

Sound and the Playful Body

“Play is everywhere where boredom can undo what enthusiastic engagement brought together”

Paul Valéry¹

0. FUN FAIRS: *chronotopes, and the search for an enchanted medium*

In *Man, Play, and Games* Roger Caillois mentions how the case of bumper cars in amusement parks or fun fairs illustrates what differentiates a state of play from serious activity. Free, within the confines of the ride, to gratuitously experiment with the affordances of “driving”, players find themselves “pursuing other vehicles, crashing into each other, blocking each other’s way, endlessly provoking pseudo-accidents without any damage or victims, and doing precisely and until they are fed up that which, in reality, would be most strictly prohibited by the rules”. Using bumper cars as a template, one can start to imagine how everyday activities in general can be disarticulated and reassembled in the context of play. What does it take for play to emerge from a banal situation? A few people gather to draw a “magic circle” (to use Johan Huizinga’s felicitous term) in order to circumscribe a region of space and time and within its confines decide to enact a new protocol to govern all their interactions with each other and with their material environment. For a few hours, life can be re-invented, made to stand on its head, released from the obligation of “busyness”. The playful experience inevitably decays— fairgoers exit the fair nervous and satiated, boredom creeping in as a vague question of “this is it?” and a sense that somehow, the adventure was just beginning when it already ended. Paradoxically, this unsettledness is accompanied by a feeling of relief as the world goes back to normal, returned to them in the same state it was in when they left it. At the borders of play, surfeit and desire chase each other’s tails: the lack of consequences incurred by the fun time is also the ticket back to the fair.

¹ Le jeu est là où “l’ennui peut délier ce que l’entrain avait lié”. From Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes*

In this sense, the significance and reality of play is in the friction between the enchanted and the disenchanting situation. The playful experience re-imagines a world from the given material conditions, setting the parameters whereby playspace and playtime can pop out of ordinary life on a purely contingent and ephemeral basis. Although Callois sees in the circle of play a boxed-off utopia regimented by arbitrary rules, Huizinga's magic circle can perhaps be more interestingly interpreted in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. The chronotope is a concrete (literary) imaginary created from a matrix of "spatial and temporal indicators [that] are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole"². Within the electric reality of the chronotope, "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history"³. Similarly, the enchantment of play corresponds to the phenomenon whereby ordinary space and time coagulate into a phantom topos with a divergent set of spatial and temporal characteristics, permitting a ghostly layering of possibility onto the real. Unlike the chronotope, however, this enchantment has a time limit. When the fairgrounds are lit up, any door can open up onto a haunted house, a hall of deforming mirrors, a frightening chimera. When the last visitor has left, nothing remains of the fair – in its place is an amalgamation of nondescript infrastructure.

Chronotopes have been chiefly discussed through their original context as literary images – in fact, as representations of themselves in literature. One of Bakhtin's examples, the chronotope of "the road" – that mythical space that threads through the epic hero's adventures and anchors his temporality – achieves its concreteness in metaphor. Space and time embodied, sensorial and sensual, are outside the scope of the Bakhtinian chronotope. In order to design a chronotopic enchantment, a specific and situated arrangement of play, one needs a *medium* with which to sculpt space, time, and the interactions between the players. In turn this hypothetical medium should be particularly suited to *conjuring* the magic circle, meaning it should be equally capable of bringing the spirit of play into being out of thin air and of vanishing it altogether. Such a medium must be a *transducer* of unexpected and unstable meanings. Coined by French physiologist Charles Richet in 1905, ectoplasm is a theoretical substance that pours out from the bodily orifices of

² p. 184, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, edited by Pam Morris, Oxford University Press, 1994

