STEFANIE KIWI MENRATH
ANONYMITY PERFORMANCE IN ELECTRONIC POP MUSIC
A PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY OF CRITICAL PRACTICES

[transcript] Popular Music
Anonymity practices in electronic music culture have long been the object of journalistic and academic discourse. Yet anonymity itself is ephemeral and ontologically precarious. How can scholars research anonymous entities without impairing their anonymity, and what can they learn from their precarity?

This study describes two projects of anonymity performance as forms of critical practice (Judith Butler/Michel Foucault) involving performative play with anonymity through the use of fake identities or collaborative persona imaginations. Adopting a reflexive and performative writing style, this performance ethnography calls for a radical performative turn and an ontological reflexivity in the cultural studies of music.

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Introduction

0.1 RESEARCHING ANONYMITY IN PERFORMANCE: TOWARDS A PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

Field note 356 / First week of Nov. 2011: The name Ursula Bogner appears on the German-language Wikipedia! ¹

In the early years of the 21st century, two compilation albums of German electronic music, released under the name ‘Ursula Bogner’ (Bogner 2008, 2011), were discussed in pop music media. Compiler Jan Jelinek, in the liner notes to the second compilation album (2011), alludes to a suspicion that has persisted since the first Bogner release (2008): ‘[W]hatever is looking for information about the “true identity” of Ursula Bogner in these opening remarks will be disappointed’ (Jelinek 2011:6).

Ursula Bogner is the name of the missing female link in German electronic music; a German Musique Concrète and electronic music enthusiast who fits nicely into an international lineage of female electronic music composers such as Delia Derbyshire, Daphne Oram or Else Marie Pade – all of whom have been re-discovered in the last decade. Is Ursula Bogner a historical person or a collective name for the countless (female) artists who remained unacknowledged by public media?

This study provides no answers concerning the ‘secret’ identity of Ursula Bogner, but instead investigates the critical potential of ‘naming the nameless’ and of anonymity as critique of personality in pop music. While there are continuities with 20th century avantgardist critiques of the unitary artist-subject

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² The first Ursula Bogner album, compiled by Jan Jelinek, was released in November 2008, the second, compiled by Andrew Pekler, was released in October 2011.
and with poststructuralist author-critiques, the critical practices of anonymity and a-personality in electronic pop music specifically target the institution of the star personality in pop music. Not being identifiable as an individual opposes the dominant identificatory system of pop stardom and thereby criticizes the many exclusions that pop’s star system produces.

Field note 1/ Aug. 2006: The Detroit dance music producer Moodymann, known for his obscurantist attitude, deejays at Berlin’s Cafe Moskau from behind a sheet. In his performance the sheet draws our attention to the physical absence of the sound sources that we listen to, while at the same time it grants Moodymann a special presence.

Within electronic dance and pop music, practices of anonymity have been tested for their political and aesthetic\(^3\) potential since the late 1980s. Dissociating oneself from identifying markers of individuality can be socially productive and establish new forms of sociality (cf. Knecht/Bachmann/Wittel 2017). In electronic dance music (EDM)\(^4\) the acousmatic quality of recorded sounds (the source of the sound remains unidentifiable due to the separation of sound and image in recording) formed not only the basis for practices such as white-labelling (i.e. anonymizing) records and the faceless\(^5\) (as opposed to star-centred) presentation of musical sounds in marketing and distribution channels, it also allowed for new hybrid musician roles such as the club DJ to develop and eventually attain central importance within the scene\(^6\). While subcultural electronic dance music (EDM) agents have intensified the general a-personality created by acousmatic, electronic sounds and collectivized the distribution and reception scenarios of pop music, other (electronic pop music) projects (for example Moodymann) more spectacularly perform the process of de-personalisation and articulate their ‘no’ to normative practices of identification in a theatrical manner. In its exploration of anonymity as a politically and aesthetically idealized scenario of

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3 Mark Butler (2006:34) refers to an ‘aesthetics of anonymity’ in EDM.

4 I use ‘EDM’ here and throughout as an abbreviation for ‘electronic dance music’ – with EDM I do not refer to a specifically commercial house music genre of the 2010s, but to a music culture starting in the late 1980s, also formerly termed ‘rave’ or ‘acid house’ and sometimes called ‘techno’ (cf. Reynolds 2012).

5 ‘When techno first emerged into mainstream British consciousness in the early nineties, it was disparagingly labelled “faceless techno bollocks”. The Rising High label appropriated this, turning it into a defiant pro-techno T-shirt slogan’ (Monroe 2003).

