Christoph Brunner (Concorida University, Montréal)
Email: c_brunner@gmx.net

Bass Nature and the Mutuality of Creative Ecologies in Dubstep Music (London UK)

This paper will address some of the very specificities of London-based Dubstep music as contemporary musical phenomenon that incorporates altered relational and mutual networks between humans, nonhumans and their embedding ecologies. In its very nature, dubstep music defines a certain genre that refers to a lineage of dub and roots music in the UK and at the same time proclaims a seminal shift in its musical (and therefore physical) composition and its perception. Considering mutuality as an ambitious concept for various cultural formations of creativity, I want to highlight certain relational bonds between humans and nonhumans and their multiple networks. The foundational thesis of my approach is to outline possible concepts to re-think the relations between music and culture and to foreground materiality in ecologies of cultural creativity as a form of critical inquiry of what might be called the 'hegemonic discourse.'

1) Roots, Rastafari, Reggae and Dub – Trails of the Bass

The history of black music and roots music in particular has to be understood as a fluctuating, incoherent and discontinuous history spread over the Atlantic Ocean. Paul Gilroy's insights regarding 'black music and the politics of authenticity' assist to provide a basic understanding of the discontinuous network described as the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1995, 73). Gilroy's re-conceptualization of historical relations between Africa,

America and Europe opposes any form of 'ethnic absolutism'. The Black Atlantic defines a field of 'explicitly transnational and intercultural' interchange that is not entirely Eurocentric nor Afrocentric but describes rather a constant fluctuation of cultural implements that criss-cross over the Atlantic Ocean (Gilroy 1995, 15). Historically, Gilroy points out the importance of the experience of slavery and oppression for the development of so-called 'slave music' and its very musical properties (1995, 74). He states: 'Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arises amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves' (Ibid.). Where Gilroy, following Derrida, sees a predominance of *logocentrism* in Western music, the emphasis of embodied communication through music emerges as a mode of resistance against the hegemonic linguist discourse. Hence, embodied subjectivity cannot be reduced to the 'cognitive' and the 'ethical'. Gilroy emphasises an anti-essential view on black cultural formations as not reducible to their 'original' or 'authentic' national or cultural realms. Nevertheless, for him the diasporic state still persists as ethical and political dynamic in the unfinished history of blacks in the modern world (1995, 80).

In the light of this altered view of black diasporic history one has to reconsider the very particularity of black music culture in the UK and especially the dialogue of dub-focused music between Jamaica and the UK. As part of huge diasporic movements from the West Indies to the UK, music and particularly reggae found its first conscious reception amongst white British working class youth in the 1970s (Eshun and George 2002: 102). Although this transcultural moment in history defines a seminal shift for new genres to emerge such as *ska* (and later *jungle*, *garage* and dubstep), the transformation of originally Caribbean-based reggae music and its re-appropriation for local political needs has been exercised since the early 50s (but only amongst black diasporic cultures in the UK). Once reggae ceased to signify an exclusively Jamaican style, it achieved a global status and form of expression what Gilroy calls 'pan-Caribbean culture' (1995, 82). At the same time the political climate evoked context-specific reformulations of the music to address the local struggle against state violence. Even though the early dialogues between music cultures with different ethnic backgrounds requires a critical analysis (which I cannot pursue in this paper), a foundation for future collaborations has been established.

One has to regard this ongoing lineage of musical creativity and their dialogues between cultures and technologies as a transatlantic and at the same time particularly British phenomenon. Dubstep definitively refers to this transcultural dialogue and outlines its latest formation.

The most important impact on dub music on the one hand dates back to Lee Perry's Black Ark Studio in Jamaica and on the other hand relies on the advent of low-budget electronic music technology. Perry developed from the mid 1970s onwards highly sophisticated techniques for electronic sound modulation and created the seminal genre of dub. This particular genre which first emerged as b-side remixes of famous reggae songs soon transformed itself into a crucial part of later called *dub*, signified by heightened reverb effects and low bass frequencies.

