



# French underground raves of the nineties. Aesthetic politics of affect and autonomy

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FRENCH UNDERGROUND RAVES OF THE 1990s. AESTHETIC POLITICS OF AFFECT  
AND AUTONOMY

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The emergence of techno music – commonly used in France as electronic dance music – in the early 1990s is inseparable from rave parties as a form of spatiotemporal deployment. It signifies that the live diffusion via a sound system powerful enough to diffuse not only its volume but also its sound frequencies spectrum, including infrabass, is an integral part of the techno experience. In other words listening on domestic equipment is not a sufficient condition to experience this music. Its expressive characteristics are linked to this specific mode of diffusion in what Steve Goodman defines as bass materialism, ‘the collective construction of vibrational ecologies concentrated on low frequencies where sound overlaps tactility’ (Goodman, 2010: 16).

Being most often purely sound, clocked by a binary beat, techno music destabilized standard discourses on popular music by depriving them of any explicit or underlying messages to interpret. Hence, the initial public and media reception of techno tended to denounce raves as places where some psychotropic substances like ecstasy or LSD were sold and consumed. If this association was not entirely unfounded, it also served conveniently to identify music difficult to classify within established musical categories. In this sense, these denunciations of a new musical form favoured by a section of the youth can be understood as reflecting an upheaval in traditional ways of thinking about popular music rather than as a wave of moral panic (Warne, 2006).

Popular music cannot be reduced in general to a discursive analysis (Grossberg, 1984), but this is even more so in the case of techno, owing to the importance of sound. As Jeremy Gilbert pointed out, electronic dance music ‘posed obvious problems in the 1990s for any model which tried to understand music’s significance in terms of the clearly coded meanings which it could communicate’<sup>1</sup>. Hence, an alternative to the hermeneutic perspective is to explore not what music means but, in a pragmatic perspective, what music does (Thompson and Biddle, 2013)? What are its effects (Sevin, 2009b)? In particular, music’s sonic corporeal effectivity can be seen in terms of affect. Registered at the level of the physical body, affect signifies that this effectivity is not necessarily to be

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert, 2004. Yet, this lack of understanding prevails about electronic dance music, as illustrated in the polemics over the 2012 demonstrations in London against budget cuts in education. It appeared ‘incompatible with traditional normative understandings of politically conscious or politicized music’ (Thompson and Biddle, 2013: 5).

understood in linguistic terms (Gilbert, 2004). For Brian Massumi, affect is 'not entirely containable in knowledge, but is analysable in effect, as effect' (2002: 237). In the case of techno, affect relates to a collectively organized form of musical experience with empowering consequences. The point is not to argue that techno experience is solely analyzable in terms of affect, but that its meaning and specifically its political meaning should be addressed by articulating this affective dimension with the conditions, practices, contexts of production and diffusion of the music in rave. Hence, techno music signifies nothing in itself, but it is these conditions that give sense to the music and its effects.

In the French context, a series of works has offset the difficulties of apprehending this sound system music and its particular modes of production and appropriation, on the one hand, by an essentialization of techno, that sees it as intrinsically transgressive with its politics of noise (Grynspan, 1999; Kyrou, 2002) and on the other, by presenting the music as a pure operator of collective effervescence. This second option led to conflicting assessments, even if they have the same type of aporia.

This chapter first shows that many characterizations of techno, whether positive or negative, are based on the same logic that thinks music as a form of stimulation for some passive individuals who suffer its effects and are therefore led into the collective trance. Considered positively, this is accompanied by a promotion of the aesthetic politics of raves in their capacity to regenerate social ties. A more negative view denounces this as a loss of individual autonomy and as a collective regression in musical vibrations. These join the criticisms of mass cultural industries and their totalitarian tendencies (Adorno, 2001).

Next, the theoretical conditions required to address the aesthetic politics of raves and techno are posed to avoid this kind of reductive analysis and the oscillation between celebration and denunciation. Here, I refer not to 'aesthetic' in terms of judgment of taste exercised over the music but in terms of a relationship between music and its players and listeners within the process of aesthetic experience (Dewey, 2005). The notion of experience here does not imply unilateral relations between the music and the listeners/dancers but a transaction between those terms. More precisely, being affected by techno is not a passive counterpart of the musical power to affect the listener, because the ability to be affected is also an active affect (Delanda, 2006). In the same way, what we call 'politics' is not related first to the content of the music, or some criticism of the established order that music could express, but to the type of space-time which is created in raves and how it is configured, involving another distribution of the sensible compared to a dominant order (Rancière, 2000).