³ *ibid*

(spiritual) mediums and that imbues conjured spirits with a temporary corporeality. I will argue that sound, as a medium/medium that conveys both sense and vibration – in fact materializing sense as a minute and swiftly decaying vibration – has an ectoplasmic quality that intersects felicitously with the design of playtime, playspace, and playful subjectivities. How can sound, in its specificity as sensorial input, embody play? What are the strategies by which sound conjures the magic circle and the playful body within it? By deploying certain sono-ectoplasmic tactics, a playful experience can bring both ourselves and the world into sharper focus and alert us to the possibilities enfolded in (our own, our environment's) materiality. In a chronotope fabricated from sound, the visitor perceives time and space as experimental and exploratory – their environment contains many more textures, their moments are sharper and more situated. Also, to be a playful body or to play with other bodies expresses a mode of (existential) *engagement* with the world and with others that is by turns enjoyment, fun, boredom, desire, nostalgia... notes and harmonies of mood that resonate in sound.

I. THE DESIRE TO PLAY: *ectoplasmic properties of sound and the voice*

Caillouis exhumes many meanings from the French “*jeu*”, which principally refers to play/game but can also signify the latitude of movement that exists between elements that constitute a complex whole. For example, *un jeu d'orgue*, *un jeu de voiles* – the play of the pipes in a church organ, the play of wind in the sails of a ship. Without the “play” at work in the organs of these materials, they could produce neither music nor motion. On the same plane, *le jeu d'un acteur* – the playing of the performer is the leverage the performer finds in herself to spring into someone or something else, to cross the distance that separates her from those she plays, the one she is enacting and her audience. Stretching or contracting that distance, which is both minute (the trembling of subjectivity within the performer's body) and incalculable (the zone of no-contact that separates one body from another), is the business of the performer's voice.

The voice possesses certain ectoplasmic virtues. It carries the material imprint of the individual spirit that speaks or sings through it, what Roland Barthes calls the “grain of the voice”. According to Barthes, the grain of the voice neither produces nor transmits the speaker's subjectivity: it “is not personal: it expresses nothing about the

singer, about his soul”. “...And at the same time it is individual”⁴: vibrating with the speaker’s body, the voice is the corporeal index of its possessor, communicating nothing, simply manifesting the ineffable specificity of the subject. Maddeningly phantom, the voice is a signifier without a signified, an undulating half-presence. This quality of unansweredness in the voice (the absent subject cannot be an interlocutor) strangely enhances its potency as a form of communication. If by communication we do not mean a passing on of significant content between subjects, but a communion between (spiritual) bodies, made possible by the physical contiguity that is generated when sound travels through air (in waves of molecules and feeling). Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen’s Throat* gives an account of this, the voice’s special mode of corporeal address. Speaking from the closeted place of intimacy in the queer subject, Koestenbaum narrates the effects of the diva’s song: “her voice enters me, makes me a “me”, an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered. The singer, through osmosis, passes through the self’s porous membrane, and discredits the fiction that bodies are separate, bounded packages.”⁵ Transducer, super-conductive element (Susan Douglas does not omit the history of early radio as a technological “medium” and its connection with the imaginary of spiritism): the voice permits ghostly passage between the walls of skins and subjects, revealing “intersubjectivity” for what it is, not a conversation between minds but a touching between bodies. Because the voice does not signify, the bodies it merges remain question marks, animated by unidentifiable spirits. Koestenbaum’s opera queen takes the diva’s voice into himself, but he also brings into himself an unanswered question, the mystery of her subjectivity that carves out hollow spaces within his interiority. Who is this other, this absence held so near?

The vibrating traces of the diva’s body set the opera queen’s own subjectivity in motion. Within a closeted identity there is now room for play – play between the elements of a complex system that is not a closed organism. The magic circle formed by the diva and the queen, that binds the performer to her audience in communion is not a meeting of individual minds or bodies but an agencing of imaginary parts. “I spent much of my childhood trying to distinguish identification from desire”⁶: Koestenbaum remembers an introspective exploration that is as much a discovery of

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice*, p.270

⁵ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Voice*, Da Capo Press, 1993, p.43