The arrival of low-budget music technology formed a significant turn in the mid 1980s. These technologies provided a new sound and drastically altered the relational bonds between humans and machines in popular electronic music cultures (Eshun/George 2002: 106). While Jamaican music reterritorialized British pop culture, black and white people celebrated from the late 1980s a strictly underground re-emergence of dub named Jungle (ibid). This underground sonic formation which Simon Reynolds named *hardcore continuum* can be traced into contemporary music genres. Dub with its explicit bass-lines became an integral and central part of the *hardcore continuum* and paved the way for contemporary styles such as drum and bass, garage, grime and dubstep. Music-cultural currents such as dub, jungle and dubstep are both part of the ongoing criss-crossing dialogues of the Black Atlantic and the continuous emergence of new technologies for the creation of electronic music.

2) *Bass Nature*, Physicality of Sound and Perception

If Gilroy pointed out the hybridity of black atlantic diasporic formations, Goodman fosters these ideas further to highlight the relations between sound, technologies and their socio-cultural environments. For Goodman the foundation of dubstep music rests on both, Gilroy's Black Atlantaic as hybrid cultural constellation and Kodwo Eshun's rethinking of black diasporic music cultures in the light of technologies and alienation.

Following Gilroy, Eshun positions contemporary music genres related to the Black Atlantic as discontinuous history of what he calls *AfroDiasporic Futursim*. By recalling musicians such as Sun Ra, George Clintion, Drexciya or Lee Perry, Eshun points out the imaginary realm of the future as the only place to be territorialized by black diasporic music cultures. For him the alliance between music technology and Black Atlantic cultures enables this particular AfroDiasporic Futursim. 'Afro-futurism (a term initially coined by Mark Dery) refers to African-American signification that appropriates images of advanced technology and alien and/or prosthetically enhanced (cyborg) futures' (Ken McLeod 2003: 341). This re-orientation alters the way we think about history and musical tradition. As Eshun states: 'Sonic Futurism doesn't locate you in tradition; instead it dislocates you from origins' (Eshun 1998: -001). In the light of Eshun's and Gilory's approach categories like black music fall through as overtly essentialist categories which do not regard the hybrid structure of dub music in this case. The significance of the rhythmic and physical structure of dub is now the centrepiece (and weapon) of dance music in a culture that defines new grounds of creation and perception.

Consumer market sound technologies such as the Roland TB-303 or 808 and 909 formed part of a general reappropriation of technologies for the creation of music. Thinking in coherence with AfroDiasporic Futurism, Lee Perry and his Black Ark studio as well as Kraftwerk, Sun Ra or John Cage all become part of a discontinuous shift in electronic music of which dubstep is one of the latest descendents.

The proximity between humans and machines comes to the fore in these formations and will therefore form a central point in my argument for new techniques in music ethnography with a particular focus on matter and materiality. Crucial for Goodman, Eshun and Gilroy are the physical properties of sound and their perception as well as the technological assemblages which enhance these cultural and sonic formations. Dubstep with its heavy sub-bass, perceived with the right soundsystem, evokes heavy physical responses. The surface of the skin becomes the secondary organ of perception (Eshun 2008), The sonic vibration not only enters our ear canals but also makes our bowels shake and our skin vibrate. The sensory part of musical experience has so far often been reduced to cognitive experience or to embodiment of sound through dance (Pini 1997). What I want to foster here is the physical and material structure of sound, which is far

from being only a transcendental force as often stated in Western music traditions. ---
before I go into notion of perception I will give you a musical example for further embodied understanding.

Gilles Deleuze's writing on perception enables us to further understand the constantly discontinuous process of becoming in the sensational experience of perceiving music. In his analysis of Leibniz's theorem of monads and particularly the idea of the fold, Deleuze provides two different degrees of perception: microperceptions and macroperceptions (1993, 86). Without going to far into detail it is sufficient to understand microperceptions as the incipient potential for routes a percept might take. Macroperceptions are then the result of assembled microperceptions, 'our conscious, clear, and distinct apperceptions' (Ibid.). What Deleuze proposes here is a virtual potential as part of every percept. This virtual relay, between micro- and macroperceptions, points towards an emphasis of constant becoming in the process of perception. Deleuze calls the result of the assembling (differential) process of microperceotions to form a macroperception *singularity* (1993, 88). These singularities are the cultural entities we can perceive for example the colour green as differential relation between blue and yellow. The assemblages are always the combinatory processes between different bodies of humans and nonhumans.

