‘House is not universal. House is hyper-specific’: dance music sequences and affect in 120 BPM and Eden

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ABSTRACT
Dance floor sequences in narrative film are often directly informed by an oversimplified heteronormative interpretation of the Peace Love Unity and Respect ethos. Among the growing body of films that have dance floor sequences, 120 BPM (2017) stands in direct opposition to this construction. After an initial discussion of how identity and dance music intersect in 120 BPM and the contemporaneous French film Eden (2014), this article will centrally focus on the way the former film subverts three core features that are prevalent in the latter: the centrality of the DJ, a superficial engagement with the political dimension of dance music culture and a literal interaction between the dance floor space and the rest of the narrative. I will argue that by subverting these structural markers, 120 BPM not only distances itself stylistically from Eden, but also locates the club as a specifically queer space. Simultaneously, this paper will engage with the role of affect within these sequences. By illustrating how 120 BPM combines both emotional and affective strategies, I will argue that the film’s presentation of the dance floor space contextualizes how dance music culture and HIV/AIDS activism relate to one another.

RÉSUMÉ
Les scènes de clubbing présentes dans les films narratifs sont souvent directement informées d’une interprétation réductrice et hétéronormative des concepts de Paix Amour Unité et Respect. Dans le courant émergent de films qui représentent des scènes de clubbing, 120 BPM (2017) se situe en opposition directe à cette construction. Cet article examine de près les stratégies subversives de ce film, en mettant l’accent sur la déconstruction de trois aspects centraux qui caractérisent le film français contemporain Eden (2014): la place centrale du DJ, un engagement superficiel avec la dimension politique de la culture de la dance music, ainsi qu’une interaction littérale entre l’espace du dancefloor et le reste du récit. Je démontrerai qu’en détournant ces marques structurelles, 120 BPM s’éloigne d’Eden sur le plan formel tout en situant le night-club comme un espace spécifiquement queer. D’autre part, cet article considérera le rôle que joue l’affect dans ces séquences. En démontrant que 120 BPM engage une stratégie à la fois émotionnelle et affective, je démontrerai que sa représentation de l’espace du dancefloor contextualise les rapports entre la culture de la dance music et l’activisme autour du sida.

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Introduction

This article examines the way in which Robin Campillo’s *120 BPM* (2017) constructs its dance floor sequences. Throughout, I use Mia Hansen Lové’s *Eden* (2014) as a point of comparison. My reasons for choosing *Eden* for this role are fourfold. Firstly, both are French films largely set in Paris. Secondly, the two were theatrically released only three years apart from one another. Thirdly, they both depict a similar time period. Finally, and most significantly, both films are concerned at a thematic level with dance music culture and its history. Despite these similarities, the way in which their dance floor sequences are structured and presented are markedly distinct, as are the political stakes at play within them.

Characters in both films engage with ‘dance music culture’. What I mean by this term is the broad spectrum of phenomena that surrounds dance music and dance music events globally from any time period, whether that be dancing, DJing, performing, promoting or producing. I favour this term over others as it enmeshes dance music as a musical art form with its associated cultures. This enables me to actively narrow my focus on specific genres, scenes, clubs or parties when such a focus is necessary (house and garage in *Eden*, for example).

In part 1 of this article, I will discuss the ways in which *120 BPM* represents its characters’ identities in relation to dance music culture, before comparing this to *Eden’s* representation. The differences between these representations of identity will illustrate an opposition in the way that the two films engage with their historical context. This discussion will lead to a close comparison between two specific dance floor sequences in each film in part 2, in which I offer a close reading of each sequence to illustrate how *120 BPM* subverts three core structural markers prevalent in *Eden*. Finally, part 3 explains the consequences these structures have on the film’s emotional/affective intensity, alongside how this intensity relates to *120 BPM’s* depiction of activism and the dance floor space. I will conclude that *120 BPM’s* presentation of the dance floor space, in combination with its depiction of activism, creates a more complex emotional and affective register than *Eden* is able to produce—one in a distinctly communal and prosocial mode.

‘House isn’t so much a sound as a situation’: the intersection of dance music culture and identity in *120 BPM* and *Eden*

In Koushik Banerjea’s article “Sounds of Whose Underground? The Fine Tuning of Diaspora in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Banerjea coins an important piece of terminology: ‘deracinated clubbing’. This term refers to the process of erasing the presence of communities that are foundational to modern dance music culture from an engagement in and discourse surrounding that culture. Banerjea utilizes this concept to dissect the displacement of drum and bass and techno from their ‘diasporic moorings’ in London and Detroit respectively, but alternative academic and journalistic accounts have located the same phenomena in a host of other contexts (Banerjea 2000, 75–76). Some of these authors have illustrated how narrative films themselves perpetuate this kind of erasure, by omitting historical and cultural context from their engagement with dance music culture onscreen, constructing the dance floor space as a site of ‘mundane
hedonism’ (Banerjea 2000, 75). Music industry language, alongside journalistic practice, has also come under recent criticism for manipulating the political contexts of specific genres and scenes.