Finally, I focus on underground raves, more commonly called 'free-parties' in France, to the extent that they were the target of many political and administrative controversies. I characterize the aesthetic politics of underground raves through the articulation of two axes, supplying the momentum of this musical movement: the axis of 'potentiation', related to the power of affective mobilization of the music, and the axis of the 'alternative', where free-parties appear as autonomous organizations corresponding to a process of political subjectivation.

### **Declining or bonding experience: techno and its social atoms**

Techno music can be summarily described as the outcome of a simplification process in an algebraic sense: a reduction of the terms of an equation leading to a more direct expression (Pinhas, 1997: 58). It is in this sense that Pierre Boulez presented Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, as a reduction of polyphony and harmony to a function subordinated to the primacy of rhythm and to the design of time pulsations:

*It was the new blood coming from the 'barbarians', a kind of electroshock unceremoniously applied to organisms (Boulez, quoted in Pinhas).*

For Pinhas, this kind of innovation can be found in popular music where rhythm and pulse prevail over other musical components. In electronic dance music, the rhythmic and sound patterns ('loops') are put in variations by processes of repetition and modulation. There is not just one binary rhythm, as is often thought, but a rhythmic complex constituted of several lines that overlap with differential durations. The melody itself tends to disappear in more abstract styles of techno. Even when it remains, it is subjected to the repetition of a pattern since a piece of techno is not composed as a song (Miller Paul a.k.a DJ Spooky, 1997: 70) but is most often created to become a component of a DJ mix. This does not preclude that a sequence of a song could itself become a component of mix or mash-up in less abstract styles than techno in the strict sense.

### ***Raves as collective regression?***

Evoking Stravinsky is not with a view of identifying him as a precursor to techno, yet the same kind of criticism of bewitchment can be observed from Stravinsky onwards down to the popular music of the twentieth century. For instance, Adorno saw Stravinsky's music as seducing the 'kind of listener who obeys the sound of the drumbeat' (Adorno, 1962: 20) and as a form of regression caused by a music intended for the body and not for the mind (Gayraud, 2012). He addressed a similar criticism of the lack of musical intelligibility and of entrancing the listener to twentieth-century American music like jazz.

As far as techno music is concerned, this kind of characterization has been echoed by its initial critical receptions in the general press. The technological dimension, presuming a dehumanization and violence of this music, has accentuated these critics. An article in the newspaper *L'Humanité*, on 15 June 1993 is emblematic of this hostility to raves, on the one hand because this newspaper is affiliated to the Communist Party and has generally supported emerging forms of popular music and, on the other hand, because it thereby legitimates a critical way of considering this music without being accused of being conservative. Indeed, this chapter condenses all misunderstandings about techno.

*This is hallucinating music, recovering extreme sounds that once digested are introduced in repetitive and hypnotic loops. Its name comes from the fact that it is all about technology. [...] Created on computers, and having as its founding ancestor the German group Kraftwerk, it shakes the body up to 150 heart beats/minute. Its followers describe the effect produced: 'It sets the brain boiling, the head pounding, the heart rushes to the head ...*

The same definition of techno appears here as a music intended for the body and the entrancement it causes: it 'shakes the body, it speeds up the heart rate'. A recurrent identification is made between the characteristics of this infernal sensorium and those exposed to it: beats per minute (BPM) are either those of the music with its binary pulse or those of the 'listener's' heartbeat. This chapter also highlights the rave party's totalitarian tendency of manipulating emotions and managing sensations.