Such a flow of singularities is expressed in Steve Goodmans concepts of *bass nature* and *speed tribes*. In his references to Eshun, Deleuze and Spinoza, Goodman re-formulates the unifying relay for music cultures through speed, perception and sensation. According to Goodman *speed tribes* are 'micro-cultures' attached to a specific sound and *speed* (2004, 140). For him as much as for Eshun, the combinatory structure of electronic music as alliances between humans and machines creates so called *Futurerythmachines*. In Eshun's words: 'Atlantic Futurism is always building *Futurythmachines*, sensory technologies, instruments which renovate perception, which synthesize new states of mind' (Eshun 1998, 012). Dubstep as a potential 'micro-scene' is orientated around the 'hardcore continuum', the polyrhythmic attacks on the audio metric (the looped bpm metric of the Breakbeat). The sensational force in the perception of polyrythmic music structures creates a link to Deleuze's microperceptions as endless intensities of affects, which form constantly new singularities experienced through perception and

materializing creative ecologies, e.g. the underground club, a vinyl record, flyers, a pirate radio station, mix-tapes, etc.

Goodman combines Eshun's analysis of the materiality and the matter of music with the social realm of *speed tribes* (2004, 141). In doing so, he pursues the project of *affective sonic sociality* (ibid.). In a similar manner like Gilroy and Eshun, Goodman sees the rhythmic structures of dance music as a key component of this concept: 'The rhythmachine possessing these collective bodies occupies a virtual plane, an acoustic cyberspace more or less continuous with vibrations of sonic matter' (ibid.). *Bass* in its low frequency sub-form constitutes this sonic matter and the polyrythmic design of the music enhances multiple routes of embodied perception. The physicality of the bass becomes an inevitable sensory effect beyond the visual and therefore disembodied perception of the eye (ibid.). Goodman's notion of *bass nature* defines what I would term (media) ecology of a *speed tribe*. Goodman's use of *speed* as the relay between music and cultures relates to Spinoza's understanding of nature. For Spinoza, nature encompasses both the natural and the artificial. Mind and body are the same substance under different aspects: 'All bodies are either in motion or at rest' and 'each single body can move at varying speeds. […] Bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness' (Goodman 2004, 143). The distinguishing instance that defines a 'micro-culture' or *speed tribe* expresses itself through the motion and rest of bodies, whereas bodies can be human and nonhuman entities. A music culture develops as an assemblages of embodied perceptions which produce and re-produce multiple singularities. In this continuous flux of movement *bass nature* forms itself not as closed entity but appears as a collective through 'rhythmic consistency and affective potential' (2002, 145). Bodies are in constant relational constellation and shape the actualization of virtual potentials (microperceptions). The distinguishing element in this AfroFuturist *bass nature* is the close and necessary relation between humans and nonhumans. Without an opening towards the agency of matter and technology the analysis of such music cultures remains overtly simplistic and anthropocentric.

3) Ecology of Practices and Material Agencies

To provide concrete ideas considering the conceptual framework of *bass nature* and AfroFutirsit music cultures in the *affective sonic sociality* of Dubstep I want to highlight conceptual tools to approach the agency of matter in music cultures.

