PURE BLISS - intertextuality in house music

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introduction

House music is a type of electronically produced contemporary dance music. Its aesthetic language was forged during the early 80s at Chicago and New York discotheques and hedonist dance parties, which mainly catered for an African-American and Latino male gay clientele. With the use of digital recording technologies, which have become increasingly cheaper during the 80s, house music developed as a type of DIY disco; legendary house music DJ Frankie Knuckles once described this type of music as being "disco's revenge" [Knuckles, 1990]. Since 1986, its rhythmical format has had a profound influence on contemporary pop music. During the late 80s it became popular in its own right in Europe, especially when from 1988 to '90 it provided the main sound track for the enormously popular and infamous rave and house parties in England. Since then it has mutated into mainly different forms of dance music and to date it is still an important musical force.

In the following discussion[1] I have attempted to account for the effects of the radical intertextuality which can be found both in individual house music tracks as well as in the set of the house music DJ, whose method has led to the way that house music tracks are constructed. Thereby notions of the authorship and of authenticity are addressed. The DJ, like a type of curator, produces a meaningful whole by compiling pre-recorded musical events. At the same time the consumer actively 'listens' to dance music with the body

[1] See also This is our house [Rietveld, forthcoming].

whilst dancing to house music, whereby a personal meaning is produced. Even though the lyrics of house music often revolve around themes of love and sexual desire, due to the recycling of an archive of musical references in the practice of house music production, it can be impossible to lock one musical meaning into place, whereby, more than pleasure, a sense of bliss is achieved.

the practice of the DJ

Musicologist John Shepherd has proposed that music can be analysed with the use of semiotics as a form of communication which for purposes of abbreviation can be designated as 'text' [Shepherd, 1991]. One could therefore regard a house music record as a text, which is created on a sequencing device in a process which these days, using software programmes like Cubase on an Atari or Apple computer, is equivalent to writing a text on a word processor. The sequenced results can be like a montage of other texts. This can be because other texts within a particular aesthetic realm are a source of 'inspiration', inevitably leaving traces in the structures of the new text. Since a text is written in a particular tradition of communication, it follows that no text can be entirely original; a text always refers to other text, otherwise it could not be understood. The use of the sampler has made this intertextuality more apparent, since a song can be created from the sequencing of snippets of sound as well as from recognisable fragments from other records. This practice has led to accusations of theft. In an assertion against this stigma, the following may state a position within the context of the discourse of house music and DJ culture:

"Stealing, as several people explain, is when someone else hears your idea and gets it out on disc locally before you do. It's nothing to do with borrowing or adapting riffs from old records. These are DJs, after all."
[Garratt, 1986]

A self-conscious sense of intertextuality does not seem to be much of a

problem to DJs, whose livelihood depends on the assembling of texts. It is the order in which they play their choice of records that makes or breaks their career. Their 'play list' is their signature. When a rather complex style of 'DJing' (British word) or 'spinning' (American equivalent) is employed, one is more likely to speak of a 'set'. The slow rolling groove of Frankie Knuckles, the techno sound 'washes' of Derek May and the backward loops of Junior Vasquez are all very different and are recognisable in their remix work. Individual DJ styles can be distinguished from the choice of records, the way they are layered and the narrative order in which they are placed. Its complexity ranges from blending one record into another to creating layers of tracks that employ vocals or a drum track from one record to be mixed with another. There are different degrees of creativity involved in this process, which can be polished to a high state of perfection when the competition is high between DJs. For instance, several Chicago DJs brought their own tracks to the clubs in order to enhance their performances. These could range from basic bass and drum tracks to entire reconstructions of known songs, as Frankie Knuckles did. DJs spend a lot of time and money on research, in order to find records that no-one else has. In many different taste cultures that involve a DJ cult, whether it is Northern soul, hip hop or house, DJs often hide the identity of the records they use (for example by soaking off the label, sticking another 'wrong' label on top or by using a magic marker). Thereby DJs are protecting their right of authorship, which is what brings people to pay to get to hear them. Authorship and thereby copyright ownership are connected to notions of property and its capital values. Although a DJ set is not recognised by copyright law as being an original piece of work, the DJ knows only too well from practice that this is the case in terms of admiration from the punters, as well as in terms of income. Since the romantic notion of the unique expression of the individual artist is at the same time connected to the notion of competition, one could argue that capitalism and contemporary romanticism of the expressive 'genius' are intimately connected. Benjamin has

argued that in the capitalist age of mechanical reproduction the aura and authenticity, of an original piece of art has disappeared; since " (t)he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity", a reproduction cannot attain this quality [Benjamin, 1973]. However, these elements remain intact in the practice of the professional DJ who uses reproductions as building blocks for an authentic soundscape. A similar issue is at stake for the producer and dance remixer, often a DJ, whose trademark is a specific choice of sound textures and a particular manner of (re-)structuring a track. This secret knowledge will give the producer an aura of 'magic', which in turn will give him or her economic power.

