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Methodological challenges of researching an emerging scene: Experimental electronic music in contemporary Manchester

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Abstract

The process of researching a music scene retrospectively, even one which has recently formed, rests on a relatively simple ontological foundation; that the scene is broadly agreed – by both participants and observers – to already exist and to be available as an object for study, whether that proceeds on a musicological, sociological or geographical basis. But what if the scene is merely purported, suspected or intuited to be in the process of formation; to be, in some sense, imminent rather that existent? What methods are appropriate to investigating a music scene under such conditions? What constitutes, if not 'evidence', then sufficiently persuasive indications that a scene is emerging? These considerations are explored in this article, in the context of the author's early-stage fieldwork into a putative new underground electronic music scene in Manchester, UK, along with reflexive observations on the researcher's insertion into a potential process of scene-formation.

Introduction

> The most perplexing problem, at least with respect to the study of Avant-garde genre forms, is how to identify them in their formative stages. (Lena, 2012: 55)

> In the universally mediated world everything experienced in primary terms is culturally preformed. Whoever wants the other has to *start with the imminence of culture*, in order to break out through it. Adorno, quoted in Foster (1999: 71), emphasis added

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In this article, I reflect on the work of researching an emerging music scene that I identify, putatively, as having a spatial and geographical epicentre, a distinctive sonic and performance style that potentially constitutes an example of genre innovation, and a relationship with previous scenes that represents a conscious rupture with what has gone before. In addressing methodological aspects of this type of tentative investigation, my foundational touchstone is Bennett's 'Researching youth culture and popular music: a methodological critique' (Bennett, 2002), a polemical declaration of an epistemological break with then-dominant intellectual currents in popular music studies that, in his view, had eschewed the need for *any* empirical research. The article called for an amalgam of methodological innovation and enhanced reflexivity in order to break out from what Bennett saw as an ideological straightjacket; 'methodological advancement of qualitative research on youth culture and popular music demands both that researchers be more open about the various methodological issues confronting them and that they reflect more rigorously on the relationship between the researcher and the research subject in the fieldwork context' (Bennett, 2002: 459).

In pursuing this research it was my intention to insert myself into the process of emergence of a potential scene centred on The White Hotel, a quasi-autonomous, 'semi-anarchistic', DIY music and arts space in Salford, one of the component cities within Greater Manchester. Research into distinct music communities, movements, subcultures, networks or ecosystems is often a retrospective activity; the scholar can be late to arrive on the scene. Sometimes, the party has been long over; the music scene in question formed, blew up and deflated some time before, presenting itself to the researcher as an object fixed in space and time and ripe for investigation. Nick Crossley's *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975–80*, (Crossley, 2015) for example, was published in 2015, four decades after the initial occurrences of the phenomena he is writing about. Although he seeks to understand the emergence of these socio-cultural movements, Crossley was, as his introduction explains, a teenager when they happened, making it somewhat unlikely that he was engaged in contemporaneous research into, or analysis of, them.

So, how does the researcher approach a scene that they suspect or intuit to be forming at the *very same time* as it is the focus of study? Where the key question that the research seeks to answer is not 'what was this scene about?', 'what was distinctive about it sonically', 'what were its sociological characteristics?', or 'who were its key players and how were they connected?', but '*is a scene in the process of formation right now – or not?*'. Not only would this be a fundamentally different kind of interrogation of the musical, performative, sonic, technical, spatial and social phenomena that might be indicative of a scene, it would also question the ontological basis of retrospective scene research, the conceptual framework of pre-existing object and the researching subject, distinct and separate from each other.

Research into the constellation of actors associated with The White Hotel was conducted in a substantive burst of activity in the autumn of 2022, from the beginning of October through to mid-December, though it also draws on earlier sporadic conversations and walks in Manchester during the period October 2021 to June 2022. Initially theorised and methodologically oriented around a scenes perspective, the research soon took an unexpected swerve.

From a reflexive point of view, this period of investigation coincided with – indeed, was partly responsible for – a shift in focus that I think of as a 'spatial turn', in which reservations that I had entertained for some time crystallised into the realisation that I had neither the inclination or the expertise to approach my research from a sociological perspective. Bluntly put, it was not the intellectual work that I wished to do. Instead, since mid-November 2022, I have increasingly redirected my attention to spatial, urbanistic and geographical aspects of these groupings of musicians. I am still unresolved as to how to precisely categorise or classify this new direction, although I feel that it aligns more with the fields of critical geography, urbanism and the political economy of autonomous art and culture. Having started out with the intention of researching an emerging cultural phenomenon under the aegis of the scene concept, and having subsequently engaged with the problematics of doing so, I have ended up writing, in effect, a personal swansong

to the term. This end result partly explains my reluctance in this text to engage too deeply with contested definitions and delineations of 'scene' as a concept; I have little to add to the past two decades of lively discussion and debate on the subject.

