

Beyond the music: Dancing (with) techno

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates on musical genres oscillate between claims of their disappearance and their persistence. This article reframes the question by shifting from taxonomic classification to the situated pragmatics of collective listening, taking techno music as a case study. Adopting an ethnosemiotic framework and drawing on multi-sited ethnography, the analysis suspends the genre category to observe how meaning emerges on the dancefloor. The analytical operators are borrowed from an unlikely source: the UK's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, which defines the music played at raves as sounds 'wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats.' Repetition and succession are treated as semiotic operators through which recurrent relations across musical flow and collective bodily movement are formalized. Repetition makes pertinent figurative contagion, rhythmic synchronization, and solidary touch, while succession foregrounds thermokinetic modulation and intersubjective conduction. Together, these dynamics produce a contingent, ethnographically attested suspension of genre/gender matrices – a suspension radically distinct from the neoliberal “fluidity” promoted by streaming platforms. The dancefloor thus appears as a temporary configuration in which a different form of life becomes concretely possible, suspending utilitarian imperatives and enabling a democratic, low-threshold sociality grounded in repetition and bodily co-presence.

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1. Introduction: The crisis of musical genres

There is a major dilemma facing contemporary music, and that is the issue of genre division. As a result of both postmodern echoes regarding the fluidity of categories and new perspectives fueled by the streaming music industry, some argue for the ‘disappearance of musical genres’ as we have known them (Petrusich 2021), while others maintain that they are far from dead (Johnson 2020; Smith 2024). While Spotify, through one of its founders, has for some years now outlined the ‘utopian’ idea of music without precise boundaries (Ek 2018), and some propose defining it according to a context-oriented approach (Krogh 2020), the debate has not failed to highlight how these issues often translate into a strictly neoliberal proposal, more oriented toward the commodification of differences and the structuring of consumer identity than toward an actual intervention in musical art (Muchitsch and Werner 2024). This is a critical position with which the present work engages in dialogue, although it differs on a specific point that will be clarified later: the suspension of genre matrices – described as a meaning-making effect of the relationship between dance and techno – is situated, contingent, ethnographically attested, and does not coincide with the fluidity instrumentally proclaimed by the rhetoric of the platforms.

On the other hand, genre is a central notion that runs through semiotic reflection and is in many ways irreducible to it. By genre, in fact, we mean the complex of socially shared pragmatic expectations that guide the reception of a text. Eco (1979:10), for example, observes that if Kafka’s *Trial* is read as ‘a trivial criminal novel,’ the text collapses: ‘it has been burned out, just as a “joint” is burned out to produce a private euphoric state.’ After all, as Rastier (1989) noted and Marrone (1998) later clarified, no text exists without a genre. Musical genres, in particular, despite their increasingly fluid boundaries, continue to function as culturally recognized, self-generating semantic-discursive universes capable of generating the texts that in turn regenerate them (Marino 2020).

For its part, techno music represents a perfect methodological object for exploring this set of issues. First of all, one of the earliest scholarly approaches to it suggested that it is a form of music that challenges established musicological paradigms. While “canonical” musical genres and the events associated with them refer to an experience or, in any case, point to something else, the practices associated with certain types of music literally have the peculiarity of constructing it (Reynolds 1998), to the point that a paradigm shift in its understanding becomes necessary – one that asks not so much what music means in these contexts but how it functions (ibid.): a problem defined in this way is of absolute semiotic relevance. More recently, however, new perspectives are emerging that emphasize the importance of granting techno a musicological dignity that is detached from its context of consumption (Benedetti 2023, 2024), both from a historical and a strictly sonic standpoint.

However, when approaching techno, the genre category presents two intertwined difficulties. The first is definitional: since its inception, techno has been considered an umbrella term encompassing an almost infinite number of subgenres in constant re-definition (De Dominicis 1998) – tech-house, hard, hypnotic, industrial, gabber, tekno with a ‘k,’ schranz, late dubstep – whose boundaries constantly overlap and clash, to the point that those approaching it from a research perspective tend, not coincidentally, to avoid the term in favor of broader formulations such as ‘electronic music’ (Attimonelli and Tomeo 2022).

The second difficulty is of a socio-semiotic nature, and here we touch upon the methodological crux of the matter: precisely because the genre functions as a device of expectations, it produces effects of pre-codification that pragmatic research must suspend, at least temporarily, if it wishes to access situated dynamics of meaning.

Techno dancing, in short, is not a dance in the traditional sense of the term: although there have been various attempts to codify techno dancing through theatrical performance – the work developed by (LA)HORDE is particularly relevant here – there are no steps, instructors, or canons of aesthetically ‘correct’ execution. Choreographic figures, when they emerge, do so through contagion and dissolve through the subtraction of repetition; forms of intercorporeality stabilize and deconstruct themselves in the course of the same event.

