for Dance Parties*, which erects a series of complex planning and regulatory hurdles for future events to negotiate (see Ministry of Police, 1997). This amounts to what Foucault described the construction of *heterotopias* - the formation of legitimised spaces set aside for deviant behaviour - acts such as hedonistic dancing and the consumption of illicit drugs are partially sanctioned, tolerated in these regulated sites, even though they are not welcomed in normal circumstances. In other words, spaces have been constructed that contain subcultures, and solidify relationships between subcultures and the mainstream - thus threatening the perceived radical edge of the scene (cf. Thornton, 1995).

Within the field of spatial politics that surrounds rave culture in Sydney, (which I have only been able to partially sketch here), there are other spatial strategies that have emerged as part of the scene's 'cultural apparatus'. While Halfacree and Kitchin suggest that the radical potential in rave culture lies with its appropriation of material space, these strategies are also complimented by agendas that rely on evading spatial fixity, in avoiding the 'closure' associated with many other now 'traditional' rock and roll tropes. This radical sense of spatial *fluidity* is most vividly accounted for in the works of left-anarchist Hakim Bey, whose essay on the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) has been influential in shaping a radical rave practice in NSW, including the incorporation of the internet into subcultural communications channels.


**The Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)**

Bey uses the term Temporary Autonomous Zone to delineate a dissenting radical politics in certain spatial locations - the niches, enclaves, vacancies in Western social fabric escape the Panoptic controlling gaze of the State, and temporarily play host to alternative social formations and bands of radical activists. Bey's vision of the Temporary Autonomous Zone is decidedly romantic, with a strong emphasis on Festival and play as political acts:

> The sixties-style "tribal gathering", the forest enclave of eco-saboteurs, the idyllic Beltane of the neo-pagans, anarchist conferences, gay faery circles...Harlem rent parties of the twenties, nightclubs, banquets, old-time libertarian picnics - we should realise that all these are already "liberated zones" of a sort... (Bey, 1991:106)

It is precisely a tendency towards spatial fluidity - a necessary physical mobility and aversion to direct conflictual scenarios of traditional class-based struggle - that provides the Temporary Autonomous Zone with its potency - its ability to evade the asphyxiating control, the spatial 'closure' of conventional cartography - to 'hide out' in the cracks of contemporary society:

> The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it.... Keep moving the entire tribe, even if it's only data in the Web (Bey, 1991:101)

In Bey's own cyberpunk discourse, the series of Temporary Autonomous Zones that are scattered across space are sustained through access to 'the Net' - matrices of information flow that can hitchhike on the back of conventional communications channels - the postal system, telephones, and now the internet - forming a sort of subversive 'counter-Net' that he refers to simply as 'the Web'. Through these channels, information about gatherings, events, and political action are disseminated in ways that may deflate the conventional power-knowledge nexus of political or scholarly 'experts' (Poster, 1995).

It is in the sense of the term 'Web' that many rave artists and musical collectives are increasingly organising their activities around and through computer technology and information networks such as the internet. Utilising the discourse of Temporary Autonomous Zone ('TAZ'), sites are constructed by rave

music collectives, artists and rave participants in Sydney such as Clan Analogue, Cat@lyst Community Access Tecknowledgy and Vibe Tribe, attempting to initiate figurative spaces of empowerment that embody the principles of community and local resistance to commodification. The Web then forms a sort of support system for a subculture that relies on utilising free-floating events that are momentarily rooted down in physical space in distinct ways.

**The Sydney Party, Rave And Club Information Website**

SPRACI HOMEPAGE <http://spraci.cia.com.au/>

Sydney's rave internet community largely revolves around one site, the Sydney Party, Rave And Club Information Guide (or SPRACI), which acts as a central point for other links to artists, organisations, collectives, labels, discussion pages and subscriber lists. The SPRACI site will be the main focus of this paper.

FIGURE TWO: SPRACI MAP

In this sense, the SPRACI constellation of sites could be seen as part of a 'TAZ" network, being used by ravers to promote events, distribute phone numbers to gain access to information concerning the illegal locations of raves, and to maintain constant feedback and interaction between those organising events and those participating in them. The internet 'Web' overcomes traditional problems with advertising, distributing material and promoting conventional events. Details can be changed late in the stages of organising a dance party, and listed on the Web, or re-confirmed through the '0055' numbers that are contacted to find out a meeting place or the actual location of a rave. Costs are low (usually free) to list on the events page, on the cat@lyst Subvertiser or to list yourself as a DJ or artist, and the organisers, DJs and artists can usually be reached by personal email through these sites.