However, having evoked the 's' word, I feel obliged to, at the very least, account for how I apply it in this piece and to explicate the reasons for initially engaging with musicians and other practitioners associated with The White Hotel from this particular perspective. Music scenes have been researched and theorised from a wide range of perspectives (Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Bennett and Rogers, 2016; Bennett and Guerra, 2018; Florida et al., 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Kruse, 2010; Oliver, 2010; Straw, 1991 and many others), so much so that a sense of weariness with, and a desire to move on from the term often permeates informal discussions about scenes in academic circles. In the context of this paper 'scene' is used as an heuristic in the process of considering and planning research. It constituted a readily available handle with which to reach for the collective work of DIY musical and spatial innovation that I intuitively felt was happening in Manchester. However, preliminary investigations, aimed at laying the ground for fieldwork, exposed two flaws in adopting a scenes perspective. Firstly, that approach repeatedly backed me into a corner labelled 'sociology' (and – methodologically – social network analysis in particular) which I soon realised represented neither my perspective, expertise or interest. Secondly – and more crucially – the musicians, promoters, label owners, venue programmers, producers, DJs and others I spoke to in the city, almost unanimously rejected the term as a description of what they were involved in, with many of these demurrals explicitly referring to previous Manchester music scenes from which they wished to register a definitive refusal, rejection or rupture.

Where (that word is not accidental) they did agree on an element of commonality, it was a *spatial* one, namely The White Hotel. This confirmed my initial inklings, themselves formed from my own observations and those of journalists and other commentators, that a growing number of experimental electronic musicians based in Manchester shared and declared an active relationship with The White Hotel. A former car repair garage, the venue has been subject to a basic DIY makeover internally (and none whatsoever externally), being located in a visually striking patch of unreconstructed post-industrial dereliction just outside of Manchester's hyper-gentrified centre, barely a few metres over the border into Salford. Those initial inklings led to my choice of the individuals with whom to conduct early-stage communications. These in turn led to immersive/experiential investigations, including attendance at performances in Manchester and London, informal preparatory interviews, and a psychogeographic walk through Salford to experience and document the urban context of The White Hotel from an alternative (geographical) approach.

These musicians appear to be closely associated, not only with The White Hotel, but also with each other, through locational proximity, sonic affinities, collaboration, shared resources, mutual creative and technical support, and from performing and socialising in the same spaces. Whilst all have built their music on a bedrock of DIY electronic production, there is a broad, loose division within this constellation between a more experimental strand characterised by slower tempos, ambient textures, immersive 'washes' of sound, subterranean bass frequencies, and heavily treated vocals and/or anguished, alienated rap stylings, combined with elements of drill, noise and Jungle (artists such as Blackhaine, Rainy Miller, Space Afrika, Croww, FUMU, Henzo, Sockethead), and another strand of club-friendly productions built around more danceable bpms (examples; aya, BSTT, Clemency). Despite these stylistic differences, there is noticeable cross-pollination between the two sub-groups, via remixes, collaborations and shared line ups.

I set out to test the premise that the more experimental tendency's collective musical and visual media activities, incubated to varying degrees in a geographically bounded area centred on The White Hotel, appear to point to the presence of an *emergent* scene. Perhaps inevitably, much of this research was conducted online; the growth of digital, online or internet based techniques having become a prominent area of methodological innovation over the past two decades, developing apace alongside the wholesale

digitisation of the communications, media, information, production and distribution of music (Davidson et al., 2016; Paulus et al., 2013). As exiled Iranian sound artist Hadi Bastani reports in 'Recent Experimental Electronic Music Practices in Iran', in the case of electronic music there is a convergence between the tools, techniques and media of music production and contemporary methods of researching it; overlapping digital technologies allow the researcher 'to engage with and reflect on the common processes of connection, production, and consumption that characterise the experimental electronic music "scene"' (Bastani, 2021: 15–16).