⁶ *ibid*, p.18

object-ivity as it is of subjectivity. He is looking upon himself as object, as a vessel where her voice finds its home, and replaces himself with a mysterious subject, the grain of her voice. Intersubjectivity realizes itself as an imaginary body materialized by the sound that permeates both the diva and the queen. At the same time, the – *inter* in intersubjectivity points to the unbreachable distance at work in the (sonic) contiguity of performer and audience – in between, from here to there. The communion is realized only in desire, not in understanding. The grain of the voice has (e)motion precisely because performer and audience are in a state of ignorance towards each other. They function together by virtue of the fact that they intersect precisely at an oblique angle, like cogs generating force by glancing off each other's teeth. The queen collects the rumors and publicity attached to his diva, weaving a myth around her subjectivity that is more efficacious the more the actual subject is mystified. The desire for a spectral other animates the mechanism of the voice. Phantom bodies and fantasies of self freely and felicitously interlock to create *le jeu de l'acteur* – the play of the performer, which always includes the play of the listener, like two friends throwing a ball back and forth or trapeze artists catching each other in mid-flight. The only rule binding them in play is the injunction to answer to each other, the movement of rapprochement that founds all interactions, that is desire to interact.

In this sense, play is anti-epistemological – understanding is not the goal of the game – and completely kinetic. Play sets up parameters for things to happen. The only point of play is happening, the minute by minute collision of initial (spatial and temporal) conditions. The sonic matrix of the voice, the performer and the audience constitutes a chronotope, a coalescence of moment and locale that seems to us both a revelation or acceleration of life, and an enchanted occurrence detached from life as we know it. The diva sings; her voice issuing a living body on a stage or in the fetichized body of a record “...was exactly like unlocking a prison door. The voice poured into me, and from that moment it became the one thing I cared to live for. All the barriers built up by convention and habit seemed to shrivel, and I felt in those few moments a free and purposeful individual”.⁷ The listener and his diva create this freedom together, for each other, inaugurating a new type of sociality not anticipated by the parameters of ordinary interactions. Their mutually enabled liberation, of

⁷ *ibid*, p.15. attributed to fictional opera fan Elsie de Haven.

course, is transient, lasting for the duration of the song. In the end, nothing is produced but the memory or imagination of an experience, an eruption of the what-could-have-been in the airless space of the present. Ghostly indeed, play is always most real in the mode of the conditional.

Thinking about the voice and the tripartite dialogue between its ectoplasmic properties and the floating corporeal consciousness of performer and listener constitutes an initial step in theorizing playful sound design. Voice brings us the idea of play by giving us a desire for it. From the architecture of ricochet at work in a whispering gallery to the sampled, Vocodered chorus of a dance track, voice is the starting condition of (sonic) play – it introduces the players by throwing them into an unexpected and instantaneous relation with each other. Furthermore, by allowing the players to be corporeally present to each other without necessarily sharing a physical space, voice anchors (im)possibility in the material world, expanding the potential for play to interrupt and affect our day to day. In the next section I will examine how sound not only conjures the players (out of thin air), but in many ways erases the distinction between players and playspace, tightening the weave of our chronotope and opening up new layers of magic circle.

II. PLAYSOURCE: *hypermateriality, noise, and the notion of ambience*

In the *Architectural Uncanny* Anthony Vidler mentions one of Freud's cases in which a couple kept imagining that the painted crocodiles that decorated their living room table came to life and started crawling all over their house. Vidler links this Crocodile Dream to the surrealist idea of "hypermateriality", the sense of uncanny aliveness of objects and textures that results from a (willful or not) derangement of perception that brings what ordinarily constitutes the background of life – in this case, literally the furniture – into the fore. To consider a given space and all its components in a hypermaterial way is to experience one's environment as the wave function of multiple imaginary spaces, any of which is likely to materialize and suddenly come to notice. The crocodiles are both animate and inanimate, both harmlessly decorative and disturbingly agitated. The effect of ambient music, or music designed as "furniture" (to go back to Eric Satie's original term) and used for background listening, mirrors the hypermaterial consciousness by allowing the

listener to move back and forth between attentiveness and inattentiveness, leaving it to her to switch her environment on or off. In an ambient soundscape, any protuberance in the surface of sound can briefly illuminate a meaningful topology that quickly becomes reabsorbed in the continuum of the listener's disinterest.

