4 The Beat Goes On: Trance, Dance and Tribalism in Rave Culture
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Rave
Specifically a one-off gathering for late night consumption of pre-recorded dance music, a musical definition of rave is more problematic. Descending from the acid house sound and ethos, the main fare tends to be fast techno and hardcore records, pitched between 125 and 140 bpm and often released on tiny independent labels with little background information.

(Ogg, in Larkin, 1994, p. 302)

INTRODUCTION

Universe’s Tribal Gathering 1994, second of its kind, brought together some 25,000 people in a disused 1930s airport outside Munich. Ravers had come from all over the world to dance all night to the sounds of ‘superstar’ DJs, each with expertise in a particular house dance-music idiom: Carl Cox, British stalwart of European techno and house, Laurent Garnier, France’s finest techno spinner, Holland’s Miss Djax, whose dialect is hard acid, etc. At an early stage in the event ‘a most spectacular occurrence [was] witnessed: a melting together of 8,000 to 10,000 bodies all with hands held in the air’ (Koehler, 1994, p. 50).

To characterise rave culture in the mid-1990s is no easy task, as it has grown into an international, predominantly European network of dance-music events at which the participants move to the sounds of techno, hardcore, acid house, trance, gabba, jungle and other variants of house music. These events include festivals (indoor and outdoor, commercial/licensed and free/unlicensed), free ‘warehouse’ parties (often held in abandoned industrial urban spaces, including factories and warehouses, but also on beaches or common land) and club nights (either one-off events or regular weekly or monthly spots). Some would say that in Britain the rave is dead, killed off by media hype and commercialisation as well as the state’s systematic
criminalisation of ravers, others believe that it has gone underground, and still others that it has mutated abroad, with Germany and Holland competing for status as European rave mecca in the north, and Spain and Italy in the south. Perhaps the rave should be compared to the mythological many-headed Hydra, a creature which captivated and entranced, only to make disappear, all those who beheld it, and which mutated inexorably, by growing new heads, when its protagonists attempted to destroy it.

Lack of consistency, of coherence, of veracity characterise representations of rave culture. There are competing versions of many of its landmarks, not only because of differences in personal, political or professional perspectives, but also because of the fluid, slippery and unstable ‘nature’ of this dance-music movement, which allows no unified perspective and resists definition. It has been difficult therefore to map, with accuracy, its history (even a history of discontinuities and ruptures), especially as I have not been immersed in it as I was in hippie culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but have only participated sporadically. What follows therefore is necessarily a partial and provisional analytical account of some aspects of raving. For those with some familiarity with the topic, this should come as no surprise.

Rave culture may be conceived as a microcosm of the contemporary metropolis, which has itself been proposed as a metaphor for postmodernity, that ‘condition’ which celebrates fragmentation, deconstruction, dispersal, discontinuity, rupture, asubjectivity, ephemerality, superficiality, depthlessness, flatness, meaninglessness, hyperreality, etc. Therefore if rave culture resists definition and analysis using conventional theoretical tools drawn from the human and social sciences, as Redhead suggests (1993, pp. 1–6, 23–4), this is logical, since no totalising meta-narrative can adequately account for something as fragmented, as elusive and as dispersed, yet as apparently indestructible. To describe raving as a ritual of resistance and rebellion is to ignore the explicitly apolitical stance of many of its participants; to analyse it within the conventional dualistic categories of social control/liberation, of individual/collective action, is necessarily to reduce its multiplicity.

The following conception of the metropolis may therefore provide a line of entry into raving: ‘a system of anarchic and archaic signs and symbols [and practices] that is constantly and independently self-renewing’ (Klotz in Harvey, 1989, p. 83). For definitions of the ‘rave’ (an expression also used in the 1960s to describe psychedelic partying and which may be outdated, as Saunders [1995, p. 3] suggests), see, for example, Jordan (1995, pp. 128–9) and Rietveld (1993, p. 41).

In this chapter I will explore a number of related issues: the possible