

Simon Reynolds "low end theory"

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By applying philosophical rigour to sonic disruption, the German Mille Plateaux label has become a nexus for resistant musicians such as Oval and Alec Empire. In Frankfurt, Simon Reynolds meets label boss Achim Szepanski and makes the connections between Teutonic Hardcore, post-structuralist theory, digital disobedience and hypermodern jazz

Frankfurt is simultaneously Germany's financial capital and a longstanding centre of anti-capitalist theory. Most famously, it gave the world the 'Frankfurt School' of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer et al: neo-Marxist thinkers who fled Nazism and landed up in Southern California, where their eyes and ears were affronted by the kitsch outpourings of Hollywood's dream-factory. Today, the Frankfurt School is mostly remembered for its snooty attitude towards popular culture, which it regarded as the 20th century's opiate-of-the-people, a soul-degrading inferior to High Modernism. Adorno in particular has achieved a dubious immortality in the Cultural Studies world, as an Aunt Sally figure ritually bashed by academics as a prequel to their semiotic readings of 'anti-hegemonic resistance' encoded in Madonna videos and Star Trek.

There's no denying Adorno deserves derision for his infamously suspect comments about the "eunuch-like sound" of jazz, whose secret message was "give up your masculinity, let yourself be castrated... and you will be accepted into a fraternity which shares the mystery of impotence with you". But in other respects Adorno's critique of pop culture's role as safety valve and social control is not so easily shrugged off. Witness his remarks on the swing-inspired frenzies of the 'jitterbug': "Their ecstasy is without content...It has convulsive aspects reminiscent of St Vitus' dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals." 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 90s rave culture, which - from Happy Hardcore to Gabba to Goa trance - is now as rigidly ritualised and conservative as Heavy Metal.

The Frankfurt-based label Mille Plateaux shares something of Adorno's oppositional attitude to mass culture. For label boss Achim Szepanski, Germany's rave industry - which dominates the pop mainstream - is so institutionalised and regulated it verges on the totalitarian. Adorno-style, he psychoanalyses Ecstasy culture as "a metonymic search for mother-substitutes - Ecstasy can be your new mommy". Alec Empire, a Mille Plateaux solo artist and prime mover in his own Berlin-based anti-rave scene Digital Hardcore, is more blunt: "Rave is dead, it's boring. House is disco and Techno is Progressive rock." As for Oval, Mille Plateaux's 'star act', when asked about their relationship to Techno, they seem astonished by the question. "Relationship?!" they reply.

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Influenced by post-structuralist theory and named after a gargantuan tract by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Mille Plateaux release deconstruction Electronica. Situating their activity both within and against the genre conventions of post-rave styles like Intelligent Techno, House, Jungle and TripHop, Mille Plateaux identify these musics' premature closures and seize their missed opportunities. The results may not offer the easy satisfactions of less ambitious Techno labels/auteurs, but they do constitute the most consistently stimulating catalogue in the post-rave universe.

One January weekend, I met Szepanski at his Frankfurt apartment, which doubles as HQ for his four labels (Mille Plateaux, Force Inc, Riot Beats and Force Inc USA), and is located in the city's sleazy equivalent to King's Cross (handy for trains, lots of junkies and hookers). Having read his Deleuze-style press releases (lots of references to "sound-streams" and "disjunctivesingularities") and conducted a theory-dense e-mail conversation, I'm expecting a rather severe individual. But over the course of the weekend, Achim reveals some unexpected sides to his character: a dry sense of humour, a soft spot for plastic pop (he owns CDs by TLC and Kylie Minogue) and an awesome talent for piss-artistry.

Plagued by a mystery ailment, he spends most of Saturday sipping homeopathic remedies and

complaining that he's too ill to undertake a planned excursion to see Chicago House DJ and Force Inc artist Gene Farris spin at a club in nearby Mainz. At midnight, he decided he's just about up to it. For the first five hours, Achim's spirits remain low, despite an alcohol intake rate of three beers to my one. But by 6am and beer number 12, Achim is flailing on the dancefloor, enraptured by Farris's trippy set. Every few minutes, he accosts someone to blearily proclaim: "Gene Farris is the best House DJ in the world. I don't care, I will tell anyone - Josh Wink, Laurent Garnier - to their face: Farris is the best."