It may be useful to see the modern DJ as a type of curator. In 1990 Brian Eno suggested:

"If the author becomes someone who 'merely' assembles a network of texts, and then lets you, the reader, join them up (...) can he or she be said to be responsible for the shapes that emerge? Should we now then place curators in the same category as we place 'original artists'? (...) it is perhaps the curator, the connection maker, who is the new storyteller, the meta-author.
(...) We will stop dividing the world into 'authors' and 'readers', and start to recognize instead a continuum of involvement in the writing process."
[Eno, 1990]

As consumers of records themselves, DJs tend to reinterpret them through a particular order of the records played, and by choosing only a specific part of a record as relevant, as well as sometimes simultaneously combining two or three tracks. This then produces an original text. Like a curator, the DJ takes the dancer along a gallery of sound experiences[2].

house music as a text of bliss

The dancer then in turn re-interprets this text through movements of the body, perhaps alone or in dialogue with other dancers. The 'reader' therefore,

[2] CD-I interactive computer programming pushes the discussion on authorship yet further, since the programmer leaves it to the software user what creation will ultimately be produced.

whether in the role of dancer, DJ or user of sampling technology, contributes a mind set that is culturally specific and productive in itself. In The Death of the Author, Barthes in effect argues that the origin of meaning is with the reader:

"Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is only one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."
[Barthes, 1977]

It is perhaps confusing that Barthes still uses the conventional meaning of the 'origin' of the text, which begins elsewhere in an author. At the same time this 'author' is presumed to be at the end of its existence in a conceptual sense. However, the doubt of the position of authorship and the doubt of origin and therefore authenticity of a text is clear from the above. Perhaps a more workable definition of the author may come from Foucault:

"... the author. Not, of course, in a sense of the speaking individual who pronounced or wrote a text, but in the sense of a principle of grouping of discourses, conceived as the unity and origin of their meanings, as the focus of their coherence."
[Foucault, 1989]

This definition unties the romantic idea of an authentic truth that ultimately lies within the writer. It is the "grouping of discourses" and therefore the procedures which legitimate a text that are important to Foucault in the creation of meaning.

In the discourse of house music it is the method of the DJ and the use of electronic technology such as sampling which create a text. Through the technique of fading and blending recordings, this text seemingly has no beginning or end. The texts used are themselves combinations of other texts. The order in which records are played makes comment on them. In a musical piece which uses recognisable samples a similar process occurs. This radical

intertextuality creates a fabric of texts, each connected with another through cross referencing. The sensation which the shifting of meanings creates in this situation may be what Barthes describes as 'jouissance' or bliss:

"Text means tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies (...) meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue - this texture - the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web."
[Barthes, 1976]

Barthes uses this description in the context of literature of a modernist kind, the 'writerly text'. However, the notion of text as tissue in which "the subject unmakes himself" is one which can be applied to house music without much difficulty. As house music has a trance inducing beat, which seems at its best a kind of simulation of non-genital sex and which (in African-American gospel influenced productions) deals with a sense of religious bliss, its prominent intertextuality adds to the effect of ecstasy. By never quite locking the meaning of the text into place, a desire to acquire a totality, an Imaginary, is created. Perhaps it is this desire which makes people dance all night and urges them come back for more. However, the (intoxicated) dancer also may want to 'let go' of all desire to acquire a sense of totality. In that case the 'untying of subject' occurs in a state of complete jouissance, in a loss of its construction in language. This could result in a sense of vertigo, a type of freefall whereby one floats along with the currents of the sounds and rhythms and with the shifting meanings of soundbites. In these shifts of meanings, only surface values remain. Complete escape is thereby achieved; the dancer is lost in a type of ecstatic 'bubble' [Baudrillard, 1988][3]. One could therefore argue that vocal tracks with recognisable song structures create a sense of pleasure, confirming the listener's sense of self by providing an imaginary

[3] "To each his own bubble; that is the law today" [Baudrillard, 1988]. This statement refers to the fact that contemporary information technology allows a person to stay fixed in one place while communicating with the world. Escape from that world can also occur in one's own head, rather than in terms of a physical place.