This fluid movement between engagement and disengagement, between participatory readiness and boredom, offers a sonic interpretation of play as a practice always problematically situated on the line that separates the enchanted space of the magic circle from the background of ordinary activity. The listener of ambient music is not unlike the player of an alternate reality game, a genre that uses multiple media platforms, including urban space, to lead a player through a series of adventures that take place in "real life". ARGs are often designed to trouble the distinction between the game space and real space, between the activity of the game and the activity of the everyday. Ambience similarly creates a world that is as elusive as it is immersive: it can always be equally absent or all-involving, depending on the listener's degree of interaction with the music. The magic circle is conjured by the listener/player's *attitude* towards her environment – a minute oscillation of consciousness that suffices to summon or dismiss the enchantment of play.

Ambient music inherits the avant-garde notion that sound can be treated as a modality of space, a perspective that makes it particularly suitable for the design of total (sensorially immersive) environments. Officially defined by Brian Eno in the 1970s with his *Music for Airports*, ambience has its roots in an earlier moment in the history of sound art that corresponds to a paradigmatic shift instigated by John Cage's examination of the "dimensional" qualities of sound, upturning the traditional (Western) artistic practice of composing music as a sequential integration of discrete units within a tonal system. In his manifesto for the *Future of Music*, Cage argues for a new type of musical composition in which timbre and beat take precedence over tone and harmony, redefining sound in sensorial rather than analytical terms. From there, it takes the subsequent spatial turn in sound art to think of these sonorous attributes as texture and *relief*, a synesthetic conversion that establishes a rapprochement between sound and sculpture (Bernd Schultze) and sculpture's affinity with both the tactile and the visual. This shift in terminology has profound experiential repercussions: the precision and neatness of a harmonic system is displaced by the fluid contiguity of the sonic landscape. John Cage describes this new tendency towards an indefinite corporeality – sound manifesting itself as shifting

regions of affect – in a commentary on the work of Fluxus sound artist La Monte Young: “...after five minutes [of listening to the piece] I discover that what I have all along been thinking was the same thing is not the same thing after all, but full of variety. I find his work remarkable almost in the same sense that the change in experience of seeing is when you look through the microscope”.⁸ The result of this “microscopic” perspective is a new phenomenological artifact that maps space as a terrain of feeling. Any *detail* of the ambient surface can become a porthole into a world, a point of view that is thrilling in its estrangement from our habitual subjectivity. The ambient listener adopts an uncanny, *thingly* objectivity. Like in the *Crocodile Dream*, the inanimate appears to be endowed with bodies: sound-objects, material impressions come to life like automata, troubling us with an unsuspected agency. The environment appears to initiate a rapport with its inhabitants, who find themselves suddenly participants in a menagerie of phenomena.

Although a typical ambient experience takes place in either a sound art or club context (Alan Light makes an arguably specious effort to make an ontological distinction between these contexts on the basis of their respective modes of commercialization)⁹, the ambient possibilities and uses of sound can be extended to playful design. Play and ambience converge most fruitfully within hybrid practices that employ strategies of the art scene to devise new forms of entertainment. Often these involve coordinating sound with other stimuli to produce powerful hypermaterial effects. Operating in an undefinable subcultural zone of the L.A. music scene, Performer Kawaiietly Please almost accidentally finds her audience amongst fans of noise art and hardcore techno. Her music, however, takes the backseat to her “show” during live performances, which use a barrage of static, distortion, beats and bleeps to trigger what can more appropriately be dubbed a happening. She begins the event by walking a circle around the dance floor with her microphone pointed sonar-fashion towards corners and walls, using it to capture the volume of the room and then spit back a new space of sonic feedback. Once the audience is imprisoned in this cage of noise, she offers them tactile fodder in the form of stuffed animals, cables and/or fake blood: so many fetishes, uncanny props to play the part of prey, entrails and