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Now aged 35, Szepanski got involved in student politics in the radical, post-1968 climate of the mid-70s. He read Marx, flirted with Maoism, protested about conditions in the German prison system. Later in the decade he immersed himself in the post-punk experimentalist scene alongside the likes of DAF, playing in the Industrial group P16D4. In the 80s he went back to college, watched the Left die and got very depressed, consoling himself with alcohol and the misanthropic philosophy of Cioran.

Two late 80s breakthroughs pulled him out of the mire: his encounter with the post-structuralist thought of Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, et al, and his excitement about HipHop and House. While still working on a doctorate about Foucault, he started the first DJ-orientated record store in Frankfurt and founded the Blackout label. By the early 90s Szepanski was tripping out to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism And Schizophrenia*, a colossal tome that Foucault hailed as "an introduction to the non-fascist life".

For Achim, the experience was revelatory and galvanising: Deleuze and Guattari's theories showed him "that you don't have to be negative or sad if you want to be militant, even if what you fight against is very bad. The Frankfurt School and Marxism has a very linear interpretation of history and a totalising view of society, whereas Deleuze and Guattari say that society is more than just the economy and the state, it's a multitude of sub-systems and local struggles."

From this notion, Achim conceived the strategy of context-based subversion which informs his labels: hard Techno and House with Force Inc, Electronica with Mille Plateaux, Jungle with Riot Beats, TripHop with the Electric Ladyland compilations. These interventions are somewhere between parody and riposte, demonstrating by deed not discourse what these genres could really be like if they lived up to or exceeded their accompanying 'progressive' rhetoric.

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Founded in 1991, Force Inc was initially influenced by Detroit renegades Underground Resistance; not just sonically, but by "their whole anti-corporate, anti-commodification of dance stance". In its first year, Force Inc's neo-Detroit/nouveau Acid sound had a lot of impact. At the same time, the label was involved in the underground party scene, organising "guerilla events at strange locations, without all the tricks and special effects that you get at normal discos". But in 1992, as the Acid revival took off and trance tedium took over, Force Inc "made a radical break", towards a breakbeat-oriented Hardcore that was a weird parallel to the proto-Jungle emerging in Britain. Szepanski and Force Inc deserve respect for recognising so precociously the radicalism of the then universally deplored 'Ardkore. They even loved the much derided accelerated 'squeaky voice' tracks that ruled in 1992.

"Maybe it was just our peculiar warped interpretation, but the sped-up vocals sounded like a serious attempt to deconstruct some of the ideologies of pop music. One dimension to this was using voices like instruments or noise, destroying the pop ideology that says that the voice is the expression of the human subject."

And so Force Inc embarked upon its own "abstract Industrial take on UK breakbeat", mashing together harsh sonorities and angelic samples over ultra-fast breakbeats, as on Biochip C's marvellous "Hells Bells", available on the recent Force Inc anthology *Rauschen 10*. Achim also licensed UK tracks such as NRG's super-sentimental "I Need Your Lovin'" and material by Force Mass Motion. "We did some great parties, our DJ friend Sasha playing much faster than the English DJs, at 200 bpm, using an altered Technics [deck] cranked up to +40. At this velocity, it was very abstract, coming at you like a sound wall. It worked good for us but nobody else! We were very isolated in Germany."

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In 1993-94 Szepanski watched aghast as rave went overground in Germany, with "the return of melody, New Age elements, insistently kitsch harmonies and timbres". With this degeneration of the underground sound came the consolidation of a German rave establishment, centred around the party organisation Mayday and its record label Low Spirit, acts such as Westbam and Marusha, and the music channel Viva TV. The charts were swamped with Low Spirit pop-Tekno smashes such as "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" and "Tears Don't Lie", based on tunes from musicals or German folk music. And the alleged 'alternative' to this dreck was moribund, middlebrow Electro-Trance music, as represented by Frankfurt's own Sven Vath and his Harthouse label.

For Achim, what happened to German rave illustrated Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of "deterritorialisation" and "reterritorialisation". Deterritorialisation is when a culture gets all fluxed up - punk, early rave, Jungle - resulting in a breakthrough into new aesthetic, social and cognitive spaces. Reterritorialisation is the inevitable stabilisation of chaos into a new order: the internal emergence of style codes and orthodoxies, the external co-optation of subcultural energy by the leisure industry. Szepanski has a groovy German word for what rave, once so liberating, turned into: 'Freizeitknast', a 'pleasure-prison'. Regulated experiences, punctual rapture, predictable music: "Boring!" sneers Achim.