'mirror', while the further the tracks are removed from this structure, the more likely it is that a sense of trance-like bliss can be achieved.

At the same time, it is the regular metronomic beat which frames this bliss. The often relentless four quarter beat is the only guide through a wash of sound textures and vocal urges to go for it and party and to need someone and to love someone and to feel it and to loose it completely. Although the beat is outside of the body, the development of soundsystems over the last twenty years now enables the volume to be that high in clubs, that its vibrations can be felt by and its low bass frequencies enter the body of the dancer. Thereby it starts to resemble the heart beat of the mother as the dancer is like a speechless infant in the moist and warm womb-like environment of the club. The ecstatic bubble therefore takes on an emotional meaning which may explain why the house beat has become popular across cultural divides; up till this moment of writing, in 1994, everyone has experienced the sensation of being inside the womb of one's mother. When one performs physical exercise, the heart beat rate increases. Add to this effect a rhythm at a speed of 120 to 150 BPM (and perhaps higher if the dancer has an unusual amount of adrenaline in the bloodstream, or a substance with a similar effect, as can be the case with the use of amphetamines such as the recreational drugs speed and ecstasy), and it could be possible that at times the heart beat seems to the dancer to 'synchronise' with the beat[4]. In that case separation between 'the self' and the outside world disappears; the dancer 'is' the music, like the infant imagines that it 'is' the mother. In this context, Richard Middleton's suggestion that music is to be considered as a "primary semiotic practice" supports my argument:

"The initial connotations of sound-structures (the origins of which may go back beyond the repetitive "coos" of the mother even into the womb: the

[4] However, at that speed a truly synchronised heart beat would not be comfortable or even possible. Even so, Newcombe has pointed out that hear beat rates of 150 BPM have been found at raves [Newcombe, 1991].

(equally repetitive) sound / feel of maternal breathing and heartbeat) are prior to any emergence of a subject, locating itself in opposition to any external reality (...) just as its quintessential structural tendency may be described as infinite repetition, or, in terms of psychological development, as the "primal metaphor", in which everything is combined in a "great similarity"'.
[Middleton, 1990, p. 288]

House music serves the function of "primal metaphor" in an excellent manner. As the dancer loses a sense of alienation, (s)he is 'reborn' in a world where only the music and its rhythm is the law. It is therefore in the actual process of the production and consumption of house music, at the moment of dancing to (i.e. physically engaging with) its sensual repetitive beat whilst being part of a warm[5] crowd, that its most effective meaning is created:

"... it is a mistake 'to listen' to House because it is not set apart from its social and cultural context. (...) When House really jacks, it is about the most intense dance music around. Wallflowers beware: you have to move to understand the power of house."
[Thomas, 1989, p. 33]

In other words, in order to 'interface' with the bliss which house music can incite, one needs to participate. Its language and indeed its 'knowledge'[6] cannot be observed and remarked upon from any presumed outside 'neutral' point of view. Without being submerged in its physical presence, house music is quite meaningless; in other words, without physical and subjective interaction it does not produce a meaningful experience.

conclusion

In the above I have suggested to inquire into house music as a text which does not objectively produce an explicit meaning. Rather, its musical meaning depends on the way it is used, on the type of tracks which are combined by the DJ in a particular manner and on the place of its consumption. House

[5] Well, let's be honest about it: a hot and sweaty crowd with a generally friendly and unrestrained attitude.

[6] This 'knowledge' includes constructions of identities, desire, aesthetic formalism as well as ethics in work practice and in human relationships and is experienced as a feeling, a sensibility, rather than as a consciously articulated knowledge.

music is a functional type of music which is made for and by DJs, to be played at dance parties and in night clubs. Only there, at a place where an opportunity is provided to engage with it in a physical sense and when it has been amplified enough to become a tactile-acoustic event, does house music become complete within the movements of the dancing crowd. Its musical interpretation shifts with each movement, which in its turn is related not only to the rhythmical stress of house music, but also to its quality of radical intertextuality, giving each beat a slightly new (cultural) space in time. In this process of 'listening' with the body a sense of bliss can be achieved.

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