6 In mainstream media coverage DJs were the figureheads of techno.
creativity emerging from the crowd, electronic dance and pop music has become notorious for (either substantially or spectacularly) eluding discursive and visual representation – by refusing to give individual author or interpreter names and portrait images or, by literally hiding behind a curtain. In light of these circumstances, when researchers endeavour to drag such music cultures into the realm of (academic) discourse, an experimental methodology is called for.

Field note 275/ Jan. 2010: Swedish singer and electronic pop musician Fever Ray appears on a Swedish Music Award Show to receive her award for ‘Best solo debut of 2009’. She ascends the stage wearing an upper body- and face covering red costume. Taking award and microphone in hand to deliver the requisite acceptance speech, she raises the upper head-masking part of her costume only to reveal a second mask of abstract alien-animal form – from which she merely exhales a deep, throaty wheeze.

Fever Ray’s TV performance helped me develop a significant differentiation: I am not interested in whether Fever Ray substantially practices anonymity on stage, but rather in how she performs it. A focus on ‘practices’ is a perspective that was revived during the performative turn in the cultural disciplines of the late 1990s. While cultural sociology has undergone a ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki/Knorr Cetina/Savigny 2001), cultural anthropology has seen a performance turn (e.g. Conquergood 1991, Schechner 1998) and both fields have increasingly focussed on the ‘act’ of culture while shifting their analysis towards practices (rather than structures, texts or ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973:5)). In line with both these developments, this study concentrates on anonymity practices as strips of activity.

The practice-based approach has a significant impact here. Whereas Fever Ray uses a visual symbol, the mask, a scholar might use the linguistic term ‘anonymity’ – according to socio-cultural practice theory, both these representations, (visual) medium and (terminological) language, are not merely constructions (in supposed contrast to the social practice itself which is somehow ‘real’). Social practices are factual and fictional, practical and theoretical. Practice theory locates practices both in subjective agency and in objective structures and understands them as unpredictable and contingent. In this sense, knowledge production on social practices must also reflect this double logic and dispel the artificial epistemological positions of subjectivism and objectivism (cf. Hörning/Reuter 2004:13f). The practical turn in (cultural) sociology has notably not only extended the unit of analysis to social actions but also to the practices of theorisation

The culture-sociological notion of practice also comes close to the notion of performance as used in performance studies. Performances are both generative and repetitive, but, crucially, performances also involve a ‘consciousness of doubleness according to which an actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action’ (Carlson 1996:5 paraphrasing Baumann 1989). The difference between doing (practices) and performing (performances) therefore lies, firstly, in this doubleness. Anonymity performance includes a reflexivity of the ideal of anonymity and the electronic music scene’s tendency of idealizing anonymity and a-subjectivity. Secondly, ‘a performance stands in and of itself as an event’ (Roman 1998:xvii) and the methodology of performativity focuses on singular actions while practice theory is predominantly interested in routines and frequent, periodic actions (cf. Hörning/Reuter 2004:12).

The music projects I have gathered in this study act out reflexive and singular practices, i.e. performances of anonymity. In the pop music field, anonymity is an activity critical of individual-centred discourse and of the institution of ‘star personalities’ in pop music, yet I am less interested in anonymity as a practice in the sense of a habitualized (sub)cultural routine (the substantial anonymity realized by EDM) than in singular performances and presentations of anonymity. My methodological anchor therefore lies in the paradigm of the performative, and I investigate anonymity operations as performances. These performances represent expert meta-engagements with anonymity enacted by electronic pop music agents, who have regularly positioned themselves rather on the fringes of EDM – as avantgarde projects, or as genre-crossers.

In the tradition of a ‘nomad’ (rather than a ‘royal’) science (Deleuze/Guattari (1980)2002:373), I ‘follow’ two such cultural expertise projects. In its original sense, ‘method’ (from Greek ‘methodos’, a composition of meta (after) and hodos (way, motion, journey), means nothing less than just such a ‘following’ (Deleuze/Guattari 2002:372) – or in a reformulation from contemporary ethnography, ‘thinking out of one’s ethnographic material’ (Holbraad/Pedersen 2017:14). Nevertheless, a precision of methodology might be called for:

Field note 417/ Nov. 2011. I finally read Jacques Derrida’s ‘Signature Event Context’ ((1972)1988) to its very end: at the end of this paper, in which he argues for the iterability and absence in writing, Derrida places his personal signature.
Researching anonymity in performance | 13