2. Methodological issues

Once the theoretical and methodological challenges have been clarified, it becomes clear what contribution ethnosemiotics can make in this regard (Marsciani 2007, 2012, 2020; Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017; Mazzarino 2022). As a boundary discipline employing ethnographic methods and grounded in a situated epistemic relationship (Denticò 2026), ethnosemiotics does not integrate pre-established sociological categories without first verifying their relevance in the local production of manifest meaning (Marsciani 2020). Applied to the subject of this article, this principle means we cannot start from techno-as-a-genre and ask what people who dance to it do with it, because this already implies that “techno” is the musical entity being experienced. Rather, we must start from the contingency of its consumption and ask what happens there to restore its meaning, following various research perspectives such as those of DeNora (2003, 2004) and Hennion (2007, 2013). The former called for rethinking the sociology of music by focusing on the ways it is used in everyday life, while the latter suggested focusing on the perspective of amateurs, that is, enthusiasts. In both cases, the idea is to concentrate on the contingent modes of listening to music, an empirical level that can be grasped through the combined method of participant observation and in-depth interviews – that is, through the lens of ethnosemiotics – with

the aim of understanding the modes of interaction among the actors – human and non-human, including music itself – that occur and develop in concrete situations of enunciation.

The departure from musical genre, however, opens a secondary – and seemingly paradoxical – door through which to re-enter the field from another angle. This door is the one opened by the UK's *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act* of 1994, the first, historic piece of legislation enacted to make raves prosecutable. Considering that starting from 'legal norms is a choice that allows us to begin establishing certain criteria of relevance for semiotic analysis'¹ (Bassano 2018: 4), it is curious to note how, in legally defining its object, the Criminal Act offers a de facto pragmatic definition:

Powers to remove persons attending or preparing for a rave. [...] This section applies to a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music [...] includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats. (UK legislation 1994; see also D'Onofrio 2015)

This definition is paradoxical, since it comes from the law and not from musicology, but it is precisely because of this estrangement from the field of musicology that it works, as it carves out and frames the phenomenon from a pragmatic perspective, even though it is in fact a very broad definition that can easily be applied to any type of music. This aspect, however, is not a problem, because the techno sound family, rather than having distinctive and definitive characteristics, in fact magnifies and radicalizes the musical traits described here (Dentico 2024) through four sememes: emission, succession, beating, repetition. Relevant to this paper – that is, useful for framing, describing, and interpreting the dimension of dance in the collective listening experience of techno – are the second and fourth: succession and repetition.

The thesis put forward is that these two sememes function as operators through which relations between techno's musical structure, dance figures, collective bodily synchronization, thermokinetic modulation, intersubjective conduction, and ecstatic-aesthetic trance can be formalized.

The concept of 'operator' will be understood here in a sense analogous to that previously introduced by Marsciani for the 'image operator' (originally in Italian: *operatore di immagini*) where an image is a formalized meaning effect (Marsciani in Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017). In turn, the operator is neither a concrete actor nor a substantial property of the object, but a mediating function through which effects emerging in the relation between the described object and the describing instance are formalized.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian and French sources are the author's.

In a recent development (Dentico 2026), the term ‘operator of impressions’ was chosen for two reasons. First, to distance oneself from the excessive importance accorded to sight in ethnographic objectification procedures; second, to make use of the term ‘impression,’ a foundational term in the definition of the *meaning effect* found in the Dictionary by Greimas and Courtés (1982: 187-188). It is in this strong sense that repetition and succession will function here as operators of analysis, starting from the formalization of the effects revealed by the interviews and ethnographic excerpts. A clarification is necessary regarding the use of the term ‘techno’ in the following pages. We have already seen that this musical family exhibits porous boundaries and an internal plurality that makes its taxonomic delimitation problematic.

Nevertheless, ‘techno’ circulates as a term of use far beyond its strict musicological definition: when a partygoer says ‘I’m going to dance to techno,’ they are naming what, within their narrative programs of enjoyment, functions as an object of value (in the Greimasian sense). In short, not so much a repertoire label as the focal point of a desired practice. It is not uncommon, moreover, for what a person describes as techno to turn out to be something musically distinct. It is in this pragmatic-narrative sense, and not in the classificatory one, that the term will be used in the following pages: wherever it appears, it should be understood as an abbreviation of the pragmatic configuration that has emerged through the sememes of the *Criminal Act*, a configuration that coincides with what the partygoers invest in as the object of their enjoyment. The aim of this article is therefore to reconstruct and formalize this configuration through these two operators. Repetition and succession do not designate causal forces internal to the practice, nor successive stages of its unfolding. They select two prevalences within a network of already manifested effects of meaning: repetition makes pertinent the iterative, contagious, and reciprocal relations that traverse sonic flow and bodily movement; succession makes pertinent continuous modulation, thermokinetic transformation, and intersubjective conduction. Their distinction is analytical rather than empirical, since the effects gathered under either operator remain mutually implicated within the same situated configuration. The relation between music and dance is therefore treated neither as an identity nor as a linear translation, but as a structural homology reconstructed from their contingent co-articulation on the dancefloor.