From a New York deep house perspective, Terre Thaemlitz (under his DJ Sprinkles alias) begins the opening track from her 2008 Album, *Midtown 120 Blues* (Mule Musiq, 2008) with words on this very theme:

The contexts from which the Deep House sound emerged are forgotten: sexual and gender crises, transgendered sex work, black market hormones, drug and alcohol addiction, loneliness, racism, HIV, ACT-UP, Thompkins Sq. Park, police brutality, queer-bashing, underpayment, unemployment and censorship - all at 120 beats per minute (Comatone website transcript, August 2008).

In what follows I hope to shed some light on the way in which these ‘forgotten’ and actively deracinated contexts are presented (or not presented) in *120 BPM* and *Eden’s* construction of ‘90s Paris.

In *120 BPM*, the film’s central characters are HIV positive and/or queer characters involved in HIV/AIDS activism in early ‘90s France. The film offers a depiction of a political crisis that disproportionally affected LGBTQ+ people from within a group populated by advocates for that community. The film’s opening makes this position clear, as three new members are introduced to the rules of the group’s meetings and the personal stakes of their membership by a more experienced activist: ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est ACT UP? C’est une association issue de la communauté homosexuelle qui vise à défendre les droits de toutes les personnes touchées par le SIDA. … À partir du moment où vous êtes à ACT UP, quel que soit votre statut sérologique, vous devez accepter de passer aux yeux du média et du public en général pour un séropositif.’

The film is directly concerned with exploring these personal stakes through the interpersonal relationships between ACT UP members and the way in which these relationships relate to the politics of the group’s activism more broadly.

Affection and intimacy are central in the film’s examination of these relationships. Members of ACT UP dance together, share embraces, kiss. Two of the three prominent sex scenes in the film are, moreover, closely entangled with the dance floor space. The first of these scenes occurs directly after the group distribute safe sex pamphlets at a local school, as Sean and Nathan (now on the dance floor) kiss one another as other bodies move around them. The club’s music and lighting remain as their bodies relocate almost instantaneously to Sean’s bedroom, blurring the exact boundaries of the two spaces through a couple of subtle transitions. The second of these scenes occurs at the film’s climax, as an abstract series of cuts combine action from three overlapping settings. As members of ACT UP throw Sean’s ashes over the food at an insurance conference protest, music and strobes begin to blare as the hall morphs into an in-between club space. Alongside this liminal representation, the sequence also cuts between Nathan and Thibault’s entangled bodies, bathed in the same sounds and strobing lights from the hall/club space. Although the film makes no overt reference to specific DJs, producers or genres in its narrative, these two moments potently connect the relationships of its characters, their participation in dance music culture and the political activism surrounding HIV/AIDS in ‘90s Paris through its formal ingenuity.
In contrast, *Eden’s* representation of its time period is markedly heteronormative. The film offers little in terms of context with regards to HIV/AIDS, offering no more than a short exchange between the protagonist Paul and his mother. In the portion of the film set in January 1995, she voices concern about her son’s increased interest in DJing and parties. Initially her worry manifests itself from a substance abuse angle, before taking a sharp homophobic turn:

Paul’s mother: Tu n’est pas homsexuel au moins?
Paul: Maman! Ça va alors!
Paul’s mother: Je prie que tu ne sois homo et que tu attrapes le SIDA. Et puis pourquoi je vois jamais des petites amies?
Paul: J’aurais honte de te les présenter.

Although Paul’s response is a critical one (if entirely non-confrontational), this scene is the closest *Eden* gets to establishing a link between the sounds of house and garage that Paul is so obsessed with and the queer communities that founded them. His mother’s question illustrates the immense disconnect between Paul and his group of (white, cis and straight) friends and the context of the sound that they are drawn to. By the time Paul tours the USA and books historic house vocalists to perform at his and Stan’s ‘Cheers’ parties, the group’s engagement with the political dimension of dance music culture already feels superficial. The only suggested queer narrative within the film involves the supporting character Cyril, a close friend of Paul who works on two graphic novels about dance music history. Cyril’s arc is somewhat nebulous, as his turbulent moods and bristly attitude adorn several important scenes in the film. After leaving a group viewing of Paul Verhoeven’s *Showgirls* (1995) in anger, a friend suggests to the room that Cyril needs a girlfriend, to which Arnaud replies: ‘Mais non. Il y a toutes ces nanas qui se lancent sur lui et il n’en veut pas. C’est un misogyne de premier. C’est un pédé c’est tout’. No-one in the room responds to this outburst and the camera cuts quickly to the next scene. Once again, the film does not display a discussion of queerness outside of homophobia. Whether Arnaud’s estimation of Cyril’s sexuality is correct is never fully established, but his resulting alienation from the group and eventual suicide align incredibly closely with the ‘bury your gays’ trope so pervasive in visual media generally.