Would he go so far as to describe a kind of aesthetic fascism at work in rave culture? "The techniques of mass-mobilisation and crowd-consciousness have similarities to fascism. Fascism was mobilising people for the war-machines, rave is mobilising people for pleasure-machines".

In 1994 Achim started Mille Plateaux. Just as Force Inc worked with and against the demands of the dancefloor, Mille Plateaux is a kind of answer to 'electronic listening music' and the Ambient boom. Achim sees the label's output as the musical praxis to Deleuzian theory, fleshing out concepts such as the rhizome (a network of stems that are laterally connected), which is opposed to hierarchical root-systems (such as those found in trees). In music, 'rhizomatic' equates with the Eno/dub idea of a democracy of sounds, a dismantling of the normal ranking of instruments in the mix (usually privileging the voice or lead guitar). Instead, says Achim, there's a "synthesisation of heterogenous sounds and material through a kind of composition that holds the sound elements together without them losing their heterogeneity". Anticipated by the fractal funk and chaos-theorems of Can and early 70s Miles Davis (the 'nobody solos, everybody solos' principle), rhizomatic music today takes the form of DJ cut 'n' mix (at its rare, daring best), avant garde HipHop and post-rock. And the output of Mille Plateaux, of course.

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Another key Deleuze and Guattari trait shared by Mille Plateaux is an interest in schizophrenic consciousness. Achim talks of admiring darkside Hardcore for its "paranoia", and mourns the way Jungle traded its vital madness for "serious" musicality. "Since the 50s, in musique concrete, in Industrial music, in Techno, one heard diverse noises, screaming, creaking, hissing - all noises one related more to madness," he explains. "Echo-effects allow sound hallucinations to occur, they delocalise the perception apparatus, allowing forms of perception to emerge that one had previously attributed to lunatics or schizophrenics." For Achim, as for Deleuze and Guattari, such sensory disorientation is valuable, acting as a deconstruction of 'subjectivity'.

Last year Szepanski contacted Deleuze himself, sending material by Oval and other Mille artists, and asking if he'd write an essay for Achim's planned anthology of techno theory, Maschinelle Strategeme. The great man wrote back saying he couldn't do it, but gave his blessing to the label, and said that he particularly dug Oval. "He even wrote about specific tracks!" exclaims Achim. "Later, the German publisher of A Thousand Plateaus told us this was really quite unusual, to get such a letter."

Not long afterwards, the terminally ill, 70 year old Deleuze committed suicide. Szepanski immediately organised the double CD tribute In Memoriam Gilles Deleuze. Featuring contributions from American post-rockers Rome and Trans Am, DJ-philosopher Spooky, a gaggle of Achim's old allies in the European experimental music scene, and all the usual Mille Plateaux-affiliated suspects (Oval, Mouse On Mars, Cristian Vogel, Ian Pooley, Scanner, Gas, etc), In Memoriam is probably the best thing the label has put out yet. Stand-out tracks include the electroacoustic

jiggery-pokery of Alec Empire's "Bon Voyage", the musique concrete Jungle of Christophe Charles's "Undirections/Continuum", and Rome's Cluster-like drone-mosaic "Intermodal".

The ubiquitous Jim O'Rourke also appears, and is working on a sort of O'Rourke versus Mille Plateaux remix project, using the entire Mille catalogue as source material. Techno Animal may also be doing a remix project based around the 'versus' concept, Techno Animal Versus Reality, which will involve five guest collaborators, material will be shuttled back and forth between each artist and the group, eventually resulting in ten versions of five tracks. And then there's Oval, who are currently scheming their way towards a sort of Listener versus Oval scenario: a digital authoring system that will enable the punter to make their own Oval records.

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Interviewing Oval is, shall we say, challenging. Their methods are obscure, their theory fabulously rarefied, their utterances marinated in irony. All that can be safely said is that Oval's 'music' - however irrelevant aesthetics may be to the trio - offers an uncanny, seductive beauty of treacherous surfaces and labyrinthine recesses.