Fig. 1 Derrida’s signature in ‘Signature Event Context’ (Derrida 1988:23)

My notion of the ‘performative’ draws on Derrida’s ((1972)1988) deconstructive reading of John L. Austin’s speech act theory. Austin ((1962)1975) had called specific forms of language usage ‘performatives’ and declared them productive due to the radical presence of their speaker. Derrida (1988) deconstructed Austin’s approach and instead positioned writing – a radical form of absence – as the basis of all forms of communication. Derrida locates the productive agency of language, which Austin had located in the presence of a speaker, in the general iterability of signs. Two elements of Derrida’s approach are of special importance to my project: firstly, by positioning the principle of repetition (in contrast to Austin’s principle of self-presence) as the condition of the possibility of any sign usage (cf. Schumacher 2002:386), Derrida laid the ground for an extension of the concept of the ‘performative’ from the linguistic field to theatrical and social performances (cf. Butler 1988,1990,1993).

Secondly, Derrida notably applies the principle of the performative to his own writing. While Derrida had argued in his paper for radical absence, he doubles (and undermines) this statement at the end of the paper with an obverse flourish: the handwritten signature

7 Of course, in Derrida’s book ((1972)1988) and here in this text, the handwritten signature is photographically, digitally etc. reproduced.
music (Cook 2008). Since the *Writing Culture* debate (Clifford/Marcus 1986), ethnography has come to represent not only a distinct qualitative research method but also a specific text genre. In music ethnography, music is, in the tradition of ethnomusicology, understood as cultural practice (of a group of people, a culture, a field) to be analysed by an ethnographer in a period of fieldwork characterized by a multi-layered methodology and eventually represented in writing.

The area of my research, ‘electronic pop music’, hardly forms a geographically or socially circumscribable ‘field’ as it is produced and consumed in global contexts, by individuals and groups who are both socially and geographically disparate. Nevertheless, ‘electronic pop music’, insofar as it represents a pop music culture heavily determined by electronic modes of production, has a historical boundary: it grew out of the subculture of electronic dance music (EDM) in the late 1980s, mainly in Europe and in the US, and crossed over to the mainstream club culture of ‘electronic pop music’ in the mid 1990s. My methodology differs from a traditional fieldwork because, besides face-to-face interactions and participation in electronic dance music events and performances, I include archival material such as journalistic texts, videos, sound recordings and books on electronic dance and pop music along with theoretical texts and use them not as corrective materials but as a constitutive part of my data material (cf. Des Chenes 1997:76ff.). Therefore, I include video transcripts and theoretical excerpts in my fieldwork notebook. The performative turn, nevertheless, permeates my methodology also in a more radical sense:

Field note 418/Jan. 2012: Michael Taussig in his *dOCUMENTA (13)* publication on Fieldwork Notebooks (Taussig 2011:5): ‘[C]hance determines (what an odd phrase!) what goes into the collection, and chance determines how it is used. (Imagine a social science that not only admits to this principle but runs with it!) This strikes me as an insightful way of portraying a fieldworker’s notebook.’

Running with the principle of chance postulates a model of socio-cultural science that is itself performative. ‘If the world is a performance, not a text’, and culture ‘a verb, a process, an ongoing performance’ (Denzin 2003:11f.), this calls for a radical ‘rethinking [of] ethnography’ (Conquergood 1991). Although I associate myself with ethnography, my aim is not a holistic representation of electronic pop music culture. Ethnography has, with its crisis of representation, seen a ‘deep epistemological, methodological and ethical self-questioning’ (Conquergood 1991:179).
Yet even in critical ethnography ‘reflexivity failed to generate new strategies, forms and norms of practice to encounter the more complex, parallel and fragmented worlds that many fieldwork projects must now negotiate’ (Marcus 2010:84). While the ‘field’ of Malinowskian ethnography was understood as a place of marginality and alterity, today’s fields resemble what George Marcus (2010:88) calls a ‘mise-en-scène’, a self-evidently dramaturgical product of ethnographer and ‘ethnographees’. Marcus’ concept of the ‘mise-en-scène’ reflects the fictional element that accompanies every topographical description (see also Bayard (2012)2013). Moreover, ethnographic practice and fieldwork turn into a ‘collaborative performance of an enabling fiction between observer and observed, knower and known’ (Conquergood 1991:190).