*4 hours 30 minutes. The atmosphere is changing. A man on stage is galvanizing a possessed crowd, conditioned by drugs. Music, more metallic, accelerates the pulsations. There is manipulation in air. Laurent, who has just been telling me that 'ecstasy unplugs him from the system' and 'raves, at least, are a frenzy beyond state control', has fallen like many others under the control of the tentacular organization that here manages his sensations, his mental state, to 'plunge him or raise him high' as he puts it<sup>2</sup>.*

Here, raves, a sprawling network manipulating people conditioned by drug and music, appear as a devious plot which escapes the State. This view holds that the French State launched a strict policy banning raves as part of a struggle against trafficking and consumption of drugs<sup>3</sup>. 'Fighting against ecstasy' was fighting against raves, to the extent that raves like electronic dance music were not recognized as legitimate manifestations. Nevertheless, the theme of techno as mass manipulation has also been formulated, no longer in the sense of an anomaly, which the State should fight, but as

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<sup>2</sup> 'Le phénomène Rave, mélange de solitude et de drogue', *L'Humanité*, June 15, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> This was clearly explained in an administrative circular destined for prefectures entitled 'Les soirées rave: des situations à hauts risques' (1995).

an emblematic manifestation of the novel historical condition following the fall of the USSR. Thus, commenting the Berlin Love Parade of 1997, the post-situationist Jaime Semprun considered techno fans as 'the true children of German unity'. For him, techno lovers were an exemplary case of 'atomic individuals, shaped by the sensory remoteness of the industrial mass society' for whom 'the main thing is to vibrate'.

Thus, the aesthetic politics of techno stands out in its fascist trend<sup>4</sup>. For Semprun, behind the slogans of unity lie the mandatory unanimity and the hate of individual autonomy (Semprun, 1997: 12–13). Words like 'Zombie' or 'convulsionary', to designate ravers, evoke similar words used by Adorno about jazz fans, called jitterbuggers at the time. This link was explicitly made in 1996 by the music critic Simon Reynolds, who denounced the 'rave culture of the 1990s'. For Reynolds, critics of Adorno targeting jazz fans who fulfil the emptiness of their existence through outbursts of dance could be easily transposed to ravers.

*Adorno's verdict on jitterbuggers – 'merely to be carried away by anything at all, to have something of their own, compensates for their impoverished and barren existence' – could easily be transposed to the 90s rave culture, which – from Happy Hardcore to Gabba to Goa trance – is now as rigidly ritualized and conservative as Heavy Metal (Reynolds, 1996).*

Ritualization is here synonymous with a conservatism, which opposes itself not only to creativity but is also 'so institutionalized and regulated, it verges on the totalitarian' (Achim Szepansky, quoted in Reynolds, 1996). The aesthetic politics of techno would add to the bewitchment and to the unintelligibility of a music intended for the body, a supplementary and more terrible seduction of sounds and beats produced by machines. If this type of criticism was clearly expressed in the 1990s, when the phenomenon was new, expanding and attracting media attention, more recent formulations can be found as well. Thus, in 2011, the neo-Luddite group *Pièces et mains d'oeuvres* denounced the technological tyranny in which techno would be one of the expressions with its 'crowds gathered in front of glorified walls of sound-speakers and moving mechanically... like real robots'.

### ***Raves as collective bonding?***

In the social sciences, in contrast to the denunciations and critics of raves as places of perdition and loss of autonomy, the neo-tribalist school around Michel Maffesoli characterized raves as a response to the contemporary evil of individualism. This line of reasoning contextualizes raves in post-

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<sup>4</sup> See in this volume, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi on Mussolini and Fascist Italy, in particular the way the aesthetic politics of Mussolini considered the masses as a passive whole, a rough material to be moulded by the artist-politician.

modernity and the end of ideology. Thus, techno ritual becomes a positive opportunity to create social ties in a disenchanted world undergoing the failure of traditional institutions of socialization.

For Michel Maffesoli, the excess, the drunkenness and the debauchery of the party refers to 'the matrix fusion, community, and consequently, social fecundity' (Maffesoli, 1985). This theory views raves as a new incarnation of the feast. In this perspective, raves manifest a democratization of Georges Bataille's thought, insofar as there is 'a will to escape from the fantasy of numbers and quantifying everything that underlies the consumer society' (Maffesoli, 1998: 159). But this does not presume a political dimension, as in the postmodern context of raves, 'fusion takes place on a sensitive and affective mode, on the basis of a concrete situation experienced in common, and not in adherence to a discourse or a political project' (Petiau, 1999: 37). The Dionysian effervescence takes over 'the myth of the henceforth saturated infinite progress' (Maffesoli, 1998: 161). With raves, we would be witnessing a socializing reintegration of the individual in a reconstituted community through a festive bonding created by the music: it would be the 'inherent strength' of techno music (Hampartzoumian, 2004: 80).