Methodologically, the article is based on a multi-sited ethnography conducted for doctoral research between February 2021 and March 2023 in the techno scenes of Rome, Bologna, and Paris, supplemented by further fieldwork in Italy, Denmark and Albania in subsequent years. The corpus includes almost forty participant observations in clubs, free parties, raves, and festivals, together with sixteen in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited by word of mouth among people who described themselves as enthusiasts of these events, understood here in Hennion’s pragmatic sense of amateurs: actors whose competence is constituted through attachment to and

participation in the practice (Hennion 2007). Demographic variables were not adopted as sampling criteria, since the research did not aim to produce a sociological profile of techno audiences, but to reconstruct the situated modes through which such attachment becomes meaningful. The study population was thus constituted pragmatically rather than demographically: the relevant criterion was attachment to and competence within the practice. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a flexible thematic outline, while allowing participants to develop issues they considered relevant. They also served to test the pertinence of the ethnographic findings: what had emerged through participant observation could thus be confirmed, reformulated, or called into question through the discourse of other situated instances. The theoretical framework is ethnosemiotics as developed, in particular, by Marsciani (2007, 2012, 2020), in its constitutive tension with relational ethnography (Desmond 2014) and the semiotics of passions (Greimas and Fontanille 1991; Pezzini 1996, 1998), and in its incorporation of the instance of description and of image production as a distinctive mode through which the body takes its place within discourse.

In the following pages, we will draw upon ethnographic excerpts and interviews, appropriately highlighted. Regarding the former, we will limit ourselves to referring to the location and date where the participant observation took place. Regarding the latter, they will be identified by self-chosen nicknames that the interviewees adopted autonomously, both to protect their identity and to feel more at ease discussing aspects that may be controversial from a social and legal standpoint. In cases where, within participant observations, subjectivities appear for whom no nickname was collected – because they were not interviewed or were not directly involved in the research – they will be indicated by a fictional letter. Both of these approaches are designed to respect the privacy of both the locations and the individuals involved in the research. It should also be noted that ethnographic notes and interviews were collected in Italian and French; in the present article they have been translated by the author, with attention to preserving as far as possible the spoken form of the expressions and the orality of the fieldwork. Citations from academic sources in languages other than English also have likewise been translated by the author, unless an existing English translation is cited.

On this basis, and using these tools, we will seek to highlight the semiotic structures that ensure that in these environments, music is experienced as something to ‘hear,’ ‘feel,’ ‘inhabit,’ and ‘live’ rather than to ‘listen to,’ ‘contemplate,’ and ‘understand’ (Agostini 1998: 61).

3. Dancing as a predicate: From the human / music interface to sound-aesthetic conduct

Before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to establish the theoretical framework that enables the mediation of impression operators from the level of musical structure to that of collective movement. This transition hinges entirely on the human / music interface model theorized by Gino Stefani (1996, 1998), and in particular on the idea – crucial to the perspective adopted here – that meaning in music does not reside in the musical object but in the contingent relationship established between the subjectivity of listening and the music itself. This relationship, to put it another way, is never mechanical nor governed by a causal link, but always interactive (Stefani 1996: 43): a notion that takes on particular relevance in the case of techno, where the auditory apparatus is not simply stimulated by a sound stream, but is engulfed and drawn into an experience that is immediately, and intensely, sensory-synesthetic (Stefani 1998: 40).

In a genre of music where melody is generally placed in the background and where the most significant – and in some ways defining – dimension is the rhythmic one, it is in fact through movement – in what Stefani (*ibid.*: 60) defines as rhythmic conduct – that the subjectivity of listening is able to perform complex acts of appropriation and re-semanticization of the music through the production of semiotic configurations and sensory reinterpretations. This is a process of somatic translation, since rhythm, through the ‘spatio-temporal coordination’ it imposes, allows for ‘that highlighting or putting into perspective which enables a meaningful translation of the sensible’ (Ceriani 2020: 21). In this sense, the interface can be understood not as a mere bridge between two separate worlds but as a genuine instance of mediation between the user and the environment (Diamanti 2003), which in our case defines a relational field where music and the body constitute themselves as such in the very act of their encounter. Rhythmic conduct, in fact, ‘manifests itself in behaviours that can be, on the one hand, a sensorimotor appropriation of music, and on the other, the production of music suited to this appropriation’ (Stefani 1998: 62): there is no hierarchy between music and the body, but a co-constitution.

This general model of musical listening as rhythmic conduct is supplemented by a specification that becomes necessary in the case of collective techno listening, where other variables are added to the human / music interface to aim for exhaustiveness: all non-human actors, such as speakers, video and light effects, but also the effects of psychoactive substances. In particular, here we will understand the latter as genuine passional devices that intervene in the mode of being (Greimas 1983) and which, within the somatic dimension of the subjectivity of listening (cf. Barthes and Havas 2019), contribute to defining its semiotic state on the narrative level. Between techno and empathogens such as MDMA, in particular, a profound formal homology emerges that

enables a genuine dynamic of mutual translation (Marrone 2005). The perceptual distortions produced by these substances, in fact, do not merely accompany the musical experience but radicalize it, magnifying certain constitutive features such as tactility and vibration, and, in a more comprehensive sense, also the ‘grip of sound’ (Stefani 1996) and *saisie esthétique* (Greimas 1987), to the point of bringing to the fore elements that would otherwise remain in the shadows. In this sense, substances do not constitute a third element to be inserted as a filter between the two terms of the interface, but rather bring to the fore the relevance of the situated somatic-perceptual dimension within a theory of signification. They certainly modify the interface, but in doing so they highlight how the two dimensions of experience and thought (cf. Coquet 2007; Fabbri 2008) are inextricably intertwined in the interpretation of the world, because modifying one also transforms the other, thereby opening the doors to possibilities for interpreting the world.