Autonomous, or quasi-autonomous spaces, independent to varying degrees from the profit-seeking spatial enterprises, the nightclubs, 'superclubs', arenas, commercialised 'warehouses' that are an integral part of the mainstream electronic dance music industry, are also crucial to any viable DIY scene, although such places are often picked out in negative relief as it were, in narratives of regeneration and gentrification that highlight their erasure after the fact (Costa, 2015; Feiereisen and Sassin, 2021; Lamontagne, 2021; Lena, 2012; Schmisek, 2020; Thompson, 2016). Although the producer, sound engineer and performer Rainy Miller told radio presenter Gilles Peterson – twice in the same interview – that the supporting 'infrastructure' available in Manchester was a key reason for moving there from his hometown of Preston, his second use of the term – 'there's the infrastructure there, there's places like The White Hotel and Soup Kitchen' (BBC Radio Six, 2022), – makes it clear that he is talking about performance spaces and not technical resources beyond the laptop. Miller told this researcher that, at this point in his development as a producer, his current workflow has no need for external facilities to facilitate processes like recording, mixing or mastering, though he doesn't discount using them in the future (Miller, personal communication). No details are available about the technical set-up in the studio that Blackhaine, Rainy Miller and Space Afrika shared in Salford and where they work with close collaborators like Croww; they continued this spatial collaboration by moving together into a new studio in February 2023 (Miller, personal communication).

As the account Miller gave to Gilles Peterson makes clear, independent spaces are a fundamental feature of this putative scene; a broad range of comments from media interviews and personal conversations attest to the importance of The White Hotel, and a supporting role for Soup, an older venue in Manchester's Northern Quarter which is independently owned by DJ, producer and label head Sam Lewis. According to one Manchester academic with close knowledge of the city's previous and present music scenes

> The White Hotel started without a license, as a sort of shebeen. The people managing and running it modelled themselves on Berlin culture after the fall of the Wall. It's not a rave space; they're invested in the arts, they host other things like contemporary classical in an experimental vein, dance etc. The White Hotel has been key in many ways by allowing artists to have a reasonable period of gestation, [to] find their feet. It's nurturing. It's quite a small scene, self-generating, self-perpetuating. The people know each other and hang out, they're both audience *and* performers. (Brooks, personal communication)

Blackhaine confirmed the venue's nurturing role in a 2021 interview with *The Face* magazine; 'The White Hotel has helped me a lot […] I can do what I want there, sets that I couldn't do in London. The crowd in there has allowed me to develop my own sound' (The Face, 2021, w/p), echoing Lena's view that 'at the Avant-garde stage, music producers require meagre resources: really just the time and *space* to experiment' (Lena, 2012: 13, emphasis added). This minimal 'infrastructure' of spaces became a triumvirate in December 2021 with the opening of Peste, a new bar in the Ancoats area of Manchester, a second independent venture from The White Hotel team, a place where one can 'Graze for everything that the flesh & ego yearn for: books & records… drinks & sustenance… conversation & contemplation'(Facebook, 2021, w/p). The space's use of artfully exposed features from the original interior, its knowingly curated selections of

books and vinyl, and lo-fi DJ sets foregrounding more contemplative veins of electronic music reinforce this projection of Peste's image as an autonomously produced contemporary version of the bohemian *salon*.

Scene formation and genre innovation

Peste's urban positioning as an outlier to both The White Hotel and to Soup's location in the well-established alternative neighbourhood of the Northern Quarter (Milestone, 2010) works reflexively to reinforce the origin story of the Salford venue, which includes an incomplete narrative strand about the emergence of a new sonic style. Future researchers may be able, retrospectively, to establish the linkage between the locational particularities of The White Hotel and a common style of musical innovation associated with it; some journalists and long-time observers of music in Manchester, though, tend to stress continuity over invention *ex nihilo*; as Klement and Strambach note, 'existing narratives or specializations may incentivize artists to develop new styles alongside them' (Klement and Strambach, 2019: 1449), illustrating this point with Bottà's notion of a mutating Manchester music meta-scene which 'became associated with a strong post-punk scene in the late 1970s. Some years later, post-punk was mixed with dance music in the emergence of a new genre Madchester, from which, in turn, a thriving acid house/rave scene spawned in the later 1980s'. (Bottà, 2009 quoted in Klement and Strambach, 2019: 1449). This schema fails to hold up in the case of the putative experimental electronic scene emanating from Salford; far from emerging 'alongside' existing genres or fitting into a neatly mapped out periodisation of successive genres, it is seen – at least by some of its more considered and articulate members – as a definitive break from Manchester's history of serial scene-forming, a rupture in the continuum. The scenes listed by Bottà rose and fell long before this current wave of innovators were even born; after the biographical hiatus of childhood and becoming musically active in their mid-teens they went on to create music that constitutes neither a follow-on evolutionary stage, nor a reaction to what came before. The generational break is absolute, as Blackhaine described when explaining to the musician and writer John Twells the complete absence of any residue of the historic Manchester music scene in his upbringing; 'The whole Factory thing, it's like fucking hell. 'Cause there weren't any of this when I was young' (Resident Advisor, 2021, w/p).