After attendance at their Cheers parties begin to dwindle, Paul and Stan are challenged by the owner of the nightclub they perform in over their music policy. This challenge becomes a broad, symbolic conversation regarding the nature of artistic evolution and genre, as the owner asks ‘Est-ce que vous voyez par exemple le club lesbienn, là, sur les Grands Boulevards, Le Pulp? Eux, ils jouent l’électro. Ça cartonne. C’est pas votre style, l’électro?’. Although the pair have no intention of moving on from garage, their resulting frustration from this intervention opens up a specific problem of representation within the film. On the one hand it seems as if the film presents the duo’s loyalty to ‘their’ sound as a seal of authenticity to their craft, but on the other this interpretation rings somewhat hollow. The pair might appear authentic as a result of their personal and professional affinity with house and garage as genres, but outside of the small portions of the film set in New York and Chicago, their engagement with the history of these genres and the
communities that founded them is never properly established. As Banerjea argues: ‘renegotiating your own identity purely through the expressive cultural forms of diaspora is at best naive, at worst opportunistic’ (2000, 79). Deracinated clubbing starkly comes to the fore here, as Eden skims over establishing a clear relationship between the work of queer, Black and Latino progenitors of garage and house and its central characters that are so clearly shaped by them.

While 120 BPM remains largely uninterested in characters that are not white gay men within the movement it depicts, the film undeniably offers an engagement with dance music culture’s relationship with HIV/AIDS history. Although 120 BPM can only ever offer a partial representation of its own context, the film does make clear ties between queer-ness, politics and the dance floor in a way that Eden does not. In the next section, I will more closely analyse how the film’s dance floor sequences structurally differ from Eden’s and begin to open up the various ramifications of these differences.

‘Community of isolation’: structuring dance floor sequences onscreen

Despite only a thirteen-minute difference in runtime, 120 BPM depicts the dance floor onscreen five times to Eden’s twenty.14 The ways in which both films present and structure their respective dance floors differ as well. To illustrate these structural differences, I will describe and analyse an important dance floor sequence from each film. Both sequences occur early on in both films and thus establish the tone of similar ones that follow. Both sequences move between a variety of locations over approximately six minutes of screen time. The ways in which the films transition from one location to another in these sequences help to forge a clear connection between the specific context of their dance floor spaces and their larger overarching narratives. This relationship is a useful avenue of textual analysis as it contains clear examples of when and how the films engage with (and disengage from) the political dimension of dance music culture.

In Eden’s second dance floor sequence, Paul follows clues from a radio broadcast to a party with a small group of friends. After catching a train together, the group find themselves outside a doorway adorned with a ramshackle sign that reads: ‘RAVE AGE’. A large tower looms overhead, occasionally illuminated by slowly moving lights. We see groups of people making their way through the doorway, the reverberation of a kick drum echoing audibly from within. The camera cuts sharply to the interior of the venue, with Aly-Us’ vocal house anthem Follow Me (Club Mix) (Strictly Rhythm, 1992) blaring loudly in a strobe filled room to a few hundred dancers.15 The music remains diegetic throughout this sequence, noticeable due to the tangible differences in tone and clarity of sound when the camera is positioned within the dance floor or away from it. As Paul’s group make their way through the crowd, the track’s first verse of vocals begins:

I’m hoping to see the day
When my people
Can all relate
We must stop fighting
To achieve the peace
That was torn in our country
We shall all be free
Follow me
Why don’t you follow me …

Paul immediately makes a beeline for the DJ booth, where we see a bespectacled DJ working the mixer and bopping their head in time to the tune. Staring directly at the DJ, Paul begins to dance, before the (young, largely white) crowd begin to sing along to the central ‘follow me’ refrain. The night pushes forward, with cuts denoting further jumps in time. Cyril kisses a woman, then loses her, then tries to find her again. Paul and Stan chat to a man selling garage zines (totemically titled ‘Eden’) and revel in their shared love of the genre. After another cut, Paul, Stan and Cyril are back on the train towards Paris, this time bathed in daylight.

There are certain structural markers in this sequence that are important to emphasize here, i.e., particular aesthetic decisions that manifest themselves in the film’s formal representation of the dance floor space. These markers are present in all of the major dance floor sequences in the film and have important links to how these sequences are experienced as a whole. The way in which these markers are presented directly inform us of the relationship between the film’s characters and the political contexts that surround the depicted dance floor space.

The first marker within this sequence is the presence and centrality of the DJ. Paul does not begin to dance until he connects to the DJ booth, which posits an important relation between the DJ’s work and Paul’s engagement with the music they are playing. The film clearly frames the music we can hear as being played by a performer, a performer that is integral in determining the atmosphere of the room. As Follow Me’s hook kicks in, the camera cuts from a close-up of Paul smiling to a wide shot of the whole room responding rapturously, with the DJ positioned above the crowd at the top of the frame. The DJ’s placement and location within this space is asserted and emphasized multiple times with both close-up and wider establishing shots of the dance floor (a strategy used with even greater intensity and frequency once Paul and Stan themselves become respected DJs). There is a clear hierarchy established here, specifically through the placement of the DJ in the sequence and the power that they display in their ability to influence an entire room of dancers. The room’s responses to the DJ stem from their role as both a curator and an exemplar of musical connoisseurship, a role that is foregrounded pointedly through Paul’s clear admiration of the DJ figure.