Such an analysis of raves may also be endorsed by authors who, on the contrary, consider that the political meaning of raves can be related to the failure of traditional and institutional socialization vectors: school, family, political parties. The aesthetic politics of the techno party is taking shape here as a response to the institutional de-legitimization of institutions and traditional solidarities. Thus, for Mabilon-Bonfils, the techno party would show some novel dynamics in the sharing of collective emotions. It 'is related to an enchantment in a disenchanted world, that era of emptiness, where watchwords and ideologies have disappeared' (Mabilon-Bonfils, 2004: 85).

### ***Consensual raves?***

Emphasis on trance and socialization in studies on raves results in the erasing of the aesthetic relation to the musical, visual and dramaturgical elements of rave<sup>5</sup>. Because in these works the aesthetic dimension is arbitrary, the accent is put on the restored communities with music reduced to the status its operator. Hence, for Mabilon-Bonfils 'the creative spontaneity of these gatherings exist elsewhere than at rave events, in cultural associations, group of football fans' (Mabilon-Bonfils, 2004: 85)... Going further, Hampartzoumian declares: 'artistic or political dimensions are relegated to merely accessory functions'. The rave mainly aims at producing some effervescence, and 'there is in this aim an insolent transparency specific to techno party' (Hampartzoumian, 2004: 264).

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<sup>5</sup> More generally, this is a recurrent interpretation of popular music by the French social sciences. David Looseley (2003: 101) notices a 'fascination with the abandonment of communal self' in French readings of pop music since the 1960s 'yé yé' phenomenon to the 1980s rock concerts.

Nevertheless, it is possible to analyse this characterization of rave with a bearing on relational aesthetics formalized by art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. His theory of installation art was explicitly associated with techno culture<sup>6</sup>. In his book *relational aesthetics*, Bourriaud's diagnosis is close to that of neo-tribalism's regarding the failed project of modernity. From this perspective, the mission of art is no longer to prepare a future world but to shape 'possible universes' and enable a 'better life in the world, instead of trying to build it according to preconceived ideas of the historic evolution'<sup>7</sup>. However, for Bourriaud, the installations of relational art include a political project, as they invest the relational sphere and thematize the production of a mode of conviviality that completes the modern project of emancipation. Therefore, inter-subjectivity, or 'being together', is the substrate of this politics of relational aesthetics: not only as part of the social setting of the reception of art but as an art form in itself. Thus, 'different types of collaboration between people, games, festivals or places of conviviality, in short, all possible modes of meeting and the invention of relationships today are aesthetic objects and may be studied as such' (Bourriaud, 1998: 29).

Reading raves through the prism of relational aesthetics shows the pitfalls of an aesthetic politics marked by consensus. As Eric Alliez pointed out, this theory developed by Bourriaud, oriented to the rebuilding of social ties and the relational fabric, is inspired by happenings and performance art movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, they aimed at a radical political and artistic change. However, relational aesthetics emptied them of their 'critical strength' in order to highlight the dimension of inter-subjectivity (2008: 122).

In the end, privileging a relational aesthetics of raves leads to the disappearance of the political dimension if, like Rancière (1995), we consider that politics starts precisely with dissensus. Politics in this sense is not a matter of reflection and organization of the resource and its right government but a rupture in this organization or reflection. Consequently, art is, to begin with, not political because of its messages or the feelings it delivers on the world order, but 'by the sort of time and space it establishes and the way in which it cuts this time and populates this space' (Rancière, 2004: 37).

## **Towards an aesthetic politics of raves**

The pitfalls of an aesthetic politics of raves identified in the above works leads to a questioning of their theoretical foundations along with their social and aesthetic ontology. By reducing the

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance the special issue of the contemporary art magazine *art press* ('Techno, Anatomy of Electronics Musics', 19, 1998), which carries an interview of Michel Maffesoli by Nicolas Bourriaud. See also the issue of the social science magazine *Sociétés* ('Pulsation techno, pulsation social', 72, 2001) which includes an extract ('L'art des années 90. Participation et transitivité') of Bourriaud (1998: 13).