Electronic dance music exhibits a unique propensity for genre creation, according to McLeod; 'the continuous and rapid introduction of new subgenre names into electronic/dance music communities is equaled [sic] by no other type of music' (McLeod, 2010: 60). Examining the emergence of new electronic/dance music genres between 1985 and 1999, Van Venrooij identifies 12 distinct examples. (Van Venrooij, 2015). What is striking about this statistic is that it *excludes* 'the emergence and development of genres, as far as they remain "untouched" by the recording industry and music press and emerge autonomously and organically from communities or avant-garde circles without the involvement of the media industries' (Van Venrooij, 2015: 106), in other words, DIY scenes. Lena endorses this view of electronic/dance music – one of the longer term, continually evolving strands of music she refers to as 'streams' – as a uniquely productive field for genre innovation, not least due to its continuous early adoption of rapidly developing production-adjacent technologies (Lena, 2012: 7). Blackhaine's dismissive remarks about Factory Records' lack of influence on his formation as a musician, his outright repudiation of historical continuity, acts as a concrete contemporary instance of her generalisation that 'When streams highly value innovation over tradition, they appear to be the most likely to generate new stylistic distinctions' (Lena, 2012: 116).

How is it possible, though, to determine whether genre innovation is happening? Lena's concept of Avant-garde Genres offers a useful benchmark: 'there are junctures when performers, fans and commentators point to cumulative changes significant enough to distinguish it [sic] from earlier forms of music' (Lena, 2012: 31). Thus innovative musicians often position their productions within, or as a departure from, a continuum of sonic styles. The descriptive texts that accompany new releases, which in a DIY context (as opposed to the corporate music industry), one assumes the artist has approved even if they have not

personally authored, give strong indications as to the material's genre antecedents and/or novel sonic components. The notes that gloss the release of Rainy Miller's *DESQUAMATION (Fire, Burn. Nobody)* on its Bandcamp page, for instance, describe 'a sound world of contorted pop and laconic drill that will cement Miller's position at the cutting edge of contemporary electronic music' (Bandcamp, 2022a). The page for Space Afrika's *Honest Labour* celebrates an 'enigmatic fusion of ambient unrest and cosmic downtempo' (Bandcamp, 2021a), while 2018s *Somewhere Decent to Live* is granted a more fulsome description; 'Unshackled from dancefloor needs, but still inspired and feeding off its spirit and romance, the pair respectfully acknowledge the undercurrents of Jungle, dubstep, ambient techno and deep house which feed into their home city's late night economy' (Bandcamp, 2018). This text is credited to Boomkat, a Manchester-based online store dedicated to featuring 'the most innovative, exceptional, interesting and often overlooked music out there' (Boomkat, 2022), one of whose team members, Conor Thomas, is likely to be the author of many of these Bandcamp descriptions (Miller, personal communication).

Inventing new sounds and performances

Not all of Manchester's new wave of experimental electronic music is 'Unshackled from dancefloor needs', however. According to Miller, two distinct strands exist and interact with each other. He even characterises the two sub-scenes as geographically separate; 'Tom [Hayes, aka Blackhaine] and a few of them didn't like the idea of being a scene; they see it as standing apart, *even from the electronic scene in Manchester* [which is] more club/dance oriented. Croww, Iceboy Violet, Me, Tom – our music is more narrative-driven'. 'We do integrate', he continues, 'it's only a small city. The White Hotel, Soup – we're in and out of the same venues as the techno lot' (Miller, personal communication). Cross-fertilisation across the two sub-genres is also evident in the shape of recorded collaborations and mutual remixes such as club-oriented producer and DJ aya's version of Space Afrika's *B£E featuring Blackhaine* (Bandcamp, 2022b) 'remixed into bass-heavy high-energy form' or their hypnotic track and video with Iceboy Violet, *Emley lights us moor* (YouTube, 2021). Despite these overlaps, at the time of writing [December 2022] it would be fair to say that while some of the more club-adjacent acts that are loosely associated with this putative scene are individually successful – aya, for example, has built an impressively busy international touring schedule – they have failed to establish any kind of collectively differentiated sonic or performance profile.