Thus, emerges what Stefani (1998: 50) calls ‘sound-aesthetic conduct,’ which, as will be seen, retains not only passionate but also figurative and narrative traits, and which develops in the conjunction of rhythm, the effects of substances, and collective somatic response. Everything in this relational field revolves around a single predicate: dancing. Dancing is the foundational performative event of collective techno listening – it is what makes techno a successful musical phenomenon, what allows it to exist as such. To assert this is to overturn the common-sense assumption that one first listens to music and then, perhaps, dances to it: in techno, it is the practice of dancing that constitutes the music as a relevant object, and it is only within this practice that the agents who organize it allow themselves to be observed semiotically.

The articulations discussed below should not therefore be understood as distinct sensory channels, nor as phases arranged in a chronological sequence. Sound, movement, touch, heat, bodily density, spatial disposition, and the effects of substances are mutually pertinent within the same relational field, although their respective weight varies from one configuration to another. Repetition and succession isolate two contingent prevalences within this field: the former foregrounds iterative and reciprocal relations; the latter, continuous and thermokinetic modulation, and conduction. Their separation is analytical, not empirical. Figurative contagion is consequently one of the forms through which embodied listening becomes formalizable, not the principle to which its other sensory articulations can be reduced.

4. Repetition

The sememe of repetition introduces the operational translation at the level of the musical structure of the loop – that is, the circular and layered organization of techno (Agostini 1998) – which, in the common understanding, constitutes its defining feature. Understood as the generation of differences through iteration (Deleuze 1968), repetition does not merely define the sonic dimension of the event but, by the same logic, also makes its somatic-collective dimension analytically pertinent.

4.1. Figurative contagion

It was mentioned at the outset that techno dancing is not codified and that, consequently, there is no canon of aesthetically ‘correct’ execution, nor even a recognized and certified ‘wrong’ way to dance. Nevertheless, somatic figures regularly emerge from the seemingly indistinct mass of those dancing ‘unconventionally.’ Once they stand out as impressions, configurations, and effects of meaning for an interpreting instance, they may orient the movements of the people around them. The ethnographic material documents numerous instances of this:

At one point, F. makes a movement with her arms, swirling them around in a whirlwind. After a few seconds, S. next to her makes a similar movement, and then a boy behind them, who had both of them in his field of vision, performs an almost identical gesture. (Paris, 4/6/22)

I make a movement with my arms, like a beat, and out of the corner of my eye I notice that Ridan mimics it almost exactly. (Rome, 12/2/22)

A guy raises his hands to the sky and I feel it’s just the right thing to do; it fits perfectly as a movement, so I raise mine too. (Paris, 23/7/22)

Both Carmine and Joyce make a particular movement, difficult to describe, easier to put into practice; it’s a kind of gesture I hadn’t seen during the evening, yet evidently a guy standing nearby likes it so much that he joins in on this movement too. (Rome, 4/2/22)

In all these cases, the dynamic is the same: one body performs a movement, another picks it up, takes it on, modifies it slightly in the process, and in turn offers it as a configuration to another instance, which may in turn take it up if it finds it pleasurable. These are intersomatic and intersubjective translations, where repetition is not mechanical but – exactly as happens in the sound loop, which according to Szepanski (2021: 133) ‘must not always repeat the same thing, but repeats, when it succeeds as a track, the variation’ – generates difference in the act of repeating. One’s movement is not necessarily identical to another’s, but it is similar enough to be recognizable as

a reprise, and different enough to constitute a translation in its own right. It is in this minimal deviation, in this variation of the same, that the semiotic relevance of gestural repetition lies: not in the copy, but in repeating as variation.

The theoretically decisive point is that this emergence of figures does not pass through a code. No one teaches anyone the ‘right movement,’ no one corrects the ‘wrong movement’; yet the figures propagate, stabilize for a few seconds into shared patterns, dissolve, and make way for others, creating spaces of sociality and communication where neither words nor the body understood as an aesthetic object are decisive, but rather shared participation itself (Barbieri 2020). The analogy with the structure of techno music is, in this case, surprisingly precise: just as the sound loop produces momentary iterative territories that then dissolve into the next modulation, so the dance figures constitute momentary gestural territories, recognizable in their internal coherence and in their dissolution. Repetition, in both cases, is the principle through which a code is created without there being a code. Rather, contingent, local, temporary configurations emerge that do not pre-exist the practice but are produced within it and dissolve with it.

