

*Discographies: Auto-critique and reflections, 10 years on*

I had an email from someone recently asking me about criticisms that had been made of *Discographies*, or notable reviews of it that had appeared, and I promised to try to write something up when I got a chance, so here it is.

Firstly, I should say that we wrote the book a long time ago - it came out nearly 10 years ago which means that we were working on it 1997-8, so obviously a great deal of it ought to have been superseded by now. Has it been? Well I suppose that's probably for others to judge, but overall it hasn't been quite as obviously as we expected. I suppose it was in the spirit of the culture that we were immersed in and were writing about that we assumed that everything we wrote would quickly be overtaken by other innovators. The flood of exciting critical work on dance music that we were expecting just never materialised, to be honest.

Anyway I don't have time to write a great deal about this, but I will try go over some of the areas of criticism that I've come across, or that have crossed my own mind.

The first thing I can say is that actually I've had very little direct feedback about the book over the years, and it's barely been reviewed at all to my knowledge (apart from a sympathetic review in *The Wire* by Andy Medhurst.). Lots of people seem to have bought it and it turns up very often in the bibliographies of American works in the same kind of area (theoretically-informed music studies), but in the UK it has largely been completely ignored by other scholars, even when writing on exactly the same topics. I don't think this is very surprising, given the fact that most of those scholars have been resolutely empirical / ethnographic in their approaches, and not at all interested in the kind of speculative or political questions which motivated us. But I suppose that ignoring the

book might itself be taken as a kind of criticism, if people are aware of it but just don't think it's even worth engaging with. On the other hand, the people who have responded to it either way and whose opinions I'm actually bothered about (for example Simon Reynolds, John Mowitt, Lawrence Grossberg, Paul Bowman), have always been very nice about it.

The one direct criticism I can remember anyone reporting to me was a reference to the book at a panel at the 2002 *Crossroads in Cultural Studies* conference in Tampere, Finland. I was at the conference but not at the panel in question. My friend David Hesmondhalgh told me that a paper had been given which set up the book's arguments for a critique from an Actor-Network Theory perspective. That's as much as I actually know about what was said, but it remains an intriguing point of possible criticism for me. The chapter on technology in the book was mainly written by Ewan, but I inserted into it a rather polemical and classically 'cultural studies' statement of what technology theorists sometimes call 'social determinism' - the insistence that technologies are always inert objects with no inherent social significance, whose effects are wholly dependent upon the contexts and ways in which they are used, and which themselves emerge as results of particular, socially-determined research agendas. One of the characteristic features of the 'Actor-Network Theory' associated with writers such as Bruno Latour and John Law is their interest in the possibilities of identifying 'non-human actants' such as machines as having specific kinds of 'agency', or at least as 'affording' certain potentials rather than others. I'm very sympathetic to this perspective, and I think that one could write a really fascinating history of music culture from the point of view of its 'machines'. I don't think that this obviates the polemical importance of the social-determinist argument in the context that we made it in, for example, because in the 1990s it was very normal for journalistic discourse to discuss the cultural impacts of both drugs and musical technologies in very technologically-deterministic terms, simply ignoring the extent to which, say, MDMA or the Roland 808 drum machine had produced very different effects, with very different

meanings, for different people in different contexts. However, the Actor-Network response to this would be to say ‘yes, that’s all very well - but MDMA can’t just have any old effects: it isn’t just a blank screen onto which any old social fantasy can be projected, and it clearly makes things possible that wouldn’t be possible otherwise.’ From a materialist perspective this is clearly an important point. A Roland 808 has a definite set of physical properties. MDMA has measurable effects on the biochemistry of the brain and the sympathetic nervous system. These properties and their resultant effects may take on a wider variety of significances within a range of contexts, but their physical quality is not as such dependent upon those contexts. Even if we argue (as I have done [elsewhere](#)) that the very boundary between the physical and the non-physical varies between cultural and historical contexts, it nonetheless remains the case that, for example, an 808 can never make a noise that anyone is going to mistake for a violin and MDMA can never cure insomnia... So here is one criticism of *Discographies* worth noting: the polemical social-determinist theory of technology which I inserted into Ewan’s always-already more nuanced account at least runs the risk of occluding the real importance of technologies as semi-autonomous actants within specific assemblages.