Deriving from critical ethnography and beginning in the 1990s, performative anthropology established performance not only as a subject of study but as a method of research. A focus on performances lends itself well to my subject, since performance is ‘a fundamental dimension for music’s existence’ (Cook 2008:58). My ‘performance ethnography’ on anonymity in electronic pop music understands its subject as performance: musical practices, in my case, anonymity practices on musical and social stages, are analysed as performances. Yet performance, as a method of research, also affects my overall writing and my knowledge practice. Performance ethnography experiments with performance as research practice – in both the senses of theatrical and processual performance. Performance as a theatrical, staging activity manifests itself in this study by the implementation of ‘performance writing’; new ‘texts that move beyond the purely representational and toward the presentational’ (Denzin 2003:xi). The effect on my writing is that my research protocol itself turns into a theatrical performance. In the tradition of performance writing, my text aims to ‘evoke […] what it names’ (Phelan 1998:13) and I use language in ways that ‘show […] rather than tell […]’ (Denzin 2003:93). My text includes visual material that not merely illustrates but performs an argument, and thus my text ‘looks distinctive on the page’ (Denzin 2003:94) – using special typefaces and graphical elements. In the later chapters, I also include other genres of writing, for example, borrowed from the encyclopaedia format, or, as in this introduction, from the fieldwork notebook. Furthermore, by use of the ‘I’ of the researcher and an ongoing research narrative my personal presence is woven into this text.

Performance as research practice further manifests itself in this study as a processual activity of the performance-researcher. The research matter of this study is processually transformed and re-perspectivized and this process begins with the delineation of my research matter: soon after beginning this study I realized that anonymity cannot be a transcendent object of my investigation. On
the one hand, anonymity ‘needs witnesses and relies on someone knowing that the proper name is being hidden or held in reserve’ (Gaston 2008:107 referring to Derrida 1987:46f.). On the other hand, one cannot know about an anonymous entity without impairing its anonymity, without registering or making it known. Anonymity is ephemeral and *ontologically* precarious. Or put more generally, the knowledge of anonymity impairs its being. Nonetheless, like a secret, anonymity’s ephemerality exerts a potent attractive force on me as an observer. And as ‘[t]here is no such thing as a secret (Taussig 1999:7, IM), there also is no such thing as anonymity. A possible state of ‘being without name and identity’ would instead depend on an active not-knowing, existing only as a ‘public secret’ (Taussig 1999). Within linguistic discourse, anonymity ‘won’t stay still’; it puts forward a ‘chain of substitution’ (Caesar 2008:38) that helps one to realize the procedures of construction that are necessary to produce a factual, distinct (discursive) object. Rather than being a fully transcendental, universal object that can be acknowledged by the fully immanent (social) subject, anonymity can only be understood as what Michel Serres calls a ‘quasi-object’ (Serres (1981)2007: 228) – both transcendent and immanent (Lash 1999). Following the deconstructivist interrogation of categorical oppositions, all cultural or anthropological things (including practices and material objects) can be understood as fabricated (albeit not arbitrary) things or as artefacts (of practices). But quasi-objects, such as ‘anonymity’, carry a specific, demonstrative hybridity with them, so that they inevitably corrupt all forms of distanced inquiry. Within the context of modernist, dualistic worldviews, which still dominate scholarly inquiry, these quasi-objects create noise. The quasi-object of anonymity destabilizes the assumed transparency of theoretical language and displays the performativity of knowledge production. How does one investigate such a corruptive research object?

Having already stated that my research interest concerns anonymity performances (rather than anonymity practices), I can now provide the methodological rationale for this decision. The corruptive quasi-object of anonymity compels me to take a step back and to consider the fabrication rather than the (autonomous) fact of anonymity as research object, and to affirm the genuine performativity of cultural research objects: both present and represented, cultural research objects are substantial facts and fabrications of the researcher\(^8\). With Latour (1999:281, IO), one can argue that ‘scientists make autonomous facts’, but in the act of fabricating them they can be ‘slightly overtaken by the action’, ‘surprised’ and

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\(^8\) While Latour introduces (and then rejects) the metaphor of the (theatre) stage (cf. Latour 1999:140), I find the metaphor of the performance stage most appropriate to understand the ‘scene’ of research.
are ‘not in command’. As a theoretical object, anonymity unmistakably displays this performativity and therefore prompts one to consider the process of fabricating anonymity, namely anonymity practices and – in my case – performances. Therefore the notion of ‘anonymity performance’ will serve as my object of study – but only until ch. 2 of this text. From ch. 3 onwards performance will transform from an object of research to the method of study.