4.2. Rhythmic synchronization

If figurative contagion concerns the emergence of figures, rhythmic synchronization concerns the temporality that makes them possible. It has already been noted that the only aesthetic criterion that can actually be identified is keeping time: a minimal synchronization with the beat of the rhythm. Confirmation of this comes from one of the few interviews that explicitly addresses the issue of judging others’ dancing:

when you go dancing you get all embarrassed and you’re like “damn I suck at dancing” but it’s not dumb sure people feel awkward but honestly if you think about it eighty percent of people are shit at dancing I mean they’re off-beat that’s a thing I hate when someone’s right up against me and they’re off-beat oh my god I can’t stand them I can’t stand them (Danika)

Within the material considered here, the only form of ‘wrong’ performance that emerges is one that breaks synchronization: not one that proposes a figure outside the canon (there are no canons), but one that places itself outside the shared beat. The repetition of the sound beat, once enacted by bodies, produces a shared rhythm that is the basis of the socialization of the experience. This brings us back, by another route, to Stefani’s (1998) concept of rhythmic conduct: in collective participation in the same musical event, in experiencing the same rhythm as the basis of socialization, the sound-aesthetic figures that each person expresses are never purely individual, but are produced within a field of minimal synchronization that makes them recognizable and contagious.

It is precisely this synchronization that allows figurative contagion to function. Without a shared tempo, the movement of one body could not be taken up by another as a repetition, but would remain an isolated gesture. Synchronization, in other words, is not an accessory function of dance but its condition of collective possibility. It must be acknowledged, however, that rhythmic synchronization as a principle of the 'we' is not in itself specific to techno: it applies to tango, milonga, hora, stadium chants, and in general to any situation of collective listening to music. A particularly relevant feature of techno in this respect is the minimalism of its pulse: with melodic accents placed in the background, techno's iterated pulse constitutes a threshold for synchronization that is much lower than those required by other dance music. By comparison, participation in tango as a codified dance presupposes figurative and narrative skills – steps, the embrace, pauses, and melodic lines – whereas synchronization with techno's minimal beat can begin with little more than bodily movement in time with the repeated pulse. The collective actor of the dancefloor is thus a 'we' with a low threshold of codification, which does not require access to a shared choreographic skill but only the body's willingness to fall in step with the repeated beat. It is an interaction that occurs at a lower level of the code, and it is precisely this characteristic that produces a distinctly social music and, if we think in terms of dancing ability, a decidedly democratic one.

4.3. The solidary touch

The third articulation of repetition unfolds on the level of touch. Touch, however, does not constitute a homogeneous category on the dancefloor. At least three configurations become pertinent, distinguishable according to intentionality, reciprocity, and consent.

In the passageways of the dancefloor, contact is often collusive: it is generated accidentally by the movement of one body and undergone by another without reciprocal uptake. It is generally valued dysphorically, as a form of annoyance that introduces discontinuity into the continuity of the aesthetic experience:

I like it when I find the rhythm I close my eyes I just stand there I dance I'm not thinking about anything and then there are moments when like I don't know someone walks past me and shoves me for a sec it pisses me off (Danika)

Collusive touch must in turn be distinguished from non-consensual contact. In this case, unidirectionality is no longer accidental: unwanted touches, groping, and harassment constitute asymmetrical configurations in which one body actively seeks contact with another that has neither requested nor reciprocated it. This modality also belongs to the pragmatics of the dancefloor and is the object of the self-regulatory practices through which these scenes become politicized, particularly those aimed at distinguishing and preventing non-consensual contact.

The configuration relevant to repetition is different again. In the high-density zones of the dancefloor, particularly near the speakers or the DJ booth, touch can become reciprocal and iterative: two or more bodies take up one another's contact as if exchanging a caress, a brushing against one another.

As soon as I'm inside with Sandro, I really notice the shift in the situation near the speakers [...] But it is not just the density and heat: the radical proximity in which we have become entangled cannot but produce a whole network of points of contact around us. They are not collisions; it is more like our hips rubbing against one another, as if we were caressing each other in time with the music. (Bologna, 2/4/22)

But anyway [that MDMA] was so good that like it didn't bother me to be touched by other people actually at one point I went right up under the speakers and rubbing against the others felt damn good I was getting chills and I think the person next to me too even though I didn't know them eh I think the person next to me felt the same way because nobody pulled back from the rubbing (Karl)

Veronika took a quarter of an LSD tab and half an Ecstasy pill. [...] she tells me "I'm all shivers". [...] she tells me a guy in front of her had his jacket wrapped around his waist and she enjoyed being brushed by it, said it felt in sync with the music, and that all this heightened her shivers of pleasure. (Bologna, 15/3/25)

This caressing in time with the music suggests what we might call a formal homology between touch and the musical loop: what we could define as 'solidary touch,' precisely because it helps people emphasize the pleasure derived from the synchronization of related elements; it is structured like a sound loop because it repeats and because, in its repetition, it generates difference. Its reciprocity – the fact that both bodies touch and are touched within the same movement – gives this iterative structure a specifically intersomatic form. It is a mutual exchange in which touching increases the pleasure of both: a giving that, by taking nothing away from anyone, guides and directs the exercise of a sought-after reciprocity.