Matthew Fuller in his writing particularly emphasises the *affective tonality* evoked trough material assemblages in the media ecology of pirate radio in London. To create such micro-cultures and their affective and activist force, technologies become an integral and constantly shaping part of such cultures. For Fuller media ecologies are closely linked to the material ground they are embedded in. But slightly different form McLuhan's notion "the medium is the message" Fuller in regard to Deleuze and Guattari directly emphasises the material grounding of such ecologies as a set of self-organizing processes (2005, 17). Taken from Deleuze and Guattari media ecologies emerge as a form of so called machinic phylum: "The machinic phylum is a materiality, natural or artificial, and both simultaneously; it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation, matter as a conveyor of singularities and traits of expression (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 409). Thus, pirate radio as a relational network of multiple molecular instances creates singularities, which are perceived and materialized through such media ecologies. The instant dialogue between materialities brings-forth the cultural 'realities' we engage in as scholars. The immanence which such a force towards materialization expresses is experienced by diverse and mutual networks between humans and nonhumans. As already described earlier with the emphasis on the close relation between Black Atlantic music cultures and electronic music technologies in the media ecology of dubstep, the plethora of criss-crossing alliances enables the emergence of *speed tribes,* or molecular music cultures. These assemblages can be expressed through the endless networks of records, labels, pirate radio stations, underground parties, SMS information-flows and data-exchanges, internet-forums, etc. In other words, music cultures are not only composed of humans, places and technologies, but it is the very dialogue between these different material states that produce together these micro- or molecular cultures and their potential for resistance, activism, and subversion.

Goodman's notion of a *bass nature* describes such a media ecology where mutual and diverse interactions between humans and nonhumans form micro-cultural and micro-political currents with an emphasis on the material grounding of music cultures. In such

cultures music is taking over in its own regard and navigates as viral continuum through these ecologies. Gilbert Simondon in his PhD-dissertation *Le mode d'existence des objets techniques* coins the term of *technical individualization*. By distancing himself from Heidegger's romantic assault against the technical object as "enframing" (Gestell), Simondon offers a relational perspective between humans and nonhumans in the form of what he calls the *associated milieu* (Simondon 2008, 207). "The associated milieu is both technical and natural … and self-conditioning in its function" (Ibid.). Technical individualization is therefore part of the process of the emergence of technical objects through the dialogue between matter and thought. In other words, music cultures such as dubstep, have to be regarded in their relational constant becoming in the dialogue between humans, spaces, technologies, adjacent cultures, nations, and so forth, i.e. they have to be perceived as ecologies. The associated milieu enables matter to become form from a basic ground or matter. The potentiality to emerge as a singularity is based on the virtual potentiality as becoming process before form takes its actual place. Dubstep in its machinic concept evokes an emphasis on sensation and embodied perception through its media ecology and the foregrounded physical aspects. The materiality of embodied perception formulates the relational bringing-forth of such a media ecology. A cultural formation in the light of media ecology therefore includes the dialogue between humans and nonhumans and at the same time regards the endless potentiality of becoming. *Bass nature* creates such an ecology through creation, perception and shared experiences of mutuality evoked by these processes.

I want to conclude my exploration into material aspects of the *bass nature* of dubstep music with a methodological remark on cultural practices taken from Isabelle Stengers' writing. For Stengers an *ecology of practice* defines the "demand that no practice would be defined as 'like any other'" and that "approaching a practice means approaching it as it diverges" (Stengers 2005, 183). Thinking in her terms an ecology of practices becomes a tool for "thinking what is happening" (2005, 184). Through the engagement with our objects of research we try to work on with this tool, we constantly shape the processes of the researched ecology and the processes itself shape our ways of thinking. We have to realize that we do not choose a tool of thought or a methodology but the tool becomes in a mutual relational process of engagement with the surrounding ecology. A music culture

like any other cultural formation should therefore be looked at as being in constant movement and in progress.

In the light of media ecologies, ecology of practice and technical individualization, dubstep music as a cultural phenomenon emerges as a constantly shifting hybrid between humans and nonhumans where *speed*, or rather the movement between motion and rest, forms the continuous singularity. The media ecology and its micro-political potential shifts constantly and manifests itself in various assemblages of intensities, as being perceived, actualized and modified. Mutuality might therefore be a way of engaging with these hybrid constellations to mediate between the multiple assembling entities music ecologies are composed of.

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