⁸ Douglas Kahn: *Noise, Water, Meat: a history of sound in the arts*, p.230, The MIT Press, 2001

⁹ Alan Light, *Sound Art. Origins, Development and Ambiguities from Organized Sound* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

bodily fluids. Provoked by the build-up in volume, the audience seizes the props and starts to use them. Simple games like throwing ball, tug-o-war and roughhousing spontaneously emerge from the chaos of dislocated sociality. Synesthesia becomes an integral part of the experience. As the “show” escalates into a frenzy of ripping and eviscerating, the stuffed animals becoming increasingly sound-like – “objectiles” to reprise DJ Spooky’s characterization of the mix – in an environment that correspondingly tears at the inner ear.

The resulting maelstrom hides the fact that Kawaiietly Please has used noise very effectively in order to *shape a situation*, sound playing the role of the catalyst in a chain reaction that ends in the formation of a primeval playspace. Her show is actually best understood as a kind of ludic Big Bang from which properties of play can be traced like so many elementary particles. Space and time congeal into a dense, hot chronotope – for the audience, the fifteen minutes seem accelerated, as the velocity of the projectiles transforms a nondescript room into an agent of aggression. Any distinction between the bodies of the audience, the performer and the inanimate participants dissolves in a series of collisions. Interaction regresses (or progresses) to what Caillois calls “padaia”, the fundamental drive of play, “that elementary need for agitation and noise that first appears as an impulsion to touch everything, to seize, to taste, to smell, to pick up and then almost instantaneously abandon any object within reach”. As such, the magic circle becomes elegantly reducible to the effectiveness of this (literally and figuratively) noisy atmosphere, which appears to essentially be a product of the players’/the audience’s reaction to sonic immersion. Evidently, a wall of noise differs significantly from a notion of ambient immersion understood as “music that is as ignorable as it is interesting” (Eno). However, to elaborate on Christoph Cox’s argument that noise constitutes a necessary background to consciousness¹⁰, ambience itself is a species of noise, in the sense that experiencing an ambient soundscape principally involves teasing signal and signification from an unintelligible unconscious. In the case of Kawaiietly Please’s performance art, the part of signal that freely emerges and detaches itself from the background of noise is not music but the activity and practice of play. Kawaiietly Please’s show is ambient to the degree that it is (contrarily to its default label) not a spectacle but a context of interactions.

¹⁰ Christoph Cox, *Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious*, *ibid.*

Continuing with this situationist line of the thought, one can see how a playful relationship between ambience and noise raises the interesting question of the political reverberations that attach themselves to the concept of *playspace*. To make noise is to interrupt the hierarchical, systematic space of authority. Understanding space itself in a Lefevrian context as a producer of social relationships and cultural meaning implies that ambience, which foregrounds the spatial properties and uses of sound, is a idea that invites us to consider the ways in which sound can challenge existing structures of sociality. Playspace, as the context that makes possible the free emergence of new forms of interactivity, is potentially one of the sites in which these structures can be disarticulated and reinvented. The sonically militant collective Ultra-Red frames this idea of “noisy” ambience in terms of revolutionary strategy: “when one understands (public) space as the way in which tactics are deployed, their ambience so to speak, one discovers a wide range of practices with the potential to elaborate on material space – in a culture of ambient markets, ambient resistance”¹¹.

Somewhat removed from Ultra-Red’s sound artistic practices, certain popular cultures that define themselves by the ways in which they playfully use sound and space can be seen as de facto engaging with the program of ambient resistance. In the following section I will consider dancing, and specifically rave, as cultures of playful resistance. If “boredom is counterrevolutionary” (according to the famous May ‘68 situationist slogan) then play, which can only exist in a dialectic relationship with boredom, is a potent – and problematic – mode of political engagement.