Latour’s shift towards actions and practices highlights the actions of researchers; when one shifts focus to consider academic practices, one finds anonymity to be a rare theme: few studies on the topic exist and in the academic field “anonymity” seems to be an instance of what it names’ (Natanson 1986:23). For these reasons, I have expanded the circle of research agents to include musico-artistic agents from the ‘field’ as ‘knowledge practitioners’. Electronic dance music (EDM) has experimented with anonymity, through practices such as white-labelling or faceless media-presentation of recordings, since it emerged as a subcultural movement in the late 1980s. With (personal) anonymity EDM itself, as a movement, aimed to go beyond dualisms of subjects and objects. Within EDM, the strategy of choice centred on the avoidance of discourse-centred forms of communication and classifying language, while within the music itself, non-organic sounds emphasized the aim of fully collapsing the ‘human and artificial’ (Loza 2001:350). This was meant to help ‘dissolve [...] all of the other dualities’ (Springer 1996:34) – those pertaining to identity with its binaries of gender, race and sexuality specifically, and the dualism of subject and object in general. In this study I will not be providing yet another non-dualist theory or a theoretical vocabulary that is meant to ‘grasp’ such dissolutions of subjects and objects (but all to often turns non-dualism into a new ontological assumption). Much has been written on EDM and I will not be joining the queue of those who seek to answer the question of this movement’s success in its ano-

Since the time that I finished this study in 2014, the subject of anonymity has received more theoretical attention. This is likely due to the increased significance and presence of surveillance, identification and online communication technologies in recent years. The research project Reconfiguring anonymity started in 2015 and its interdisciplinary perspective integrating social anthropology, sociology, media science, art history and art is highly promising (see www.reconfiguring-anonymity.net). Michi Knecht, Götz Bachmann and Andreas Wittel (2017:243), who are members of this research group, give a good overview of the existing literature on anonymity while also acknowledging that it is a ‘category that defies easy ways of modelling and framing’. Although they mention the ‘performative dimension of anonymity’ (Knecht/Bachmann/Wittel 2017:251), a study on ‘anonymity performance’ seems still pending.
nymity these endeavours. I will also not be investigating non-personality in the forms that pop music theory of the last 30 years has been immersed in – the approaches of theorizing sound and listening, describing non-personality as subjectlessness theoretically or supporting the various motivations for anti-personality in EDM theoretically.

Instead, I depart from an investigation of anonymity as a substantial fact. Substantial anonymity – the state of being without a name or unlinked from other potentially identifying markers of individuality – has only ever been achieved by very few electronic dance music producers and performers; nevertheless, it stayed with the genre and its successor, electronic pop music, as an aesthetic and political ideal. Anonymity performances, in contrast, represent meta-engagements with anonymity and its history in the scene by electronic pop music agents. My interest centres on these peripheral, reflexive practices, which do not aim to achieve substantial anonymity, but perform anonymity and engage with its ambivalences. I aim to make these field knowledges about anonymity productive for academic knowledge practice – an ultimately science-centred (not field-centred) transdisciplinary endeavour. Instead of theoretically speculating on how to bring a (corruptive) research object into (academic) discourse, I conducted a transdisciplinary search for field projects that do not achieve full anonymity but perform anonymity – performing in the sense of processing but also staging (in discourse). The chosen projects stem from electronic pop music and are critical of pop music star personality, yet they do not refuse identification and subject constitution in discourse altogether, but perform personality in a critical, des-integrating and ambivalent manner. In their performance of anonymity, these projects find alternative, and discursive, ways of practicing a critical a-personality. They interfere with discourse, using written and spoken language and vocality in performances or engaging in public relations and journalistic discourse. These electronic pop music projects, frequently positioned on the fringes of the scene, deliberately engage in linguistic operations and reflect the theatricality of discourse and discursive critique; but they also engage in language’s processuality and release it from its representative functions. It is certainly clear that these musico-artistic projects have functions other than producing critical, discursive knowledge – however this is the aspect that is of most interest to me in this project.

10 Similar to institution-critical art, which criticises the institutions of art while being displayed in galleries and museums (cf. Fraser 2005), electronic pop music performances of anonymity use the discursive and media institutions of pop music while critiquing them.
In my transdisciplinary methodology these field projects serve as laboratory (not exemplary) cases of anonymity performance: they neither represent nor exemplify the field of electronic pop music – I do not describe a practice that is typical for the field – but these cases do provide a laboratory for strategies of performance that can be productive for the academic field. And precisely in their very ephemerality and indeterminableness, in their resistance to becoming an object of knowledge, lies their critical potential.