Furthermore, the internet's cyberpunk/underground discourse suits the subcultural rhetoric of rave culture, with its calls for liberation via sound, through the ambiguous repetitive bleeps and bass-lines of techno music. If we travel through SPRACI to the Artists page, and then on to one example, Non Bossy Posse (which includes Ian Andrews - a member of other electronic music collectives Hypnoblob and Organarchy Sound Systems), we find a classic text of the discourse of appropriating technology for emancipatory purposes, alongside opportunities to freely download excerpts, or whole pieces of music from the internet:

> "Clear the area of the dodge-**CORE**-rupt ne***GET***ive patriarchial, earth destroying war machine. Technology should be used for omniversal JOY and *E*-**qualit**-*E*. INFORMation Trance-mitted through music creates a new mediA different to that controlled by those who fill it with obvious and SUBliminal info to oppress us.... When *SSS*SOUND empowering info saturates the frequencies=====an <u>NRG</u> is let Loose that will set the stage for *ssssss*sweeping, mutually beneficial **CHANGE**. And so with a dodgey van, an array of finger synched LOOps, assorted **BLEEP** chorus calling for local and glob**ALL** (R)evolution. ***<u>REALIZE: EQUALISE</u>***."

NON BOSSY POSSE WEBSITE: < http://www.iuma.com/IUMA-2.0/ftmp.../music/Non_Bosy_Posse/ >

The cluster of SPRACI sites also indicate new links between underground rave cultures and more politicised scenes - in particular Hakim Bey's brand of left anarchism. The liner notes to a recent Organarchy Sound Systems release *Beatz Work Vol. 1*, a compilation of underground technno from Sydney, Byron Bay and Brisbane, map out these connections:

From Europe to India, Thailand, the Americas and here in Australia people have emitted various forms of repetitive rhythms in clubs, warehouses, forests, beaches and fields....Festivals have re-emerged with self-organised groups and individuals gathering autonomously....Sounds themselves can now be liberated. (Organarchy Sound Systems, 1997)

The Organarchy Sound Systems releases grew out of the Newtown-based collective Vibe Tribe, which is connected through the Web to the cat@lyst Subvertiser - a free listing of radical activities, demonstrations, conferences and gatherings, and cat@lyst's own links to other clusters of urban political movements (for example, environmental lobby groups, anti-racism campaigners).

**Internet sites as constructed spaces**

If we look at other organisations, and their websites, we see the social construction of rave spaces themselves reflected on the internet. Some sites act as 'flyers' of sorts, promoting rave's fantasy sites, bizarre spaces, alternative worlds, subversive worlds.

QUANTUM JELLY SITE: <http://www.cia.com.au/grant/quantum.html>

Quantum Jelly are a small group of people who have staged one-off low-key, low-cost events such as 'Tank Slut' and 'Presence' - here their contents page links through to flyers for their events, and photo galleries of decorations within those rave spaces.

The decorations displated on the site are part of strategies to construct 'otherworlds' for dance events, widely-used imagery include surreal artwork, icons and symbols of exoticised tribalism, through to science-fiction animation, lasers and sophisticated lighting systems. These images were downloaded from Quantum Jelly's 'Tank Slut' website, and their presence alongside images of DJs at the turntables and participants dancing gives some indication of the importance of spatial representations in promoting rave events.

CYBERSONIC RECORDS WEBSITE: <http://ww.ozemail,com.au/~matrix12/ >

Exploring another of SPRACI's links, labels such as Cybersonic Records have also employed spatial imagery in particular ways through internet technology, to create images of transformed worlds, or in their language, to "blur the boundaries between the reality of this world and a disembodied, electronically generated virtual one" (Cybersonic Records website). The cover of the recent release doof@cybersonic.aust.com suggests a mix of 'otherworldly' sounds, yet questions remain as to whether these spatial texts are indeed autonomous expressions of an electronic 'underground', or another complex marketing tool in a more commodified niche music industry.