III. FUN TIME: *vertigo, revolution, and dance culture*

Caillois identifies the enjoyment induced by vertigo as a particular modality of play, “a kind of elation that corresponds to the physical and psychic disorder” that he associates with the experience of amusement park rides and the balancing acts of acrobats. The medley of performance, play-acting and purposeful abandon that characterizes certain contemporary immersive dancing environments, particularly raves, a subcultural phenomenon that exploded in the UK and the early 90s to span what might have been or might still become a global counterculture, inherits the vertiginous atmosphere of the carnival and the circus and uses dancing to enhance it.

¹¹ Ultra-Red, *Constitutive Utopias: sound, public space, and urban ambience*.

Dancing in this contemporary context is a form of cultural technology. Like the chemical dizziness that often accompanies it, this ritualized sharing of an experience of disorientation – a destabilization of the inner ear precipitated by the outer ear’s sensitivity to a saturation of sound – constitutes a sophisticated type of experience design.

Here music is partaken of to create a *fun time* for all involved. The beat marks the time of this fragile intersubjective bubble, relentlessly driving and supporting the dancing body to sustain the momentum of pleasure. What makes dancing fun, what marks its affinity with play, is how both *jouissance* and boredom alternately possess the dancing body. The fun time is elusive. If one twist or turn of the temporal sequence is missing or wrong – the kick drum does not align with a particular synth motif, a face in the crowd touches us with confusion – the vertigo effect dissolves and dancing loses its élan, hurtling us back to the amorphous time of our ordinary, isolated subjectivity. When the alchemy works, however, the centrifugal force that glues us to our movements induces a heightened perception of sound (a carnival ride takes us to a certain height only by tyrannically constraining us), an almost painfully intense experience of listening that brings the body into “ek-stasis” – propelling it into a state of standing outside itself. Standing outside oneself but with others: the distinction between an outside and inside the body abolished¹², the cage of the subject left open, allowing whatever us is to finally break free and explore. As such, ecstasy is a mode of temporality, a ballooning of the moment into an event horizon of multiple possibilities. As a mode of affect, it becomes *jouissance*, used by Barthes and Kristeva to describe the “moments when the materiality of the means of signification interrupts meaning”.¹³ Here the materiality at work conflates the individual body with the fluid, intelligible body of the sound, holding up the ideal of their common pulse as a tactile, pre-linguistic vision of cyborg excellence. The goal of dance as a game is a vertiginous surpassing of self perhaps indistinguishable from plummeting, a duality of interior states accurately portrayed in Simon Frith’s¹⁴ remark that dancing is a way of

¹² Jeremy Gilbert, Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: dance music, culture, and the politics of sound*, Routledge 1999, p. 60 “When we feel music to actually move to its rhythms, the distinction between ‘outside’ (where the music comes from) and ‘inside’ (where the music is felt) is radically problematized.”

¹³ *ibid*, p.65

¹⁴ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: on the value of popular music*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.

both losing oneself in the music and of thinking through it, of stopping time and of “considering how time passes”.

Fun time circumscribes and defines dancing/raving as a cultural practice that builds community, however ephemeral and evasive, around the material signifier of a specific sound. As such, the experiential totality of rave is consensually imagined and remembered as “an acute experience of music in all its sensuality – its shimmering arpeggios, soaring string-washes, abrasive squelches, crackles and pops; an incessant movement forward, in all directions, nowhere; the inspirational smiles of strangers, the awesome familiarity of friends; the child-like feeling of perfect safety at the edge of oblivion; a delicious surrender to cliché”¹⁵. The correlation between safety and surrender is evocative: dancing culture effectively capitalizes on the productive potential of cliché, shamelessly enlisting a reverent engagement with musical ideology and subcultural code. These derive their reality from the fact that their adherents read them as gateways into different *styles* of intersubjectivity. Different genres of techno are associated with different flavors of fun time. Within the connected but compartmentalized spatial distribution of a massive (as of the state of Social rave in 2009), the happy hardcore crowd will flow differently from a school of drum n’ bass, the appearance of their members often constituting a secondary type of musical performance that pairs Vocoded diva vocals with colorful bracelets – both are ‘kandy’, a reference to an ideal of joyful infantilism – or that marries glitchy snare drums to the practice of wearing black bandannas as face masks – both meant to invoke some kind of endgame of darkness and insanity. Musical genre is a fluid category that assigns group identity to real and imagined sonic descriptors. The use of adjectives as musical modifiers may horrify Barthes but fulfills a central function as an epithet becomes the magical, deforming mirror in which a sound culture can recognize and invent itself. Specifically in the playful context of dancing culture and the fragmentation of its sonic and human elements into a quasi zoological multiplicity, genre achieves concrete meaningfulness as a template for certain patterns of communal sense-ational / sensational.