My use of the term ‘assemblage’ here leads us towards one of the oddest theoretical aspects of *Discographies*, from a historical perspective: the relative paucity of references to Deleuze & Guattari in the book. There is actually an interesting background to this. At the time Ewan and I were both already quite familiar with D&G, although Ewan more than myself (I was still carefully reading through *Anti-Oedipus* for my PhD), and we could have had a lot more references to them. But at the time, it appeared that we were on the cusp of a wave of theoretical writing on rave and techno within which D&G would be by far the most-cited theorists. If I remember rightly, Simon Reynolds already had an early version of his website up and running, featuring discussions of his ‘rave theory’ toolkit, to which D&G were central (as well as some interesting sources on androgyny

and kundalini, if I remember right!). It wasn't until we had practically sent our book to press that Simon's *Energy Flash* finally came out, with almost all of the theory removed! Not that the book suffered from this at all - in fact there was clearly no room for anything more in this monumental historical survey (I wanted to describe it as 'brilliant' in the foreword to *Discographies*, but Ewan thought that this was over the top - he was probably right, but I'm going to say it now anyway - *Energy Flash* was a brilliant work that could so easily have been so much weaker than it was and got away with it). Anyway, the point is that we knew that Simon was about to publish his big book on rave and we thought that it would be full of D&G.

Kodwo Eshun's superb *More Brilliant than the Sun* came out while we were working on the book, and was obviously heavily influenced by a particular reading of D&G. Tim Jordan had published a very interesting academic article on rave and revolution which discussed D&G as political theorists at length. Most importantly, or so it seemed at the time, Drew Hemment was looking for a publisher for his PhD, which was a very thorough Deleuzian study of house music. I really expected Drew's *Microgroove* to be the book which superseded *Discographies*, but it never came out in book form. We could say that this shows how little justice there is in the world of academic publishing, but I think it's really a different kind of cautionary tale - Drew rather got it into his head that following the success of *Energy Flash* and *More Brilliant than the Sun* he could find a mass-market publisher for the book, and by the time it became clear that he wouldn't, academic publishers were no longer interested in books about rave. Still, his PhD is online and I always encourage people to read it. It's to be found [here](#).

Anyway the upshot of all this was that we thought that the world was going to awash with Deleuzian rave theory, so we'd better emphasise the other theoretical sources at our disposal simply to distinguish our book from all the others.

That isn't to say that anything in the book is incompatible with a Deleuzian perspective, however. The usual postgraduate way of understanding the difference between a Deleuzian perspective and one informed by most of our 'post-structuralist' sources would be to claim that the former is somehow more 'materialist' than the latter. This is a misreading, I'm afraid, based on the fact that the kind of people who make it - and many of the people who have taught them, I'm sorry to say - have never taken the time to engage with writers like Derrida and Lacan and so realise that they are, in fact, informed in all their thinking by a very complex but very rigorous materialism. That's not to say that in some cases, a schizoanalytic vocabulary wouldn't probably have been more effective in terms of making the kinds of analysis that we wanted to make than the language that we used, or couldn't have added something important to it.

In particular, I would draw attention to our analysis of the gender dynamics of music and corporeal experience, and in particular our deployment of a very specific category of *jouissance*. I think a point that is easily missed is that our conception of *jouissance* was never really a psychoanalytic one, identifying *jouissance* with a kind of regressive experience (this was arguably Simon's understanding of it, derived initially, I think, from Kristeva, but it wasn't really ours). Rather, we specifically tried to synthesise Barthes' conception of *jouissance* from *The Pleasure of the Text* (at which point in his theoretical trajectory I would argue Barthes had decisively broken with psychoanalysis) with the deconstructive materialism elaborated by Judith Butler in her *Bodies that Matter* (which, to my eternal disappointment, Butler has never made the slightest effort to develop, refine or update). From this point of view, *jouissance* was to be understood as access to a dimension of experience which is outside of or unconditioned by ordinary patterns of gendered behaviour, but not simply because it relates to a pre-Oedipal or pre-genital phase in the development of the person.