The second marker relates to my discussion of representation in part 1, that is, how central and supporting characters are contextualized leading up to (and within) the dance floor sequences themselves. Eden offers little context for its characters’ identities prior to this party, offering us a crew of white men that appear confident inhabiting a largely white (seemingly straight) space. The only political context we can glean from the party are the vaguely countercultural connotations of ‘rave’ in the sign that hangs over the venue’s entrance, alongside the call to unity we can grasp if we pay attention to the lyrics in the track being played. The latter, however, is an interesting example of what the film chooses to omit. Although the verse of Follow Me featured in Eden presents the track as a
broad invocation of the communal values synonymous with rave, the absence of the track’s next verse from this scene speaks to Banerjea’s concept of deracinated clubbing once again:

Follow me
Why don’t you follow me
To a place
Where we can be free
Come with me
Over there
Let’s put an end to racial hatred
And let’s learn to share

The camera cuts to the smoking area just before this verse starts, focusing instead on the dance floor’s jubilant and vocal reaction to the track’s hook. By featuring the prior verse and not this one, the film presents a clear decontextualisation of the track’s explicit reference to racist oppression.

The third and final marker within this sequence is related to the film’s broader narrative structure. *Eden* takes its time to establish the site of the dance floor geographically and narratively, by depicting how characters physically move to and from that space. The process of getting into a nightclub, finding the exact location of an illegal party, interacting with security and dealing with potential intervention from the police, are all common tropes in films that have extended dance floor sequences. *Eden* is no exception. Paul hears the party’s phone number on the radio and sneaks out of the house before meeting his friends at the train station. We see the exterior of the building in an establishing shot alongside a line of people walking towards and through the entrance. The luminous tunnel that leads from the dance floor to the smoking area is used multiple times to show characters walking between both locations. *Eden* offers a very literal presentation of finding, attending and leaving the location of a party through this exact A-to-B style causality. Much like the centring of the DJ figure, this causality becomes even more prominent as Paul and Stan’s DJ careers progress, depicting journeys between green rooms and offices behind the scenes of venues, as well as close-ups of characters within the DJ booth itself. Whilst this establishing of causality creates a detailed picture of the venue, *Eden* prioritizes how this geography relates to the relationship between audience and DJ—rather than, for example, focusing on how members of the audience might relate to one another.

To begin a comparison with 120 BPM, let’s look at that film’s first dance floor sequence and the ways in which these structural markers are consistently subverted within it.

After protesting at the offices of Melton Pharm and a short stint in a prison that occurs offscreen, members of ACT UP-Paris spill onto the Metro and find seats together. Sean and Max share an affectionate kiss, which leads another passenger behind them to move swiftly away from the group with a palpable look of disapproval. After some back and forth about the protest and resulting arrest, the conversation moves towards the difficulty
of dealing with the side effects of AZT. With Paris barrelling past outside, we cut to a close up of Sean as he describes how HIV/AIDS has altered his life. Sean undermines these introspective thoughts with sardonic laughter as the camera cuts away from the window back to his face. The riff of Arnaud Rebotini’s Premier Club (Because Music, 2017) begins to play as the train moves quickly past the flashing overhead lights of the Metro tunnel, emerging into daylight on the other side. We cut from a shot of the tunnel’s passing lights to one of nightclub strobes, as repeated pulses make tableaux of dancing bodies. The music begins non-diegetically from within the train but as the camera keeps cutting between both environments, the origin of the music is deliberately confused. As the camera affixes itself more permanently to the dance floor space, the ambience of the group’s cheering, talking and moving feet underscore the same track, now clearly playing within the room itself. Unlike the light, open space of the train, the club is juxtaposed as dark and enclosed. As the ACT UP members dance, the camera shifts to a series of close-ups of characters faces, all of a similar duration. We see the burnt orange end of cigarettes, fleeting kisses and hands raised in the air as strings crescendo and drums stutter in the track’s breakdown. The camera cuts to a higher angle above the crowd, the mass of people still dancing but now in slow-motion and out of focus. Instead of characters’ bodies, the camera now focuses on patterns of dust particles illuminated by a single shaft of light. The vague outline of the dancers slowly fade away and are replaced over a succession of slow fades with small CGI microscopic cells still surrounded by the same lights present in the club. As the track comes to a close, the music is rendered non-diegetic once again, as the club becomes entirely absent from the frame. There is a final sharp match cut from this ‘real’ cell to a hand-drawn illustration on the slide of an overhead projector. The image now part of a presentation at ACT UP HQ.

In this sequence, the three structural markers I outlined in the previous analysis of Eden are all subverted, imbuing the dance floor space with a wholly different atmosphere. To begin with, the figure of the DJ is entirely absent from this particular sequence. In fact, no DJs make an appearance throughout any of the film’s dance floor sequences. This distinction seems to intuitively make sense, not just between these two specific films, but more importantly between two films of this kind. Eden is ostensibly a film concerned with the machinery of dance music industry, whereas 120 BPM is concerned instead with the depiction of activism. It would not be surprising to find that films whose narratives are not intimately concerned with the specifics of DJing, production, promoting and attending parties also do not centralize the figure of the DJ. There are, however, a litany of films more narratively disengaged from dance music culture than 120 BPM that still prioritize the figure of the DJ.19 Instead of establishing the geography of the club in a way that privileges the position of the DJ booth and the power of the performer inside it, the camera in 120 BPM focuses solely on the bodies of the dancing characters and their interactions. Rather than the connection between a central character and an elevated authorial figure, the connections between a larger group of activists and the atmosphere they create on the dance floor is the focus here. Secondly, the extended scene on the train enables the status of the characters’ identities to be asserted clearly, well before we see them interact in a dance floor environment. The film relocates the characters from the aftermath of a protest to the dance floor space,20 unmistakably rendering its characters’ identities as a collective of queer HIV/AIDS activists. Thirdly, the dance floor we see (and return repeatedly to) in 120 BPM is narratively sealed from the rest of the world that its
characters inhabit. Unlike *Eden*’s Rave Age party, the film eschews the traditional cause and effect construction of seeking out, travelling to and attending a party in a clear chronological fashion. *120 BPM* does not display a single character entering or leaving the club space in this style. Not in this specific sequence, nor in the rest of the film. Moving to and from the club space in less literal ways renders the dance floor as an unusual, almost magical space, its status never presented as wholly real nor entirely metaphorical. This unreal quality is apparent in the final set of fades that move from the dance floor to ACT UP HQ described previously. By obscuring entry and exit to this space, the film also insulates its characters within an environment that feels resolutely their own, hidden from the leering looks of homophobes and threat of police violence it has presented to us in detail previously.