Observing live performances by artists situated within the 'narrative-driven', strand of Manchester-based experimental electronic music offers another basis from which to assess the emergence – or not – of a coherent scene. In discussing the production of gender in the rock music of late 1990s scene in Liverpool, Sara Cohen suggests a productive linkage between its 'spatial, "scenic" aspects and the dramatic sense of scene as public performance' (Cohen, 1997: 7); scene, space and performance coming together in an identifiable formation. To test this hypothesis, immersive/experiential research methods were applied to a range of phenomena: the staging and overall mis-en-scene; the comportment of the musicians, their movements and attire; the manner in which they address, interact with or physically encounter the audience; sonic aspects such as volume, tonal or dynamic range, and rhythmic patterns; the structure and length of discreet 'pieces' of music and the relationships between them; and the use of complementary media like video or film backdrops. Experiencing a live performance exposes the researcher to a complex of embodied, visual and aural affects that can be 'read', arguably, as more than just a record of that singular event. As Daykin observes, 'the rituals of western music cultures are closely linked with ideological forces. Hence, the concert-going etiquette of disciplined passivity and bodily control has been seen as mirroring macrocosmic processes of social order'. (Daykin, 2004: 39). The corollary is that a rejection of such 'etiquette', or its replacement by different forms of ritualised behaviour, may mirror other, 'undisciplined', 'active' and 'uncontrolled' processes that, in turn, suggest alternative social orders. Attali proposes a related, but almost diametrically – dialectically? – opposed direction of causation in his foundational text, *Noise*,

where he reads seismic shifts in the dominant *forms* of music as presaging equally disruptive shifts in the organisation of society (Attali, 1985). Susan McClary's afterword to Attali's book subtly relocates his theory, flawed not least by its reliance on the role of the charismatic (and almost always male) individual, in a collective basis for musical innovation, going as far as anticipating possible social and material dimensions of what is being prefigured; 'At the very least the new [musical] movements seem to herald a society in which individuals and small groups dare to reclaim the right to develop their own procedures, their own networks' (McClary, 1989: 158). Daykin draws the narrower, but no less radical, methodological conclusion that immersion in music can be a source of knowledge beyond the event itself; 'the questions of meaning that arise from a consideration of reception and affect are clearly of importance to the development of an arts-based epistemology' (Daykin, 2004: 37).

One evening in March 2022 at London's Café Oto, I watched as Space Afrika's Inyang and Tarelle sat on the floor of the venue, which had been stage-dressed as a bohemian living room, laconically triggering waves of dark ambient sound while a filmic backdrop of urban life unspooled behind them. At the time, Space Afrika, along with Blackhaine, acted as the advance guard for artists associated with The White Hotel, expanding their field of performance in a trajectory that has continued in the ensuing 12 months to the point where these musicians perform internationally at an ever-widening scale.

The duo's demurral on that night to performatively press buttons and flip switches to enact the ersatz creative labour of much live electronic music (Cochrane, 2012, w/p), the single unfolding flow that did away with any temporal portioning-out into 'tracks' or 'songs', and the simulacrum of domesticity and comfort, I read as a refusal of many of the conventions of live music performance, including those of the electronic dance club. A similar refusal was evident in Blackhaine's performance the same year at Corsica Studios, which describes itself in very similar terms to The White Hotel as a 'music and arts venue' with a 'stripped back interior and a reputation for being a hidden underground gem' (Corsica Studios, n.d.). Performing in all-over black, his head and face covered, the MC tag-teamed with another similarly dressed rapper over intensely deep, dark beats, the sub-bass powerful enough to penetrate the chest and vibrate clothing. I counted just three occasions on which the set featured an abrupt 'drop', that moment in an electronic dance track when a danceable beat kicks in (Solberg and Dibben, 2019). Each time this happened, the entire audience, teased to the point of frustration by the relentless drone of the bass frequencies, bounced in unison in synch with each snippet of movement-inducing rhythm, the brevity of which only seemed to generate yet more frustration. Schacher sees this precise controllability of electronic sound as a technique for connecting the embodied listener/dancer *physically* with the space of performance; 'The geographical space, one's own place within that space…and controlled media content can build a perceptual frame of reference that emphasizes the physical presence within the work' (Schacher, 2012, w/p).

Rainy Miller's live show debuting his DESQUAMATION (Fire, Burn. Nobody) album, seen by this writer in early November, 2022 at The White Hotel, bore a strong resemblance to that earlier tour by Blackhaine, who made a brief appearance during his friend's set, rapping on a single track to devastating effect. Miller, again clad in black, face obscured, stalked the audience, spending extended periods, sometimes the entire duration of a song, off the stage, crouched on one occasion into a foetal position with the attendees respectfully moving around him. Though a few used their camera phones to record the event, the overall stance of the crowd was one of quiet respect and close attention. Miller is bullish about the performances he and his associates stage; 'There's a big emphasis on live performance - we think we're really on the cutting edge. We always outperform as a support act and blow them out of the water' (Miller personal communication).