Are these patterns also configurations of (social, political) resistance? To what extent and depth is sociality transformed in and by rave culture? Claims have been made concerning rave’s explosion of norms of gender and sexuality, particularly in

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 64

terms of jouissance and Barthes' particular understanding of it as an experience of the post-sexual or "neuter"¹⁶. While Simon Reynolds's depiction of techno dancing as "polymorphously perverse frenzy"¹⁷ is temptingly evocative, it is arguably tangential to the extent that it references a moment in rave when the fashion happened to favor baggy unisex pants. Gender codes, though today creatively interpreted in a punk-glam fashion infused with a queer aesthetic that has informed dance culture at least since the times of disco, actually flourish in the contemporary rave scene. The fact that fashion is an eminently ambient cultural statement does not necessarily define it as strategy of ambient resistance (at least in the context of rave), particularly when other ludic practices, specifically those involving the game-oriented pursuit of skillful competition, reinforce rather than upturn the existing cultural rules. Standards of excellence in (break) dancing and DJing remain a mostly masculine prerogative, often resulting in girls being marginalized as secondary, if highly decorative, performers.

Rave reinscribes the problematic politics that define carnival in general and that can be applied to play in particular. Jacques Attali's argument that carnival, with its cortege of noisy, topsy-turvy practices, exists in a dialectical relationship with the sobriety and ideological conformity of Lent echoes the parabolic trajectory of fun to boredom, enchantment to disenchantment, that characterizes play. In this sense, "planned obsolescence" accurately describes both market and carnival logic. That boredom entertains a stimulating relationship with capitalism is a fact made prominent in the fetishization of the rave event and its circulation within an economy of promoters and consumers increasingly concerned with high turn-out and production values. The political promise of play has always been utopian – play offers up a conditional example of what alternate forms of sociality could evolve in the wake of a hypothetical breakdown of the division between labor and leisure. This same fantasy animates rave, where "dancing for dancing's sake can be thought of as almost the opposite of work, a form of labor which is literally unalienable in its non-productivity" (Gilbert and Pearson). But are we not falsely engaging with the question

¹⁶ Maria Pini quoted in *Discographies* (Gilbert and Pearson): "Being "ecstatic" has in many ways replaced previous youth-cultural styles of being: being political, being angry, being hard, and even (certainly at the beginning of rave in London), being fashionable".

¹⁷ Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (London Picador, 1998)

of play by trying to hold it up to, to align it with principles and standards outside of itself? The proper of play is the inviolability of its magic circle: after all, “when we are playing, we are just playing – we do not mean anything else by it”¹⁸. Utopia, fantasy, enchantment: only a discourse of sobriety (unfortunately pervasive in most engagements with the political) finds it necessary to judge these ideals and find them wanting, offending imagination with the tendentious label of escapism. In a contemporary cultural moment obsessed with designing novel forms of entertainment, the individual consumer may already strategize around and capitalize on the increasing ubiquity of play to transform and enrich her experience of the everyday. Baby step towards a benign revolution and/or corruption of a dream?

¹⁸ Bernie DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game*, Writers’ Club Press, p.2