It is a combination of these qualities that clearly distinguish this sequence in *120 BPM* from the one outlined in *Eden*. *120 BPM*’s focus on contextualizing its characters and their interactions with one another enables a greater feeling of community to emerge on screen, alongside a more complex formal construction that makes overt links between the virus, oppression, protest, dance and the human body. This formal construction creates a dance floor space that overtly contextualizes queer characters and their interpersonal relationships with one another, in obvious contrast to *Eden*’s construction of a more realist space. In the final section of this article, I want to move away from these structural observations of *120 BPM* to further explain how looking at formal aspects of the film can have certain consequences for our understanding of its relationship with feeling.

**‘Suffering is in here with us’: dance floor sequences and affect**

Affect in film studies has been explored at length from a variety of authors working in a multitude of cinematic contexts. Within the specific context of this film, I want to ask one key question: if *120 BPM* relates its depiction of activism to its dance floor sequences, then what relationship does this have to affect within these sequences?

To answer this question, I will first outline the conceptual framework used in E. Ann Kaplan’s chapter *European Art Cinema, Affect, and Postcolonialism: Herzog, Denis, and the Dardenne Brothers*. Kaplan’s argument is a useful jumping off point, as the perspective she takes relates politics, emotion, affect and form to one another (albeit in a different cinematic context). Kaplan’s chapter aims to ‘explore how cinema structures screen emotions and look at techniques that produce emotions between embodied spectator and screen’. From the outset, Kaplan makes it clear that she wishes to resist a certain kind of Hollywood sentimentalism and reliance on emotion, instead directing her analysis towards an exploration of what she calls ‘prosocial feelings’ within cinema. Although she doesn’t offer a specific definition of this term, it is implied that films which generate these feelings positively benefit individual spectators (Kaplan 2010, 285). Kaplan’s argument occupies an interesting position, asserting that Hollywood’s use of emotion through a close identification with specific characters equates to a certain kind of manipulation of the spectator’s emotions and is troubled, in particular, by how the structures of specific narratives imbue their films at large with an emotionally didactic capability (Kaplan 2010, 286–287).
For Kaplan, however, certain filmmakers manage to harness this emotional identification alongside prosocial feelings, producing work that manages to escape this mode of emotional manipulation. As Kaplan focuses on films that deal specifically with issues of colonialism, her examples of such filmmakers make ‘Art cinema’ and are so-called ‘affect auteurs’ who ‘engage with themes such as colonialism/postcoloniality’ but with a clearer focus on affect (intensity of the expression event) rather than on emotion (quality or feelings dealt with through cognition) (Kaplan 2010, 287–290). This distinction between Hollywood cinema and the work of affect auteurs has a peculiar implication, in that it presupposes cinema which focuses too closely on an individual somehow precludes a deeper engagement with affect.27

I agree with Kaplan, in that analysing form can be a valuable way of decoding a film’s affects, but it is also clear from the dance floor sequences I have described, that narratively focusing on specific characters closely need not occur only in Hollywood films, much less detract from other unusual and co-present formal features. When discussing the implications of this framework for 120 BPM, I will retain the distinction between emotional identification and prosocial affect as it is a useful one but will leave behind specific references to Hollywood and ‘affect auteurs’, as neither term adequately capture the cinematic context of 120 BPM or Eden.

The potential tension and/or harmony between emotional identification and prosocial affect in Kaplan’s arguments have intriguing implications for reading 120 BPM. I have already noted that the film focuses on certain characters (as well as certain kinds of characters), but it is important to resist the idea that the film’s concern with Nathan and Sean’s relationship renders the film somehow incapable of generating anything other than an emotional response.