Reflecting on Miller's performance afterwards, I questioned whether the similarities between the two artists' live shows was simply a matter of mimicry, learned behaviour, or the work of an acolyte treading in the footsteps of the master. Alternatively, could it be indicative of a house style of performance starting to

develop? A partial answer came a few weeks later when the Manchester-based experimental *Youth* label took over London's Café Oto for an evening. The second act to perform, Yūgen Disciple, lurked behind an Apple MacBook in a black hoodie, dark scarf pulled up over the lower half of their face, while multiple sub-basses boomed and built to a deep crescendo. Was the scene starting to develop elements of a recognisable performance style? And along with it, the sonic equivalent? Rainy Miller seemed to imply that a signature music style *was* developing, and had reached a stage where it was evident and familiar enough to be copied, when he wrote on Twitter in late November 2022; 'New Slowthai sounding an awful lot like it was made by me croww and haine' followed by a trio of 'laughed so much I cried' emojis (Twitter, 2022). Miller's self-deprecating critique of the Slowthai track echoes Sargent's description of the relationship between shared ways of making music and the emergence of a creative community; 'sonic practices are powerful social forces as they are given meaning in interaction. In this way, sonic practices can provide a basis for the building of wider social networks or artistic organizations in the digital age' (Sargent, 2010: 181). This paper, however, is less interested methodologically in Sargent's 'blend of interactionism and musical sociology' than it is in understanding how the *experience* of immersion in these performances might offer clues to emergent collective sonic and performance practices. One way forward might lie in Alice O'Grady's participant-researcher fieldwork at music festivals, from which she has theorised a methodology that supports the subjective experience of immersion with a mix of reflection and theory: 'The conscious triangulation between embodied or tacit knowledge, reflection on practice and reconsideration of existing theoretical frameworks would seem to provide a particularly secure underpinning to such fieldwork and addresses the concerns of those who doubt the validity of "doing research" in parties, clubs and festivals' (O'Grady, 2013: 34).

The online music press; agents of instant consecration?

Given that the role of media in not only documenting, but to some degree fomenting scene formation has long been recognised by researchers, I used a thorough search across coverage of The White Hotel in the UK music press – which now mostly operates online – as an important source of indications as to whether a scene was emerging.

> consumer magazines operate in *subcultures*. They organise social groups, arrange sounds, itemize attire and label everything. They baptize scenes…give definition to vague cultural formations, pull together and reify disparate materials which become subcultural homologies. The music and style press are crucial to our conception of British youth; they do not just cover subcultures, they help construct them. (Thornton, 1995: 151, emphasis in original)

This media coverage – Peterson and Bennett's 'journalistic discourse' – also works reflexively on audiences, 'as a cultural resource for fans of particular music genres, enabling them to forge collective expressions of "underground" or "alternative" identity and to identify their cultural distinctiveness from the "mainstream"' (Bennett and Peterson, 2004: 2). It is arguable, though, that the music press have transformed beyond their role in countercultural scene-making and identify-forming to become part of the institutional apparatus that confers 'retrospective cultural consecration' on past music scenes:

> consecrating institutions increasingly operate across the sphere of contemporary popular culture, conferring critical acclaim, historical importance and cultural value on particular texts. *In the context of popular music, print and visual media have performed an incisive role in the process of retrospective cultural consecration* (Bennett, 2015: 21, emphasis added).

As the music press has shifted inexorably onto digital platforms, to such a dramatic extent that print versions of many once-popular titles have been shut down by their publishers (Gorman, 2022), this process of 'consecration' has become almost instantaneous.