<sup>7</sup> 'Instead of reaching the expected emancipation, technological progress and 'Reason' has allowed, through an overall streamlining of the production process' to new forms of exploitation of nature and man. Countless forms of melancholy have been substituted for the modern project of emancipation' (Bourriaud, 1998: 12).



productivity or the harmfulness of raves to a purely social relationship – whether in terms of alienated individuals or revived society in collective effervescence – in which music is an intermediary, acting as a stimulus on passive subjects, the aesthetic as well as politics of this experience disappear. A non-reductive understanding of what could be an aesthetic politics of raves and techno is called for.

First, the false problem of an individual/society opposition that serves as a ground for analyses in terms of socialization must be dismissed. This is in fact based on an atomistic postulate in which the shift from the isolated individual to society takes place through a collective unity created in the fusion of techno trance<sup>8</sup>. Pragmatist thought allows a break with this false opposition by considering the individual as a directly social reality<sup>9</sup>. In this context, the society is not taken as a whole but is integrated into the various streams of consciousness in the words of William James (Lapoujade, 1997). Accordingly, the socialization of the individual is the condition of his individuation and not its antidote. Thus, the level of analysis here is neither the individual nor society but the experience process from which a subject and an object of experience can be derived (Dewey, 1993).

Second, a renewed conception of sensitivity that does not oppose an active intellect and a passive sensitivity (Vilani, 2013: 52) must consider the musical experience in terms other than socialization and alienation by taking account of its potential in association with its political dimension. Instead of apprehending a unilateral action of music on a passive subject, music can be perceived as a continued exchange of sensitivity between musicians and listeners/dancers who actively perceive the music in the dance. This physical relation in the music does not oppose a cognitive relation mediatized by discourses, but has its own autonomy in the field of affect.

This in turn, requires an appropriate vocabulary that does not resort to a psychology of emotions (Massumi, 2002: 27). Here, the notion of affect is therefore understood in the Spinozist sense of a power to affect and to be affected, as a transition from one state to another resulting in an increase or decrease in the capacity of existence. Considering the techno musical relationship in rave in terms of affect, establishes a distance from experimental psychology and its stimulus-response model -or 'input-output model' (Ibid.: 259)-, which feeds the analyses of rave as a place of fusional trance. Sidelining this traditional conception of linear causality leads to the assertion that music to be efficient and affect the listener/dancer must be articulated according to the latter's capacity to be

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<sup>8</sup> The theories of contract, against which the neo-tribalism is supposed to differentiate, are based on the same premise. In Rousseau, it is the 'adherence to a speech or a project' that provokes a switch from a natural dispersion to the unity of the people. In both cases we assume the resorption of the multiple in a collective whole. Cf. Lapoujade, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> That of Williams James, John Dewey and, to some extent, Gabriel Tarde, although he is not currently explicitly presented as such.

affected (Delanda, 2006). This is not a passive counterpart of the musical power to affect the listener but also an active affect. In this sense, the techno affect is not a property of a subject; it is the product of the musical relationship. As argued above, this sets the analysis at the level of musical experience.

Two points remain to be clarified in this problematic of the aesthetic politics of techno. First, the field of affect is autonomous with respect to linguistic qualifications of emotions that lay down a subjective state. It is located in the impersonal level of experience and is in proportion to the strength and duration of the musical sensation and its intensity (Massumi, 2002: 27-28). This is discussed here in terms of the potential, the first axis of the aesthetic politics of underground raves. The affective encounter through techno in raves has empowering consequences that could lead to various initiatives of investment. Second, there is no direct correspondence between techno affect and political dimension. Experiencing music, as argued above, is not first about signification and cannot be reduced to the expression and transmission of ideas. Therefore musical and visual performances of raves have no intrinsic political dimension. But even if raves do not carry a political message, they can still contain a political dimension. Following Rancière's point that art is not politic in terms of the messages it sends, but dependent on the type of time and space it establishes, I examine the organization and the type of relationship proposed by underground raves (free-parties). I consider the underground credo of free-parties as an alternative contributing to the effectiveness of their aesthetic politics (Sevin, 2009b).