Returning to the film’s first dance floor sequence, we can see this combination of emotional identification and prosocial affect deployed effectively. The way in which the film transitions from an isolated close-up of Sean’s emotional testimony on the train to the communal dance floor of the nightclub, impacts the mood of the entire sequence. We begin with an act of emotional identification with Sean as the camera focuses solely on his face, giving us a specific context for both Sean’s personal experience of the world alongside his status within the group. The length of the shot also allows a larger amount of time to be spent focused on his character alone, alongside a greater degree of intimacy through Sean’s closeness to the camera. The unusual transition to the dance floor space allows this identification to elapse rather than continue, constructing in its place an affective communal atmosphere through a combination of music and moving bodies. In the dance floor space, the camera has an entirely different positionality, never lingering in close-up over a particular dancer and instead roaming between a multitude of characters. Having already seen these characters collaborate within the context of the group’s activism, this placement of the camera allows a more generalized, communal feeling to arise in this space. This combination of emotional identification and affect within the narrative contextualizes how dance music culture and activism relate to one another. By subverting the structural markers normally present within these kinds of sequences, the film manages to play with both emotion and affect in quick succession, fitting within the framework of ‘prosocial feelings’ that Kaplan suggests for her own corpus of films.
It is important to Kaplan that we remain critical of manipulative forms of emotional identification in narrative cinema, but there is a broader form of historical and cultural narrative that can also problematize cinematic representation of the dance floor. Like Kaplan, Terre Thaemlitz also offers a criticism of narrative, albeit from the specific context of New York deep house:

The House Nation likes to pretend clubs are an oasis from suffering, but suffering is in here with us. After all, it’s that larger context that created the house movement and brought you here. House is not universal. House is hyper-specific: East Jersey, Loisaida, West Village, Brooklyn - places that conjure specific beats and sounds. (Comatonsen website transcript, August 2008)

Thaemlitz’s description of the deep house scene at that time is a direct subversion of the idea that the atmosphere within both activism and dance music culture was one of harmonious, utopian collective enterprise. He suggests an alternative picture of the relationship between HIV/AIDS activism and the dance floor spaces of that time:

I was just always in super fucked up tragic clubs. There was this really nasty rice bar called Club 59 and my partner at the time was head of the API (Asian and Pacific Islander) Caucus for ACT-UP and so I was DJing at their benefits or I would supply the tape for their pride parade contingent or whatever. So I’d DJ at these one off things in these totally messed-up clubs [like that]… Me and the people that we knew, we went and we were more drawn to these kinds of places that didn’t have the kind of utopian, communal blah blah, because there was already too much of that within the kind of activist work we were doing at the time and it was already so kind of flawed. And we wanted to be places, and felt more comfortable around places, where we knew from the start that this is totally messed up. This is totally fucked up. There is nothing heroic about this, there is nothing clean about it, it’s totally nasty. And in a way it was helpful psychologically. (RA Exchange Podcast, 2012)

For Kaplan it is emotional identification within narrative cinema that falls into an emotionally manipulative mode, but for Thaemlitz, it is the narrative construction of history more broadly that can be both manipulative and reductionist. Rather than romanticizing an aspect of New York dance floors at that time, Thaemlitz illustrates the plurality of emotional and affective shades that can often co-exist in these contexts. It is not that these communal, emotionally bound enclaves we see in 120 BPM were nonexistent in New York, but rather that they were not the only kinds of dance floor experience that existed. For Thaemlitz, the commitment to utopian and communal values within activism at that time was overwhelming and, as a result, she and her friends were drawn to (and actively sought out) dance floor contexts in direct opposition to that atmosphere: messy, dangerous and less concerned with communal and utopian ideals. In contrast, 120 BPM’s depiction of Parisian activism inverts this structure. The film displays the organized chaos of collective action in its dramatization of ACT UP’s internal politics but constructs its dance floors space as one in possession of a more unified communal atmosphere. In this cinematic context, it is the activist work that appears messy and compromised, while the dance floor enables individuals within the group to seek out an alternative, more harmonious communal framework.

Although both of these representations offer a mirror image of the other’s activism/dance floor relationship, both Thaemlitz and 120 BPM embrace a multiplicity of narratives and contexts within a single historical context, never prioritizing one experience as the definitive version of reality, but instead one of many. This commitment to multiplicity is
most obvious in the film’s final moments, as all three layers of reality within the sequence (the protest, the liminal club space and the sex) are actively embraced simultaneously: from the ashes thickening in the air, to the stark, clear composition in the darkness of the dance floor. Wide shots display multiple bodies shouting and holding signs aloft, alongside close-ups of individuals alone, shoes squeaking as they shuffle and move, eyes closed.

The structure of 120 BPM’s dance floor sequences is in many key ways opposed to that in Eden. While Eden offers a deeper immersion into the dance music industry of its setting, 120 BPM offers a more detailed engagement with complicated and often oppositional political context of the dance floor. As a result, it manages to create a complex emotional and affective register in these moments, with a distinctly communal and prosocial atmosphere onscreen.

Conclusion

Through a close look at the ways in which both 120 BPM and Eden construct dance floor sequences onscreen, it is clear to me that such sequences offer an interesting avenue into discussions about representation and identity within dance music culture, alongside more specific applications to affect and atmosphere in film studies. Whether a film that has a dance floor sequence engages with the history of dance music culture or not, the contexts a film prioritizes and the aesthetic decisions it makes to depict them have clear consequences on its emotional and affective intensity.