Well before my own explorations, a number of music writers had already announced the existence of a new scene based around The White Hotel. Genre-focused music publications are useful research sources for insights into journalistic perspectives on scene formation. With specific reference to electronic dance music and DJ culture, Jalmangal-Jones notes 'how the media bestow DJs with artistic credibility and authenticity in addition to the range and type of references used to position DJs within the cultural landscape and hierarchy of electronic dance music culture' (Jalmangal-Jones, 2017: 223), an approach that is readily applicable to the dance-adjacent genres of experimental electronic music considered in this paper. For example, in 2017 *Mixmag* reported that 'an increasing number of Manchester's underground music stalwarts are making The White Hotel their home' (Mixmag, 2017, w/p); two years later *The Quietus* was calling it a 'crucial Salford nexus' (The Quietus, 2019, w/p) and by 2021, *The Face* was declaring it to be 'a crucial hub for club culture in the North West of England and one of the most exciting experimental scenes in the UK' (The Face, 2021, w/p). Perhaps the most powerful media complement, albeit a somewhat backhanded one, was Blackhaine's appearance as a 'featured model' in *Vogue Italia*'s April 2020 spring/summer menswear shoot, striking the moves that characterise a self-made choreography and dance style that had already attracted a commission from Kanye West, while wearing, among other garments, a Maison Mihari Yasuhiro coat that retails at over £1000 (Moda Uomo Primavera Estate, 2020). Acknowledging the scene's DIY credentials while instrumentalising them to drive magazine subscriptions, high fashion promotions and advertising revenues, the shoot drew from a longstanding symbiosis between designer fashion and DIY music (Bug and Dao, 2020; McRobbie, 1999) whilst echoing, perhaps more distantly, a well-established affinity between electronic music and the fashion catwalk show (Mouchemore and Kay, 2022).

Conclusion; does a scene exist?

What to make of these suggestions, commentaries, observations, opinions, connections, affects, experiences, conversations and other tentative markers that might indicate the emergence of a new experimental DIY scene in Salford, centred on The White Hotel?

Epistemologically – and hence methodologically – this entire investigation begs the question of what status pre-research probings such as these might have and how it might be possible to analyse and synthesise them. Given their contingency and heterogeneity, it would be no surprise for their 'legitimacy' within an established research paradigm to be questioned. However, rather than defensively justifying these methods in response, I prefer to adopt an alternative paradigm, one that allows, in the words of Les Back, for an assemblage of 'The whole, without a totalising perspective'. In this model, data is collected via 'activist spatial methodologies and experiments' that are 'Based in the arts, touched by critical theory' (Back and Puwar, 2012: 8) and synthesised using what Jennifer Mason has described as 'exploring context in the sense of "associated surroundings"', adopting 'a multi-dimensional vision of context, with creative, mixed-method, unblinkered, interdisciplinary thinking about what forms it might take, how we might research it and how we demonstrate our arguments about it' (Mason, 2006: 19). Such an approach feels particularly well-suited to testing impressionistic assumptions at a stage of investigation that precedes, and potentially informs, more structured research, and when the object of study itself is emergent or immanent.

There has clearly been a concerted effort by the specialist (dance & electronic) music press to announce the emergence of a new scene, starting with Mixmag's declaration that 'The White Hotel is not only the most experimental venue in Manchester, but also its most subversively self-aware' (Mixmag, 2017,

w/pa). Music writers could be accused of magical thinking, willing a scene to materialise out of a collection of disparate and discreet artists and events, but the musicians themselves are having none of it, abjuring the media's desire to revive Manchester's reputation for serial musical innovation; 'people interviewing you want to say it's a return to the glory days' (Blackhaine personal communication). Rainy Miller similarly told Gilles Peterson that 'Music here is braver than it's ever been; it obviously got locked up in that Hacienda thing for a while and people were always trying to hark back to that' (BBC Six Music, 2022).

As a researcher, I am also implicated in this mutually reinforcing relationship between media and musicians through my former profession of music journalism. Reflection on my initial approach to data gathering brought an awareness that I had been reproducing habits derived from that practice of writing: the too-quick presumption of a privileged overview; a conversational style of interviewing tainted by an aspiration to establish a casual rapport with the interviewee; a loose relationship with confirmed facts and genuine research. These reflections led me to adopting a more considered methodology; approaching live performances from an immersive perspective; documenting musicians' recorded output and how they allowed it to be described; analysing online music media coverage to understand its role in just-in-time cultural consecration; autoethnographically experiencing the spaces in which the musicians performed in both Manchester and London, participating in audiences at gigs and noting people's interactions with, and responses to, the artists. Other methods used included informal interviews and post-performance conversations with musicians, scrutiny of social media posts, conversations with observers of the putative scene, and the informal noting of collaborations, gig line-ups, tour itineraries and international links with musicians, labels and promoters working across related genres.

One way for this generation of musicians to distance themselves from the scenes that have preceded them is to stake out fresh sonic territory and a distinctive style of performance. A core of artists associated with The White Hotel have made significant progress in realising a collective mode of innovation, in both production and performance. The notes that grace the Bandcamp page for Blackhaine's 'And Salford Falls Apart' EP describe the music in terms that could be readily applied to the output of a number of his colleagues and collaborators: 'cinematic drill noise', 'road level, punk-spirited', 'the no-person's-land between detuned drill, noise and industrial ambient', 'the gut-level consciousness of rap and punk' (Bandcamp, 2021b). For that Bandcamp page's author, this music 'echoes the North West's indefatigable spirit' and, decisively, '*spearheads a crucial new movement*' (Bandcamp, 2021b, emphasis added). This sense of burgeoning sonic convergence is underpinned by material practices of collaboration, remixing, technical support and co-production; if these musics often sound as if they're converging, that's partly because they were crafted, staged and performed to some degree collectively. Coherence was imminent to the very process of production.