NORTH COAST PARTIES, CLUBS AND LINKS: <http://spraci.cia.com.au/nc.html>

The SPRACI 'Web' also provides links with other rave scenes across Australia and overseas - with connections to other similar servers such as the North Coast NSW Parties, Clubs and Links site, which then links up with other local organisations, labels, artists, events listings, discussion pages and flyers. We can, for example, visit the ironically named 'Federal Space Agency' homepage, and event websites connected off of those under the name of 'Trance Plant'.

TRANCE PLANT PHOTO GALLERY: <http://www.echo.net.au/tranceplant/> >

The internet site as a photo gallery of previous events is again demonstrated here - with various scenes from North Coast raves adding to the construction of mystical, imagined spaces - resplendent with actual 'webs' of fluorescent string, fire, and Eastern exoticism.

These websites also promote a discourse of rave culture and the internet as somehow more democratic, and more participatory than wider society - reflected in the levels of access of the anonymous Web-surfer to the 'experts' behind the homepages, and behind rave events themselves. The Clan Analogue collective of musicians and visual artists, who maintain a policy of recording and releasing music beyond the scope of the major record companies, have a highly organised website, with their own discussion pages, subscription lists, and zine, Kronic Oscillator. Throughout many of the websites we have already glimpsed at here, including the Federal Space Agency, Vibe Tribe, Non Bossy Posse, cat@lyst and Quantum Jelly reiterate a politics of egalitarianism and acceptance forged through defying the mainstream world, a form of non-oppositional resistance.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have established a brief picture of how the use of the internet can transcend the closure associated with the 'Control map' of the formal nation-state that Hakim Bey refers to, and indeed, the formal cartographic gaze that poststructuralist thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari are keen to critique (see Ferrier, 1990). Asserting new spatialities of festival and playfulness, and new ways of disseminating information about unregulated events, the internet here is used as a support mechanism for a series of subversive activities in real physical space, a 'Web' that draws on strategies of spatial fluidity to construct 'otherworlds' and imaginary landscapes for musicians and participants. In these ways, rave subcultures have emerged as significant musical arenas that are deeply connected to particular sites, to Maffesoli's 'lived spaces', much more so than many mass-consumed musics of the global industry. In turn, they can offer an opportunity for young people to 'hide out' from wider society, to protest through disappearance, and to attempt the grand project of re-forming social relations through festival and play.

However, although there is clearly a sense of community established here through computer-mediated communications channels, it becomes more difficult to sustain this argument through to conclusions about more permanent emancipation - to claim that the internet is used in ways that provide lasting change, and an autonomy significantly beyond providing the individual greater geographical scope from their home terminal. It is true to say that the cluster of sites surrounding SPRACI operate relatively independently of the major record companies and promoters in Australia, and are connected to subcultural practices that in themselves provide arenas of escape and diversion from the mundane. The spatialities constructed may be able to transcend state-regulated cartographies, a significant empowering practice in itself (cf. Poster, 1995). However, to claim that rave subcultures and the internet are truly removed from wider, and more pervasive questions of class, gender, race, and access would be dangerously megalomaniacal (cf. Mitchell, 1997). To what extent the internet might entrench previously rigid subcultural heirarchies (cf, Thornton, 1995), or establish what Batty and Barr have called 'a new geography of the rich and poor', remains to be seen. No doubt as dance music scenes in Australia continue to diversify and fragment, further examinations of their spatial agendas, and the use of spatial imagery will be necessary. As a departure point for this paper, one major concern remains left unanswered - the extent to which rave's Temporary Autonomous Zones can, after all, be truly autonomous.

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**Websites**

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Clan Analogue:

<http://sysx.apana.org.au/clan/ >

Cybersonic Records:

<http://ww.ozemail,com.au/~matrix12/ >

Federal Space Agency:

<http://www.echo.net.au/tranceplant/fsa.html>

Non Bossy Posse:

<http://www.iuma.com/IUMA-2.0/ftmp.../music/Non_Bosy_Posse/ >

North Coast NSW Parties, Clubs and Links

<http://spraci.cia.com.au/nc.html>

Quantum Jelly:

<http://www.cia.com.au/grant/quantum.html>

Sydney Party, Rave and Club Information (SPRACI):

<http://spraci.cia.com.au/ >

Trance Plant:

<http://www.echo.net.au/tranceplant/ >

Vibe Tribe:

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