The relevance of the formal homology between touch and the loop becomes particularly evident by contrast with configurations in which tactile reciprocity does not stabilize. Collusive and non-consensual contacts are not failed versions of solidary touch: what distinguishes the latter is that contact is reciprocally taken up and repeated, acquiring an iterative form in which repetition generates variation. Reciprocity adds a specifically intersomatic dimension to this tactile loop, since both bodies touch and are touched within the same movement. This third articulation highlights

the semiotic modes through which repetition structures a dimension that exceeds simple formal iteration: it produces a tactile solidarity that redistributes eroticism across the entire bodily surface, undermining the hegemony of the specific zones traditionally targeted and partially liberating pleasure from hierarchical and genitalized sexualization (Petrilli 2020; see Garcia-Mispireta 2023).

5. Succession

The ‘succession’ operator, on the other hand, highlights what can be considered another particularly salient feature of collective techno listening: the uninterrupted flow of its unfolding. It takes the form of an unlimited continuum (Agostini 1998) and an expansion of the present, resulting in the ‘eradication of time’ (Salvatore 1998; cf. Wark 2023), according to the typical form of modulation whereby an element transforms without ceasing to be what it is (Paolucci 2010). Here too, this operator does not merely define the sonic dimension of the musical event but, by the same logic, also articulates the somatic-collective dimension.

5.1. The thermokinetic modulation

In the collective listening experience of techno, dancing is also pertinent as a practice in which movement, heat, bodily density, spatial proximity, and the effects of substances enter reciprocal determination. None of these elements acts as the origin of a linear sequence: depending on the contingent configuration, movement may make heat prevalent, heat may modify the way movement or the effects of substances are experienced, and these may in turn transform the modes of moving and approaching other bodies. The ethnographic material does not therefore document a stable chronology, but a thermokinetic network whose elements reinforce, inhibit, or redirect one another:

It’s really hot [...] I do the same to figure out why, and I’ll be just as baffled as them – I get their bewilderment: they don’t seem to be working. Yet it seems clear that they’re on [...] But it really is hot, so I decide to take off my shirt and tuck it into my jeans like a belt. I do this also because it’s keeping me from moving freely, especially from raising my arms: at first, I feel a bit “restricted” in my movement, but once I take it off I experience a total sense of freedom. (Paris, 27/7/22)

Almost all of us are moving toward the speakers and bit by bit we close ranks. The first effects are already showing: people getting closer and closer to them, and the heat starting to spread – whether from the drugs, the music, or the movement. If before it was unbearably cold, now you start seeing the first people peeling off one layer after another, layers they’d taken refuge in to

fight the (relatively) freezing temperatures that now seem to have practically vanished. [...] if before we were huddled around the fire to keep warm as the only way to survive while complaining about the cold, now while someone takes off jackets and then sweatshirts you hear 'oh, can't you feel how hot it is?' (Bologna, 17/9/22)

The difference is striking, way too obvious not to count as data: the closer you got to the speakers, the more the density of bodies had created a really pleasant microclimate of warmth, and people were moving almost in unison, like one single body, as if everyone was inhaling and exhaling at the same time. Then just stepping out of those tight clusters was enough to feel the temperature drop: the further away you got the less dense the space became, less density meant less heat, and less heat basically meant one obvious thing: people were moving much less. (Roma, 8/4/22)

These ethnographic accounts provide different points of access to the same relational network. In each case, a different relation becomes temporarily prevalent: the removal of clothing makes the relation between thermal perception and freedom of movement pertinent; bodily density brings heat and collective movement to the fore; spatial displacement makes their reciprocal modulation perceptible. These are not successive phases of a single process, but local configurations in which one relation acquires temporary prevalence and renders the others readable. *Thermokinesis* designates precisely this mutual determination among heat, movement, bodily density, spatial disposition, and the situated effects of substances.

The reference to thermodynamics has a heuristic rather than explanatory function. It does not establish an identity between physical and semiotic processes, nor does it reduce the dancefloor to a mechanical system. It makes a formal relation pertinent: variations in the movement and density of bodies correspond, within the observed configurations, to variations in the thermal state of the dancefloor, while the latter becomes one of the conditions through which movement, proximity, and the effects of substances are experienced. Musical succession and thermokinetic modulation are therefore not manifestations of the same process, but heterogeneous series made comparable by their continuous transformation.

5.2. Intersubjective conduction

Within this network, heat becomes intersubjectively perceptible through proximity and contact. Conduction will be used here not as a physiological explanation, but as a formalization of the way in which participants render the presence of other bodies pertinent to their own experience. Their movement, density, and warmth can become sought-after conditions for organizing the effects of music and substances, as in the following example:

Sandro [who had taken MDMA] makes his way into the crowd gathering at the side of the stage in front of a speaker. After a while I follow him [...]. He doesn't seem satisfied [...]. There's definitely also the crowd-and-density component. I mean, he physically slid himself in among the people who were there, people he didn't know at all, in an almost unconscious search for contact – because clearly he felt the high coming on but couldn't bring 'the effects into a system' the way he wanted. He went deep into the crowd precisely in search of warmth. (Bologna, 2/4/22)

The phrase 'bring the effects into a system' is semiotically valuable: it indicates that the effects, to acquire the expected and desired value, require a relational configuration capable of containing them, and that this configuration is also an effect of bodily density. For Sandro, the search for the crowd is not adequately explained by a generic taste for sociality. Within this configuration, the warmth and proximity of other bodies become necessary for organizing the effects of music and substances and for completing their pleasurable value. Conduction is therefore not taken as the physical cause of an otherwise individual experience, but as the form through which continuity among bodies, musical flow, and altered perception becomes pertinent. Thermal conduction, in other words, reveals itself here as semiotic conduction: continuity between one body and another becomes pertinent in a form homologous to the continuity between one musical track and another. The same ethnographic excerpt from Rome, 8/4/22 provides an even more expressive formulation of this continuity: the dense crowd perceived as 'a single body,' which 'breathed in and out at the same time' – a collective actor whose presence is reinforced through thermal and conductive synchronization.