My research question for this study is therefore centrally concerned with method: how can one practice critical knowledge about anonymity performances and not objectify the ephemerality of these practices?

Before embarking on a transdisciplinary search for answers from within the field (in order to eventually transfer them to the academic field), the notion of ‘critical’ in this question must be clarified. Traditionally, ‘critique’ was linked to the position of distance between a subject of knowledge and its object(s); critical subjects delivered judgements about objects, they disclosed knowledge about objects. Yet due to major shifts in political and social power structures since the last decades of the 20th century this operation of ‘disclosure’ has become problematic. In today’s society of control, rather than enclosing rules, it is flexible modulations, which exert power (cf. Deleuze (1990)1995). Traditional criticality that calls for transparency – ‘disclosure’ and distanced judgement – has therefore undergone a crisis. In contrast to such contemplative, abstract operations of critical judgement, ‘critical practice’ (Butler (2000)2002) or ‘practical critique’ (Foucault (1984)2003:45) does not deliver critical knowledge about but with an object of critique (cf. Huber et al. 2007:9). Critical practice as developed by Foucault and Butler does not investigate from a neutral and autonomous standpoint, but represents a knowledge practice that is self-transformational and ‘exposes the limits of [an] epistemological horizon’ (Butler 2002:217), while concentrating on the ‘invention of as many new practices as possible’ (Sonderegger 2008:673, TM). Critical practice is self-critical (i.e. it reflects the ‘knowledge-power nexus’ (Foucault (1978)2007:61) within every knowledge practice) and is delivered in a performative, artful form of practice. With Foucault’s critical project and Derrida’s performative project in mind, critical practice will not only be an object of investigation in this study, but will itself be applied as research practice. A critical position – also towards one’s own work – has to be taken permanently; research as critical practice has to self-critically acknowledge its very own reductions. Instead of setting up definitions and applying them subsequently, in the course of this study and in dialogue with my laboratory cases, I develop and apply concepts (such as ‘persona performance’ and ‘fake’) and
discard (some of) them later in the text. My theoretical musings alternate with analyses of the laboratory cases.

The processual character of ‘performance’ manifests itself in this ‘performance ethnography’ as a continual transformation und re-perspectivation of its research matter. This text documents a process of research through various concepts, only delivering potential solutions to the research question (i.e. a thesis) in its final stretch: forms of critical practice that academia can deduce from the field of electronic music. The tactic of ‘collaborative imagination’ is advocated here as a possible new format for ethnographic research into ephemeral phenomena and precarious objects, that disallow simple testimony or disclosure (cf. Hamera 2011). The structure of this study therefore more closely resembles a patchwork than a tree.

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Outline

After this basic introduction, ch. 0.2 draws together the historical reference points of practices of anonymity and their utopian and dystopian potential. It also refines my basic differentiation between anonymity practices: those that in effect produce substantial anonymity, and those that knowingly and spectacularly perform a-personality in discourse without necessarily effecting full anonymity – discursive anonymity performance will be at the centre of this study. Chapter 0.3 points to three potential forms of critiquing pop music personality: the critical investigation of star personality (as in the various disciplines of academic star studies), the (distanced) refusal of pop music personality (as in the anonymity practices of EDM) and the critical practice of pop music personality (as in the anonymity performances of electronic pop music projects examined in this study). Investigating an anonymity performance by electronic pop music artist Fever Ray, ch. 0.3 distils characteristics of critical practice (against a backdrop of historical concepts of critique in theory), which is then itself taken up as the guiding knowledge production principle of this study and developed into a research design.

Chapter 1 represents the first laboratory case of this study. Here I analyse how dance music producer Moodymann inquires into the construction of persona and demonstrates the various (historical and medial) aspects of the ‘pop music persona’ in a live performance. Proceeding from Moodymann’s practice, in ch. 2 I arrive at a summary of the approaches to practice and performance in (pop) music studies and their applicability to electronic dance music. An excursion following ch. 2 then introduces approaches to persona, which I present in a deconstructive format, a fictive encyclopaedia entry. Chapter 3.1 then aims to work out a definition of one form of critical anonymity practice in electronic pop
music which turns the relationship of subjects and objects of knowledge on its head; the fake. The terminological and practice history of fake, in pop music and elsewhere, which I develop in ch. 3.1, will then be discarded in ch. 3.2 in favour of a more self-critical practice, as applied by the musical project ‘Ursula Bogner’. With this second laboratory case I then arrive at a point where I tentatively name its practice ‘collaborative imagination’. Finally, rather than defining this practice, I argue for transforming this critical practice into a methodology for (academic) research on precarious research ‘subjects’.