Narratives surrounding dance music culture have tended towards a utopian polarity, either offering a new version of early rave escapism or an oversimplified and romantic picture of communal harmony. Onscreen, these narratives have traditionally fallen into the former category, but as an increasing number of films depict and dramatize niche corners of dance music, it is important to stay cognizant of the political complexities inherent in the contexts that they represent onscreen. Building this awareness into textual analysis of dance floor sequences not only helps us to tune into how these films present feeling, but what in fact these films can make us feel.

Notes

1. It is mentioned early on in 120 BPM that the AFLS was founded three years prior. If we take the timeline in the film to be reflective of reality, then that places the events at the beginning of the film somewhere in 1992 as the AFLS was created in 1989 (Harrous-Paicheler 2008). Eden, on the other hand, begins with an explicit title-card which locates the beginning of the film in November of the same year.

2. These other terms include, but are not limited to: ‘Electronic Dance Music Culture’, ‘DJ culture’, ‘rave’ and ‘rave culture’, ‘club’ and ‘club culture’ alongside compound words that are created when some of these terms are combined with ‘scene’ and ‘subculture’ (e.g., ‘rave scene’ and ‘club subculture’). The above terms are present in a variety of academic works in sociology, music theory, film studies and cultural studies.

3. The quotes from my three headings are taken from three spoken word sections within DJ Sprinkles’ album Midtown 120 Blues (Midtown 120 blues, Comatose website. August 2008).
4. These also include issues of gender and sexuality alongside race. From Christina Lee discussing misogyny and the erasure of women in rave (Beyond the Pink: (Post) Youth Iconography in Cinema (2005)) to DeForrest Brown Jr. exploring the misapprehension of techno as a white German art form (“Techno is Black, Tekno is German” [Dweller website. 26 January 2021]).

5. A few examples of this include: Matt Annis’ exploration of UK dance music history (“How much of UK dance music history is real?” [DJ Mag website. 11 March 2020]), Roshan Chauhan’s extended examination of structural racism in the dance music press (A “letter to RA and the rest of the UK music press” [Author’s website. 13 July 2020]), Alexis Gutierrez’s article on genre signification and its contribution to the appropriation of Black culture (“The ‘160’ movement must not erase its Black roots” [DJ Mag website. 22 July 2020]) and Luis García’s exploration of forgotten sexual diversity in club culture (“An alternate history of sexuality in club culture” [Resident Advisor Website. 28 January 2014]).

6. Deep house is a sub-genre of house music that has evolved significantly over the past thirty years. The term is generally used to refer to a slower, more minimal house sound. As Terre Thaemlitz argues, over time the genre has become unmoored from its original stylistic markers:

   New York Deep House may have started out as minimal, mid-tempo instrumentals, but when distributors began demanding easy selling vocal tracks, even the label “Strictly Rhythm” betrayed the promise of its own name by churning out strictly vocal after strictly vocal. Most Europeans still think “Deep House” means shitty, high energy vocal house. (Midtown 120 Blues. August 2008)

7. I use pronouns in rotation when referring to Thaemlitz throughout this article, as per an interview on his own website:

   By simply rotating “she” and “he”, the focus remains on unresolved questions of gender identity within patriarchy, while rejecting the notion that “third-gender” pronouns offer a comfort zone or escape route (although they may for others). Also, because “he/she/he/she” rotation is disorienting and annoying to most everyone, I feel I am inviting the reader to share in the awkwardness and inconveniences I continually feel around issues of gender identification. (Terre Interviews Terre, Comatonse website. October 2011).

8. It is also a film directed by a former member of ACT UP-Paris: Robin Campillo joined the group in the same year the film’s narrative also begins, with newcomer Nathan’s romantic history itself based partially upon Campillo’s own personal experience (Lewis 2018).

9. Of course, the film has its limitations. There are far fewer moments of intimacy and closeness between women in 120 BPM, the central concern of the film being the portrayal of young, gay men’s experience. There are also no clear discussions of gender identity within the film other than a single line of dialogue. The film deals with race in a similarly unengaged way, with no scenes that illustrate the differences of experience for queer/HIV positive people of colour. From these simple observations, it is clear that the film is uninterested in representing the narratives of characters that are not white (or at least white passing), cis, gay men. It is also worth noting, however, that this represents ACT UP-Paris’ membership at that time, being comprised of ‘predominantly young urban gay males’ (Ernst 1997, 23). The way the film relates to issues of gender and race are worth further detailed inquiry but are outside of the concerns of this particular article.

10. The now iconic Paradise Garage nightclub helped usher in the transitional period from disco, to post-disco and eventually house music that would later blossom in Chicago. Both the Paradise Garage and Chicago’s The Warehouse catered for gay, Black and Latino men (Garcia 2014).

11. The first of these is a collaborative history of electro with the character of Arnaud, one that eventually falls apart. The other is his own passion project, the life-story of Paradise Garage DJ Larry Levan. As aforementioned, the Garage was a space that welcomed a diverse community of party-goers. Levan himself was a Black, openly gay artist and, like many in queer communities at that time, lost many close friends due to HIV/AIDS.
12. The ‘bury your gays’ trope refers to the prevalence of queer characters dying in film and television, usually as a plot point that in some way motivates more central straight characters (as well as being closely related to the ‘gay suicide’ trope in modern American pop-culture) (Hulan 2017).