## **The alternative and the potential: two axes of aesthetic politics**

Clearly, raves are not political or non-political in essence but may have a political dimension under certain conditions. The two axes of aesthetic politics sketched above, the potential and the alternative, have unstable relationships: between a dynamic of expansion and an organizational alternative turned towards a collective experimentation. The tension between these two axes indicates the constituent ambivalence of the techno movement. It lacks the coherence sometimes attributed to it and has only tendencies.

### ***The potential***

The musical performance involves a degree of indeterminacy for its effect is not mechanical. The techno affect taken as an event implies that it does not have a transportable content. On the contrary, it must be produced each time in a collective musical performance. In others terms, if there is no social fusion, nor is there a group of individuals separately affected by the music. One way of stepping beyond the model of the linear causality of the music and addressing the collective

dimension of the musical performance is to consider the affective attunement (Stern, 1989) performed by everyone to add to the collective intensity.

On the dance floor, participants receive the music by dancing, not miming the music but expressing it in their own style. Participants are not in a pure head-to-head relation with the music. In other words, they are not only sensitive to music but also to how other participants are dancing and receiving music. This is understood with the notion of vitality affect (Stern, 1989: 206) that occurs in the expressive energy of dance, and corresponds to a type of 'amodal perception', which does not depend on a specific sensory modality. It induces a collective and interactive process of transmutation into sensations of rhythm and danced movements. This process provides the basis for an affective attunement in which ravers agree not only on the reception of music but on the way of receiving and feeling it. This affective attunement through dance is a continuous process that does not involve mimicry but a personal appropriation producing a variation that avoids boredom and so maintains the intensity of the collective reception.

The musical interaction between ravers and DJs is of course part of this attunement and here too, variations in the music introduced by the DJs serve to maintain the intensity by modulating musical sensations such as accelerating or decelerating rhythm and sound patterns, adding different sound filters and so on. Such techniques and sensitivity to public reception are an integral part of the making of a DJ mix. The music never intends to reach a paroxysmal point followed by a fall; it is more in the order of a succession of intensity plateaus<sup>10</sup> composing a relief with rising phases which then stabilize in a plateau then slow down to give way to a new cycle and so on without moving towards a final peak.

The musical performance is thus a complex process of collective harmonization. It requires a substantial descriptive set-up in order to capture perceptual and affective interactions. This difficulty may also explain the propensity, via recourse to concepts like trance, to interpretations of raves in explanatory terms of relations between this phenomenon and a state of society. This brief sketch of the affective attunement process substitutes the socializing principle of fusion with a process of harmonization of differences as a vivifying experience leading to new possibilities of existence. The affective attunement approach incorporates divergences and agreement. Thus, there is no

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory Bateson (1977: 149) forged this concept. In his work on Balinese culture and especially music (which has greatly influenced Western composers, among others, the minimalist movement), Bateson noted that Balinese music follows 'a progression that results from his structural logic, where changes in intensity are determined by the duration and the development of formal relations: we can't find a type of increasing intensity and paroxysmal structure that characterizes Western music, but rather a formal progress' (my translation).

uniformity but affective differences in the same event, in other words, the public of ravers is tuned together, rather than fusing in an undifferentiated crowd<sup>11</sup>.

Such an intensive musical experience encourages newcomers to get involved variously in the collective dynamics of raves. Neither rational nor individual decisions but a collective dynamic arouses these desires or 'motivates' amateurs. A dynamics is created expansion where techno music experience promotes new ways of 'entering the movement': becoming a DJ, purchasing turntables and discs; setting up a techno record store or a techno record label; creating a fanzine or a webzine; organizing raves, investing in sound equipment, decoration, and so on.

The aesthetic politics of the potential specifies itself in this collective dynamics that Tarde described as imitative influence. As for the affective attunement realized during raves, the imitative influence that takes place within the temporality of an experiential path of ravers does not imply uniformity. Tarde's imitative problematic cannot, as is commonly supposed, be identified with the psychology of crowds, because the inter-individual and not the individual is the level of analysis. The process of imitation does not lead to an identical reproduction or uniformization but to an adaptation that modifies the imitated model. For Tarde what is imitated is not a behavior but always an idea, a judgment or an aim, 'in which a certain amount of belief and desire is expressed' (Tarde, 2000: 157). Since the imitative influence occurs at a different 'sensitive layer', there is no standardization but a connection with other imitative flows in which each individual is a singular node (Karsenti, 2002). Imitation is about affect and as shown above, does not imply pure passivity but involves an active dimension.