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0.2 THE ENIGMATIC VOID: FROM ANONYMITY TO ANONYMITY PERFORMANCES IN ELECTRONIC DANCE AND POP MUSIC

‘This is the enigmatic void of Acid House: where the invisible hide and the mute prefer silence, where the ecstasy of disappearance resists the imperative to reveal one’s self.’

Melechi 1993:38

Although anonymity has seldom been an autonomous research object,¹ the term’s discursive use and history are worthy of review. This chapter presents the discursive history and contemporary usage of ‘anonymity’, which is characterized by ambivalences (cf. Bachmann/Knecht/Wittel 2017:248). In today’s digital culture, anonymity serves to protect individuals while simultaneously alluding to dystopian notions of individual unaccountability or political totalitarianism. Anonymity has accommodated this ambivalence from the early years of the 20th century when it acquired its conflicting meanings. In the more recent past, electronic dance music celebrated the void created by anonymized sounds. The high degree of prestige accorded to obscurity within dance culture not only encouraged an active audience seeking out information about new styles and genres (rather than individual authors), but also – through ‘[t]he “moral panic“ associated with early rave culture’ (Hesmondhalgh 1998:237) – served as an effective marketing tool (cf. McRobbie/Thornton 1995:565), ‘obviat[ing] the need for promotional skills and marketing costs on the part of the incipient independent sector’ (Hesmondhalgh 1998:237). This chapter discusses the dis-

¹ See supra ch. 0.1 footnote 9.
cursive conditions in which the *sonic anonymity practices* of EDM operate and how self-critical projects from within the scene engage with the ‘enigma’ of anonymity through *discursive anonymity performances*.  

**History of the term ‘anonymity’**

In its early 20th century sociological usage, anonymity figured as a culture-historical and political diagnosis of urban culture, signifying the impersonality, estrangement and solitariness of the modern metropolis. Here the term was used for a critique of modern urban society in which agglomerations of individuals live in close proximity to one another while ‘sinking’ into anonymity (Canby 1926 as quoted in Natanson (1986:80)). Anonymity has also been used negatively in reference to the crowd, in the sense that, by ‘being anonymous’, the crowd is considered to be ‘in consequence irresponsible’ (Le Bon 1896:33).

This negative connotation of the term persists in the reputation that anonymity has today when it is used in contexts of liability (of speech) on the internet. Furthermore, negative usage of anonymity persists in the sense of ‘sovereign or [externally] imposed anonymity’. This usage is frequently found in the context of contingent labour of blue collar jobs, of ‘anonymous adjuncts’ (O’Dair 2008:11) in academia, as well as of anonymity as the imposition of namelessness by a state for the purpose of exclusion; foreigners, ‘sans-papiers’, the undocumented aliens who, being ‘without a name’ are also without rights and without the right of human dignity (cf. Derrida 2002:135).

By contrast, in early 20th century critical literary discourse, anonymity gained a positive connotation as the celebrated artistic-aesthetic practice of publishing a piece of writing ‘without a name’ (in the literal sense) or in the figurative sense of writing in an impersonal manner. Here, anonymity became used as a kind of antonym to personality (cf. Ferry 2002:198) and its imposition (anonymous authorship or impersonal writing style) was highly valued as a strategy of ‘anti-personality’ amongst writers who disregarded individual expression and disdained a literary scene and publishing industry based on individual authorship claims and personality cults. Of course, non-individual production and non-personal reception had been the norm in oral and folk traditions, and the term anonymity itself only gained usage in the 19th century (cf. OED 1989) – when ‘personality’ had become the standard model of literary and musical distribution.²

² While forms of anonymity clearly differ with respect to social orders, ‘*concepts* of anonymity often implicitly build on Western assumptions and categories’ (Baumann/
The term ‘anonymity’ as discursive act