13. Notably the only overt reference to queer clubbing in the film. Le Pulp was a legendary French club that became associated with a more modern electro and techno sound. According to founding ACT UP-Paris member Didier Lestrade, its openly queer and working-class reputation clashed with the comparatively straight French garage scene at the time, a movement that had ‘its foundations in the cushy neighborhoods of Versailles’ (RBMA online. 1 June 2016).

14. This is inclusive of a short montage sequence in the portion of Eden set in the USA, as well as its post-credits sequence—both of which recycle footage from larger sequences within the film. Even excluding these, Eden still outnumbers 120 BPM eighteen to five.

15. Aly-us were a Black trio of musicians from New Jersey, who had several iconic house tunes released in the early ‘90s. The name was revived in 2010 as a solo project for original member Eddie Lewis.

16. Loosely speaking, the general values of ‘Peace, Love, Unity and Respect’ (often abbreviated to PLUR) that became a popular slogan in the ‘90s British and American rave scenes, before becoming prevalent throughout the rest of Europe shortly after. (Connor 2015, 46)

17. This is even more striking considering the track’s significance in specific political contexts since Eden’s release:

> 25 years on, “Follow Me” ultimately remains an unrelentingly uplifting call to action. In 2015, the track was played at a memorial party following the Baltimore Uprising, commemorating the death of Freddie Gray. Its inspirational lyrics—“We must stop fighting/To achieve the peace”—delivered catharsis to a community distraught by police brutality. This year, the track was included on NPR’s playlist commemorating the 2016 Pulse Nightclub terrorist attack in Florida. (Insomniac online. 27 July 2017)

18. See Human Traffic (1999), Groove (2000), Weekender (2008) and more recently, XOXO (2016), Ibiza (2018) and Beats (2019) (alongside too many others to mention).

19. This applies to an overwhelming number of films from (and set in) a variety of time-periods and countries, such as Party Girl (1995), Millennium Mambo (2001) and Victoria (2015). This is without even examining the phenomena of the real-life DJ cameo in big-budget Hollywood films like Tron Legacy (2010), Point Break (2015) and Mission: Impossible—Fallout (2018).

20. As an interesting aside, of the five total dance floor sequences within 120 BPM, four occur directly after a scene of protest. These four sequences all move from protest to dance floor in similarly metaphorical ways, often making it difficult to discern exactly where one location ends and the other begins.

21. Except for the final dance floor sequence in 120 BPM, the space the characters inhabit appears to be visually consistent, largely anchored through the appearance and position of the bar throughout each of these scenes.

22. Nor do any characters display or discuss an interest in specific DJs or genres in the way that Paul and his friends do throughout Eden.

23. From Vivian Sobchack, Jennifer Barker and Eugenie Brinkema to Steven Shaviro and Laura U. Marks. The list is long and the work highly variable and idiosyncratic. Affect in film studies encompasses subjective phenomenological accounts of spectatorship, analytical formalist readings of film text and everything in between.

24. While the singular work on experimental intercultural film in Marks methodologically chimes with my own narrow cinematic focus and Brinkema’s emphasis on close textual analysis aligns with my philosophical approach here, Kaplan’s combination of the political alongside the formal in her paper is the reason for its centrality in this chapter (Marks 2000) (Brinkema 2014).
25. There is much work in social psychology on the concept of the prosocial as it pertains to interpersonal relationships, alongside more specific literature in film studies that relates spectatorship to prosocial norms and feeling (both in individual and collective spectatorship). As it is unclear in Kaplan’s argument as to which model of prosocial she is drawing upon, I utilize the basic definition that Kaplan herself offers i.e., positive emotional states that are generated for individual spectators onscreen in specific films. For more detailed discussions of the prosocial outside of this specific cinematic and individualized context, see work by Julian Hanich and Winfried Menninghaus in Beyond Sadness: The Multi-Emotional Trajectory of Melodrama and The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience.

26. Kaplan also doesn’t specify exactly what kind of benefit these feelings can enable, whether they function as an act of self-care or somehow improve a viewer’s relationship to a given community or their broader society.

27. This bicameral structure also relies upon a certain reading of the film industry itself, with Hollywood acting as an emotionally manipulative media machine, separate from the affective work of auteurist filmmakers that can create entirely different affects for spectators, through qualitatively distinct exploration of political structures.

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Filmography

Party Girl (Daisy von Scherler Mayer, 1995)
Showgirls (Paul Verhoeven, 1995)
Human Traffic (Justin Kerrigan, 1999)
Groove (Greg Harrison, 2000)
Millennium Mambo (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2001)
Weekender (Karl Golden, 2008)
Tron: Legacy (Joseph Kosinski, 2010)
Eden (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2014)
Victoria (Sebastian Schipper, 2015)
Point Break (Ericson Core, 2015)
XOXO (Christopher Louie, 2016)
120 BPM (Robin Campillo, 2017)
Ibiza (Alex Richanbach, 2018)
Mission: Impossible - Fallout (Christopher McQuarrie, 2018)
Beats (Brian Welsh, 2019)

Discography

Aly-Us - Follow Me (Club Mix) (Strictly Rhythm - 1992)
Arnaud Rebotini - Premier Club (Because Music - 2017)
DJ Sprinkles - Midtown 120 Blues (Mule Musiq, 2009)