### ***The alternative***

The second axis of aesthetic politics, mainly its alternative dynamics of organization sheds light on its promotion of another distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 1995), distinct from the operating mode of professional raves.

This alternative finds its source in the confrontation with the French State's ban on all raves in the early 1990s. This prompted the development of undeclared raves to avoid police surveillance, and thus reinforced free-parties as an oppositional trend within the techno scene. Whilst Techno actors fought for official recognition through their organization *Technopol*, a report submitted by the National Committee of Contemporary Music sought to normalize this musical landscape, by encouraging the professionalization of the musicians and organizers of raves. The Ministry of Culture

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<sup>11</sup> This is the difference between a public and a crowd, according to Tarde (1989).

thus pressurized the Ministry of Internal Affairs to facilitate administrative authorization of raves that complied with the state regulatory framework.

However, a new administrative circular appeared only in 1999 ('Instruction sur les manifestations rave et techno'). Meanwhile, a mass movement of amateurs and actors outside established channels of professional raves multiplied, benefiting from the official recognition of techno and the more relaxed guidelines. Raves no longer appeared as a simple perverse effect of a prohibition policy. The alternative of free-parties, operating outside authorized times and places, can be seen as a movement of political subjectivation, which promotes another configuration of roles, spaces and times, or in Rancière's terms, another distribution of the sensible.

Some structuring principles of this dynamics of organization include a principle of autonomy regarding the temporal, spatial and relational framework. Once a suitable place is identified by one or several organizers, a flyer is released, indicating the date, groups or sound system organizers<sup>12</sup> or their power (5, 10, 15, etc. Kilowatts), musicians and DJs<sup>13</sup>, as well as a telephone number to call in the hours preceding the rave. The flyer is deliberately vague about the precise geographical indication allowing organizers to outpace police forces, who might decide to intervene. Police action becomes more difficult when hundreds of participants are already present in the place.

In practice, organizers act more as mediators than as a control unit imposing a code of conduct or restricted access to the rave, making the event an instance of self-organization. No external service providers are mobilized to supply and install the sound, deal with the logistics and planning of the space, whether open air, warehouse, and so on. The event is articulated through horizontal relationships between participants and organizers that rule out a strict designation of roles and responsibilities. Instead, people switch from functions of ravers to organizers or DJs, or sometimes hold multiple functions from the most artistic to the most practical. Relationships between participants and organizers-mediators are not profit-oriented, but rather take the form of a gift offered freely to those responsible for the music and the preparation of the event. There is no *a priori* time restriction; the rave ends when the sound systems cease transmitting music, or when the last participants leave.

As a corollary, the principle of participation can be understood in two different ways: first, it flows from a participation taking place in the aesthetic experience of the rave, notably through dance,

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<sup>12</sup> The term sound system refers to both a public address system and by extension a group of organizers and musicians who possesses such equipment.

<sup>13</sup> In the case of teknivals, that is to say raves taking place over several days on the basis of this principle, the invitation relates not only to participants but also other collective musicians (sound systems) or performers (street theatre, fire-breathing etc...) so that they join the liveliness of this event.

which opens onto a dimension of the potential and vitality affects. Second, participation is articulated in the principle of autonomy, for no external member or entity is present to guarantee and frame the event or provide logistical and practical support for cleaning up the site after the event.

These two structural principles contribute to a different 'distribution of the sensible' that follows from a dissensual division of space and capacity granted to each individual<sup>14</sup>. Actors of free-parties appropriate ways of organizing and performing music in a framework of autonomy that denies a prior distribution of positions and abilities and disabilities associated with their positions.

In the wake of English sound systems of techno travellers who introduced it in France and Europe, the propagation of underground raves took place informally through collectives organizing raves and allowing new participants to experience it<sup>15</sup>. In other words, underground raves were their own propagation vector; sustained by the two axes of its aesthetic politics. But the alternative and its mode of operation and the potential and its dynamics of expansion were tested during the growth of free-parties in the late 1990s.