Live performances exhibit a parallel sense of commonality, not least in their considered production of distinctive visual and affective experiences, of which the music forms just one element. It is tempting to see Blackhaine's performance style, honed from his parallel practice as a disturbing and inventive choreographer and dancer (YouTube, 2020), as a formative influence on associated performers. To an observing attendee at these live shows, a strongly embodied aspect is consistently evident, whether it's the legs of one's trousers flapping uncontrollably to Blackhaine's deep bass frequencies, Rainy Miller crouching in a ball at your feet while an on-stage accomplice triggers the track, or being lulled into a sense of interior, domestic comfort while Space Afrika's alienated urban sound- and film-scapes unspool on speakers and screen. These exhibit the shared characteristic of music you *feel*, as much as listen to.

Finally, I turn to the aspect of location, frequently cited in a large corpus of study – though also contested – as a key feature of a recognisable music scene (Brandellero and Pfeffer, 2015; Cohen, 1991; Florida et al., 2010; Gaines, 1994; Hemment, 1998; Redhead, 1993; Shank, 1994; Smith and Maughan, 1997). Applied to the musicians and participants of the putative scene under scrutiny here, the notion of location becomes problematic in a very interesting way. There is little discernible sense in which even the patch of

near-derelict land immediately surrounding The White Hotel can be claimed as territory on which a scene is forming, or in which its purported members operate, let alone any acknowledgement of more widely defined location, such as Salford, Manchester or Greater Manchester, that could be seen as home to a formative scene. There are statements from individual musicians, like Iceboy Violet's personal declaration that 'Manchester made me who I am' (BBC Six Music, 2022) but more typical is Rainy Miller's statement that 'We avoid commodifying the geography. There are so many corners of Manchester; it's a really vast musical landscape' (Miller personal communication). The concept of *place*, then, is perhaps not that helpful, but the notion of *space* might well be, given that several of the musicians spoken to refer to The White Hotel – a stand-alone structure that acts as a proxy for a place that perhaps doesn't exist, or at least cannot be pinpointed or identified – as a formative locus.

The importance of location has been an integral part of the contemporary understanding of the term 'music scene' ever since Straw's pioneering work on the subject (Straw, 1991); as Bealle observes when reviewing Straw's subsequent influence on this field of study, 'That scene theory insists on spatial engagement is not a trivial preference but a theoretical imperative, a recognition that the space of music is always a component of its materiality' (Bealle, 2013: 2). That sense of space, though, has evolved substantially, and no longer necessarily implies a geographically bounded neighbourhood, district or city, a notion that Blackhaine, once again, dispels; 'Not that many people [in the scene] are from the city, they're from the *outskirts*', before going on to add that 'There's people in London or Kenya that I have more affinity with' (Blackhaine personal communication). That the musician shared a billing at 2020's Rewire festival with prominent African electronic music innovator Slikback illustrates his point, which is echoed by Rainy Miller; 'when we were going around Europe for the first time performing shows, we got a better reception in Paris than locally' (Miller personal communication).

The sense of a space that these musicians regard as foundational, where they have come together at crucial stages in their artistic development, around which their activities revolve in ever-expanding concentric circles, comes down to, unusually, a single building. If there is a scene to be intuited or inferred here, it's one whose dynamic is centrifugal, more of a diaspora than a gathering, a metaphor that chimes with Miller's description of the role played by The White Hotel's enigmatic management team; 'they're more interested in seeing how things play out than in being identified as prime movers' (Miller personal communication).

In conclusion, I believe it is presumptuous for the researcher, just like the music journalist, to impose the idea of an emergent scene on these proudly independent artists, who are determined not only to establish a distinct style of production and performance, but to break with Manchester's long history of serial scene formation which, to paraphrase Marx, weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the middle-aged Manchester music fan. I'm inclined to defer to the musicians' organic understanding of what they are up to. That is not to say that research, or the researcher, are redundant; it's more of an acceptance that the framing – of a putative scene – may not be the most helpful one. In this instance, the term 'scene' may itself be a misnomer; perhaps what is emerging from The White Hotel and its environs is, instead, an *underground*, a prospect that is far more exciting, and freighted with possibility.

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