Ironically, given Oval's polemical engagement with digital culture, my encounter with the trio takes place in one of Frankfurt's new cyber-cafes. Immediately there are communication problems. Humble enquiries about backgrounds and influences are met with rolling of the eyes, sniggers, and "Next question!" Tentative characterisations of their activity are treated as a reduction or misrepresentation of the Oval project. So what are they trying to do?

Put as simply as possible, Oval is "not so much about music as the technical implementation of notions of music," says Markus Popp. "It's an effort in sound-design rather than music with a capital M. The main content of our effort is to have an audible user-interface."

In nuts and bolts terms, this means fucking with the hardware and software that organises and enables today's post-rave Electronica. Most critical of these technologies is MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), which allows different pieces of equipment to be co-ordinated like the players in a group, or instrumental 'voices' in an orchestra. For Oval, this is precisely the problem. "MIDI is basically a music-metaphor in itself, one that's so deplorably dated. It's so constraining in every way, you have to go beyond these protocols."

Despite, or rather because of, this technology's reliance on "traditional music syntax and semantics", Oval deliberately use the set-up, because their real interest is in standardisation. Their first Mille Plateaux release Systemisch, explains Sebastian Oschatz, "was done with a very cheap MIDI set-up and a borrowed copy of Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient Works Vol II." This later turns out to be an Oval in-joke; apparently, Richard James is one of many artists who have claimed that Systemisch was based on their material. "That album is composed of material that is really old, and it got edited, layered and recombined so many times, it's stupid to ask whose music is this?" says Popp. "That is the only truly negligible aspect in our music. Most of the CDs we used were rented, and often they didn't have their covers!"

Getting back to MIDI or a sampler/sequencer software such as Cubase (the power tool of choice for the post-rave generation), Popp complains that, "There is so much determinism within these programs, working with them involves so much compliance to principles that are highly critical. In a social context these technologies are mostly used in a controlling way: monitoring the workplace, workplace efficiency, optimising the user-interface. On-line newsgroups are full of people who e-mail back to the manufacturers saying, 'We'll need this, change that', and all of this keeps them in front of their computers even longer. Our way of dealing with this is to overcome the manufacturer's distinction between 'features' and 'bugs'.

Which brings us to the famous Oval deployment of deliberately damaged CDs to generate the raw material of their music: the glitches, skips and distressed cyber-muzik that makes Systemisch and its sequel 94 Diskont so ear-boggling. The CD-thang is another 'reduction' that irks Oval: "We did use CDs, but that is neglectable, there are so many other things we could have used...The important point was that the CD player has no distinction if it's an error or a proper part of the recording, it's just doing calculations, algorithms."

This recalls Hendrix's aestheticisation of feedback, a 'bug' or improper effect immanent in the

electric guitar but hitherto unexploited. Oval reject terms like 'sabotage' to describe the CD treatments and the more esoteric forms of algorithmic mischief they wreak within hardware. But they do use the word "disobedience", which also has a frisson of subversion, and talk, deconstruction-style, of engaging in a kind of non-antagonistic dialogue with corporate digital culture: Sony, IBM, Microsoft, et al.

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Contradictions abound in Oval's own rhetoric. They speak in almost punk 'anyone-can-do-it' terms of deliberately keeping their activity at the "lowest entry-level", of not wanting "to convey an image of arcane technology and years of expert study in digital signal processing and programming". Yet their discourse is often absurdly forbidding and user-unfriendly. Then there's the way they deny any musical intentions, only to later come close to characterising their project as an enrichment of music. They talk of not wanting to produce a merely "predictable outcome" of the hardware and software, of wishing to "offensively suggest" the existence of soundworlds "from 'outside' the digital domain", of having invented a "completely new music-paradigm".

Says Popp, "Another aspect of what we wanted to achieve musically is to generate a new kind of perception. In the beginning, some labels sent back the demo tapes because they said there's no music on it!" In that respect, Oval's audio-mazes induce a 'perceptual dissonance' akin to the Op Art of Bridget Riley, or the perspectival chaos of Escher. Sebastian adds: "It works the other way: obvious mis-pressings on the albums, or DAT drop-outs on certain compilation tracks, don't get spotted during the production process!"

Future Oval projects include some kind of EP for Mille Plateaux; the US release of Systemisch and Diskont, accompanied by "exclusive material, possibly predating Systemisch", via the ultra-cool label Table Of The Elements; and an 'interactive' product designed in collaboration with British computer boffin Richard Ross.