An extensive media coverage attracted actors and audiences curious of 'sensational' appearance of free-parties that parasitized them in the ecological sense. Thus, older participants denounced these new participants, categorized as 'tourists' and 'scums'. Tourists to these events, tempted by easy access to various drugs, did not necessarily adhere to the principles of underground raves. At the same time, the principal musical activity was overshadowed by drug consumption, described as modalization in Goffmann's terms. This category of 'tourists' was linked to the presence of 'scums', or drug dealers who found favourable trade opportunities in raves and at times engaged in thefts and destruction at the property (destroying cars, etc.). The boundary between the categories of actors could be porous.

This situation disrupted the principle of autonomy and self-organizing of raves and increased local conflicts arising from the damage and garbage left behind by 'wild raves'. Simultaneously, security problems and disorganization of gatherings installed a more violent and dark atmosphere in the free-parties, frightening off some of the initial participants, especially girls. Whilst the homogenization of participants – apparent in dress codes of the 'raver's' military outfit – were denounced by the host fraction of the movement as was the predominance of a harder music style. These elements altered

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<sup>14</sup> So there are two possible types of distribution of the sensible: one, that Rancière calls consensual, 'which puts the body in their place and function according to their properties'; and another, that he calls dissensual, which specifically cleaves this harmony by inscribing what exceeds (Rancière, 1995: 50).

<sup>15</sup> 'Being a traveller is also more philosophically, a mission: to promote techno, its lifestyle or its codes, still further' (De Haro and Estève, 2002: 16).

the nature of open free-parties, promoting a large diversity of participants, organizations and artistic practices at national, social or artistic levels (VJing, graffiti artists, performers, street theatre, etc...).

Deeply involved actors reacted by organizing meetings<sup>16</sup> to review the situation and promote a better structure. This failed as ideas of horizontalism and spontaneity of underground raves were clearly reaffirmed. Thus, the proposal to create a representative body of free-parties was rejected as a disguised attempt by an institutional takeover that would have contradicted the principle of autonomy of free-parties.

From spring 2001, the State decided once again to tackle underground raves via a new legislation that threatened to confiscate the sound system of the organizers. Despite initial broad popular supports, the movement was unable to mobilize political resistance. This can be explained by the connectionist form (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999) of the freeparties, lacking clear contours or leaders, with an undetermined membership. Without a representative and centralizing body the free party's movement failed to launch this kind of political action. Instead of a collusion fomented progressively as in connectionist forms, much is expected from individual responses to a public call for an objective formulated in almost the same terms.

A new security law targeting free-parties was eventually adopted and enforced in spring 2002. However the movement did not disappear overnight. But the tightening of conditions governing underground raves has led to a significant decrease in the number of events, impacting on the production and economy of records labels, DJs and record stores linked to this movement. Gradually, the underground techno scene has lost its musical and social vitality, confining itself to spaces that have become confidential over time.

## Conclusions

The analysis of this moment in the free-parties movement fraught with obstacles highlights the problematic of the aesthetic politics of this kind of cultural movement. On the axis of the potential the techno movement grew informally, aggregating groups with different arrangements and backgrounds, while providing a model of an alternative musical gathering. In a country where cultural policy is primarily a powerful tool of control, techno succeeded in escaping institutions and achieved autonomy. But as seen above, this very strength became a weakness when it came to maintaining

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<sup>16</sup> In these situations, the actors are willing to explain the principles behind their actions, which is a valuable resource for the investigation. On this basis I identified structuring principles of free-parties, formalized as the underground credo (Sevin, 2009b). In this perspective, 'being underground' is not an attribute of individuals and groups as in the (sub)culturalists' approaches, but falls under situations and practices.

this alternative. Nonetheless, this lack of stabilization or sustainability should not necessarily be interpreted as a failure. It may be less a question of contradiction than of an intrinsic characteristic of this type of movement. Alluding to a contradiction would give them too much consistency. Raves and techno movement, as popular cultural forms in general should not be considered as coherent wholes but as constitutively ambivalent and contradictory. In the particular historical conjuncture of the 1990s, that still need to be explored, free-parties opened a breach in the consensus and in the perception of the youth cultural movement inherited from the 1960s and 1970s and created a line of flight with its aesthetic politics of affect and autonomy. In this sense, the impossibility of stabilization has a positive side that therefore shed light on the possible fossilization that threatens any institutionalized cultural form of expression.

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