It should be noted that conduction, like thermokinesis, appears here as a threshold-dependent process. The presence of others is not in itself sufficient: within the configurations observed, a certain degree of bodily density is required for proximity, movement, and heat to become mutually pertinent. Sandro and Carmine's accounts of the evening in Bologna on 12/3/22, where the venue was sparsely attended and cold, record converging complaints that the effects did not 'kick in' enough and that the evening 'could have been even cooler if the [venue] had been full.' Their accounts suggest that the attraction of the crowd cannot be reduced to a generic social preference for density: what becomes pertinent is a conductive threshold at which proximity, heat, movement, and the effects of substances acquire a different value. Below this threshold, the thermokinetic relation may fail to acquire the same intensity, while the configuration remains marked by coldness and relative immobility. Intersubjective conduction thus emerges as one of the conditions through which the thermokinetic configuration can acquire its full pleasurable value.

None of these elements, taken separately, can distinguish techno from related musical practices. Its specificity lies rather in the *intensity*, with which traits belonging more broadly to musical experience are magnified and made mutually pertinent: iterated pulse, uninterrupted succession, amplified vibration, prolonged movement, bodily density, and tactile proximity. Techno is not defined here by an exclusive property, but by an intensive configuration in which these relations can become reciprocally reinforcing.

6. Outcomes and consequences of sensory intensity

The configurations of dance described in the preceding pages show that the effects of meaning reconstructed on the dancefloor are distributed across a plurality of actants, including the DJ, the speakers, psychotropic substances, the bodies of the partygoers, and the music itself. None of them holds hegemony over the successful fulfillment of the pragmatic conditions of textual traversal. Together, these elements configure dance as a somatic translation within a distributed collective configuration. *Repetition* and *succession* organize the analysis of this network and make it possible to distinguish synchronization and touch as functions contributing to the distinctive sociality observed in these events.

While rhythmic synchronization operates through a low threshold of codification, touch makes bodily co-presence particularly salient within the context of an unconscious critique of safety mantras, where “proper distancing” in social settings and venues – even before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic – has redefined the experiential design of collective events. Listening to techno is a celebration of presence, not only one’s own presence in relation to the musical event, but also in relation to that of others.

One interviewee, describing what she calls an ‘out-of-body experience,’ adds significantly:

I really – yes, I felt it – I felt the music, I felt the people around me. [...] It was – it was beautiful, above all because I also got feedback from others who had gone through as much as I had (Joyce)

The ‘confirmation’ from others is what makes it possible as an experience of self. Joyce does not say that she had an intense experience and then realized that others were doing something similar; she says that the experience was what it was because she received confirmation from others.

It should be noted, however, that this configuration of the dancefloor as a field of presence is far from automatic or guaranteed. There are occasions when the

configuration becomes locally desynchronized, so that the same elements cease to reinforce one another euphorically and begin instead to interfere. Cassandra describes this rupture explicitly as ‘a sort of detachment of the music from the sensations of my body,’ as if her body ‘needed to move at a different rhythm from the one imposed by that kind of music.’

This is the case during an evening in Paris on 25/6/22, when a delayed onset of MDMA’s effects coincides as the venue becomes increasingly crowded. Rather than entering into mutual reinforcement, the elements of the configuration become locally desynchronized: the heat that for other partygoers signifies shared progression becomes suffocation for her; bodily density becomes pressure and a need to escape; close touch does not take the form of a repeated caress but of an unassimilable impact. The resulting discomfort is intense enough for Cassandra first to leave the dancefloor and, after briefly considering returning, the party altogether.

The configuration does not cease to exist; rather, the synchronization among its elements fails to stabilize euphorically. The same network of effects is reorganized dysphorically, precisely because of the intensity with which its elements are experienced. The outcomes of participation are therefore neither strictly subjective nor strictly objective, but intersubjective and contingent.