Today I would say, in a wholly Deleuzian register, that what we were trying to get at was a conception of *jouissance* as a direct experience of the virtual. And of course, ‘a direct experience of the virtual’, at the level of corporeal existence, is arguably one of the definitions of D&G’s ‘Body Without Organs’ - the BWO being the body experienced in its full virtuality, which is to say its multiple potentiality. I have written a little bit about this subsequently, particularly with reference to D&G’s idea of ‘Becoming-Woman’ (you can find a short piece about this on this website, in the section for my course ‘Music, Sound and the Body’). I would say that what were getting at was precisely an account of how ‘becoming-woman’ works, at least for straight men on disco dancefloors. It has been suggested to me that our conception of *jouissance* is still burdened by its psychoanalytic legacy, and still doesn’t quite capture the ways in which ‘making oneself a body without organs’ doesn’t simply constitute a temporary *escape* from prior strictures, but involves the invention and discovery of new capacities and potentials for new kinds of relation and action. I think this is probably a valid criticism, although I think that maybe one of the political criticisms to be made of rave and post-rave dance culture was precisely that it never *did* find ways of making blissed-out *jouissance* into a resource of new modes of becoming in the world outside the rave.

As you can see from this example, recently I’ve been thinking that the great value of D&G’s work for cultural studies, is that it gives us a vocabulary with which it is possible to describe various phenomena or forms of practice as informed by a radical *desire*, even if that desire is quickly captured by state or corporate agencies. I think that if I was writing the final chapter of *Discographies* today, then I would rely quite heavily on a schizoanalytic framework to try to describe the ways in which the deterritorialisation of certain kinds of subjectivity - and the potentiation of radical new modes of collective desire - by rave was quickly reterritorialised by new figures of sexualised and commodified identity. I think that might make clearer to readers how

far we thought that this was what had happened. One of the things that has always rather disappointed me about the way the book has been read, is that it seems to have been read mostly for its enthusiastic, speculative account of the potentially radicalising effects of the rave experience. Really, this is the part of the book which is about what it's like for individuals (in particular white men) on the dancefloor. Other parts of the book were much more concerned with the the collective and social dimensions of the the phenomena that we were describing. Most importantly, the concluding chapter was really about the ways in which almost all of that radical potential had been *neutralised*. The political questions which we raised - the question of how it might be possible to avoid such neutralisation - have never seemed to interest readers as much as the account of why raving might be really cool. This is understandable, but politically it's disappointing, and possibly a different vocabulary would have made the whole thing clearer and opened up the political questions in a more productive way. Possibly.

The one great absence from the book in my view is any serious discussion of the politics of 'race'. This isn't because we weren't interested in or concerned about the issue. In fact, Ewan had some material that we initially planned to work up into a chapter on ethnicity and music, with particular references to Paul Gilroy, Afrofuturism, and, actually D&G. But for various contingent reasons we never got this chapter together, and as I recall, when *More Brilliant than the Sun* came out we felt that it had covered most of the issues so well that we didn't need to write about them (I've certainly always told my students to read this as well if they were interested in reading *Discographies*). We were also quite nervous of tackling these issues, just as we would have been about writing about women's experience in dance culture: at the time, Ewan and I were both very hostile to any kind of 'anthropological' writing about 'other groups', and felt that it was only for black people or women to write about their experiences and cultural practices. So we had some justification. Still, this is my one big regret about that book now - if I ever pick up a copy these days, I always find myself asking

myself ‘where’s the Black Atlantic in all this???’ I don’t have much more to add on that topic, except to say that there has been some exceptionally strong work on race in relation to related issues which has come out in recent years, most notably Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* and Arun Saldanha’s *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race*.

That’s all for now.