6.1. Re-subjection and anti-practice

This form of sociality corresponds to an equally specific form of subjectivation. The subject of dance in these events, though there is a wholly personal component, is not the Cartesian self of the modern tradition, capable of constituting itself through autonomous reflection on itself; nor is it its alter ego of postmodern dissolution, which would leave it disintegrated and devoid of constitutive capacity. Rather, it is a self that recognizes itself as such through an echo in others, reconstituting itself in the iterated reciprocity of shared movement. By withdrawing from aesthetic canons to which one must refer and conform, the body of those involved in the practice can free itself from the pressure of submitting to the judgment of others. The complex sensory intensity to which one is subjected brings forth a body where boundaries are extensively renegotiated. One final ethnographic excerpt is particularly illustrative:

Next to me two people show up who, after slowly drawing close to each other, cling together and start making out hard while dancing and grinding against me in waves. Not sure whether it’s the girl or the boy but it doesn’t bother me too much and evidently it doesn’t bother her/him/them either: it feels good. I don’t know if they had noticed my presence, maybe it wasn’t important to know whether that body existed or maybe this distinction just wasn’t in the range of their contingent sensations – it was all about grinding

between them and, every so often, against me, and their pleasure was probably also defined by grinding against this other body – mine. The music ends, they snap out of it and stop kissing. Then one last track starts up and they go right back to making out hard, and that's when I get it: they're kissing *with* the music, it becomes a third element that slips into mind and body, it's part of their kissing, it fuses them together and in turn fuses with them. Then, at one o'clock sharp, the music cuts off, leaving everyone a bit stunned. (Bologna, 17/9/22)

Here it becomes clear how the perceptual intensity to which one is subjected fosters a comprehensive fusion between subjectivity and the environment, giving rise to a new way of experiencing the world and engaging with it and the entities that inhabit it – and with them, a new way of conceiving of oneself. It is truly fitting to say: one dances to techno.

Thus, as perception is re-hierarchized and redistributed through extra-ordinary pathways of pleasure, the body emerges – less as a substance or image than as a complex of sensations. It is clear that such a high-density relational configuration provides fertile ground for the free experimentation of non-conforming subjectivities; this is precisely because the modulation of sensoriality allows for the development of an epistemic relationship through which one can gain new knowledge of oneself, the environment, and others within a strictly practical, contingent, and pleasure-oriented dimension. This constitutes a re-subjection formed through resonance and shared participation, blurring bodies in order to redefine their boundaries.

The suspension of gender/genres described here does not coincide with – and in fact opposes – the 'fluidity' proclaimed by the rhetoric of streaming platforms. As Muchitsch and Werner (2024) have shown, that rhetoric effectively functions as a neoliberal apparatus for the commodification of difference and the individuation of consumers, encoding social identities under the guise of transcending them. In contrast, the suspension described here is situated, contingent, and ethnographically attested: it is not a general overcoming of gender categories, but rather their localized non-relevance within the circumscribed field of the dancefloor.

The difference is one of both scale and direction: where the Spotify apparatus solidifies identities by producing increasingly granular categories, the rave apparatus de-substantializes them by suspending the very relevance of those categories. These are two opposing semiotic apparatuses, even though both deal with the relationship between musical genre and social identity; from this perspective, the practice of the dancefloor can be read as a theoretically invaluable limit-case that clarifies exactly what platforms do – and what they fail to do.

The dancefloor thus configures itself as a delimited, somewhat liminal space-time in which a different form of life (Fontanille 2015) is realized primarily as a local and contingent fact, rendering visible the non-necessity of what seems mandatory outside of it and making another possible sociality concrete. The subversion of the sensory hierarchy – the downsizing of the ‘hegemony of the visible’ that characterizes Western philosophy (Macnaghten and Urry 1998) in favor of a distributed thermokinetic tactility – is not a mere redistribution of the senses but a reconstitution of the very categories founded upon the sensible. It is within this articulation that the political dimension of participation becomes analytically tangible, as a meaning effect produced contingently within the network of relations described above.

But there is also a further outcome – this time concerning a dimension strictly tied to the amount of energy involved in this mode of dancing – which, by virtue of its low entry threshold, renders it almost a vast collective ritual. But what significance does this ritual hold? Alongside the strictly performative dimension of dance, the dancefloor hosts a dimension of pure ‘playful waste’ (Eco 2002) which, partly in relation to the use of psychotropic substances, restores the body to a non-utilitarian functionality.

Numerous ethnographic accounts highlight how the ability to roll a joint, tie a jacket, or even tie one’s shoes – the latter a gesture of quintessential simplicity – becomes impossible to perform due to the intensity of that *saisie esthétique* (aesthetic seizure) resulting from the network of effects we have attempted to describe. These instances are, for all intents and purposes, signs of the body’s withdrawal from the ordinary economy of its performance. In an era where the rationality of valorization across all domains of human sociality (Dardot and Laval 2013) maintains its hegemony – especially within Western societies – the liberation from a utilitarian scheme of movement (and of ‘work’ understood, drawing again from physics, as energy exchanged between two systems when displacement occurs through the action of a force) takes on a meaning that exceeds the strictly sensory aspect.

The withdrawal of the body and its energy from the ordinary economy of performance, technical incapacity as a sign of a body refusing to be an integral part of a productive system, and mutual aid as an ordinary way of being together: these three operations, taken together, form a situated counter-configuration to neoliberal rationality and define the contours of a collective refusal. This represents a shift in the semantic field and its axiologies. Just as the choreographic, proxemic, and gender/genre classifications are suspended by the configuration described in the preceding sections, so too is the matrix of valorization – the fundamental classificatory apparatus of the body in late-capitalist societies – suspended. Ultimately, it is within this suspension as a contingent effect that the political stakes of a re-subjection oriented toward the refusal of utilitarianism are played out.

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