Both early 20\textsuperscript{th} century usages of anonymity – cultural impersonality and aesthetic anti-personality – were developed in fields of (traditional) critique; the sociological critique of cultural anonymity and critical literary discourse. These two critical discourses valuate anonymity differently (negatively in the case of sociological critique, positively in literary critique) but both usages, albeit referring to concrete practices, are applied in order to judge and impose a critical distance to these practices. Thus, in critical modernist discourse, anonymity forms a ‘paradox’ (Ferry 2002:209); the utopia of aesthetic non-personality as opposed to the dystopia of cultural impersonality. Critical discourse aims to level this gap by the very use of the term anonymity. Interestingly, the Greek word ‘anonymos’ first appeared in the English language in an act of sovereign, epistemological distancing: when something was found to have ‘no name to be called by, [it] got thereupon the name Anonymos’ (Holland (1601:274) cited after Gaston 2008:107\textsuperscript{3}). ‘In other words, the birth of the “anonymos” in English does not announce what is without name as much as the naming of the nameless’ and ‘“Anonymous” becomes the proper name, the capitalisation, the socially recognized form of the without name’ (Gaston 2008:107), thus making possible the imposition of the naming convention upon ‘pre-modern’ (and subsequent 20\textsuperscript{th} century anti-modern) practitioners of ‘writing without name’. Rather than (merely linguistically) representing an existing, circumscribed object, the word ‘Anonymos’ itself executes the objectification.

This study is predicated on the poststructuralist view of language and knowledge that asserts that discourse is not merely descriptive but has consequences in the material world. Referring to a utopia of collectivity by the term anonymity is itself a discursive act that has repercussions within the music scene in which anonymity is practiced. The self- or other stylisation of EDM as ‘radically anonymous’ is an objectification of these practices. The discourse about musical anonymity – critical and distanced – is never fully able to close the gap between a utopia and a dystopia of anonymity and will always interfere in the realities of anonymity practices and performances.

\textsuperscript{3} Philemon Holland (1601) was the translator of Pliny’s natural history (cf. Gaston 2008:107).
Sonic anonymity practices in production, distribution, and reception

Studies on the ‘aesthetics of anonymity’ (Butler 2006:43) in EDM have, until now, not considered such a poststructuralist take on language and discourse. Accounts of electronic dance music commonly focus on either the (bodily) experience of EDM sound or the new production apparatus of EDM in order to postulate EDM as a music that is separate from discourse.

In this first case, arguments are put forth that focus on the highly synthetic sound and acousmatic properties of the music, the use of sampled fragments of other music and the rare use of vocals (e.g. Eshun 1998, Reynolds 1998, Tagg 1994, Gilbert/Pearson 1999:38ff.) thereby deliberately directing attention to the music’s ‘surface’ rather than to its ‘sources’. If, despite the generally acousmatic quality of the sounds (the source of the sound remains unidentifiable), one hears (and can identify) a sound source, it is likely to be a machine (rather than a human body) invoking – if anything – the impersonal soundscape of a metropolitan or industrialized city. Along with this ‘depthlessness’ (Toynbee 2000: 132), the sound of EDM is based on repetitive percussion patterns and rhythmic structures instead of narrative development and storytelling (cf. Toynbee 2000: 132, Gilbert 1997:18, Diederichsen 2008b:185). These intratextual, sonic features of EDM place listeners arguably in a state of ‘pure presence where time, and therefore subjectivity, threaten to disappear altogether’ (Toynbee 2000:145 referring to Melechi 1993 and Gilbert 1997) and where the music affects them ‘immediately’.4 A further transformation of subjectivity is facilitated by the experiencing of music in networked forms of club dancing and trance-like states induced by drug consumption (cf. Collins 1997, Jackson 2004).5 In such experience-oriented readings, EDM sound – addressing a crowd with ‘a body [that] is a large brain that thinks and feels’ (Eshun 1998:22) in dance rather than a thinking, individually conscious audience – can put the subject in a liminal state.6

5 The role of dance and bodily experience in techno culture has been further conceptualised by Gabriele Klein ((1999)2004) as being not merely transformative but primarily constitutive of social reality.
Another strain of argument focuses on the specific production apparatus of EDM as dance music and as electronically produced music. EDM’s drive towards impersonality and dissolution of individual consciousness in a collective groove has historical predecessors. EDM – ‘formerly termed “rave” and before that “acid house”’ (Huq 2002:90) – has its origins in (predominantly) African-American music styles that emerged in the mid-1980s: Chicago ‘house’ music, Detroit ‘techno’ and New York ‘garage’ sounds. These were themselves ‘amalgams of post-disco dance music, and the electronic sounds of European avant-garde pop’ (Toynbee 2000:133) such as Kraftwerk (cf. Eshun 1998:86). All of these styles feature the four-to-the-floor bass drum pattern inherited from disco, yet they differ from disco-style dance music in two ways: firstly, in their fully electronic mode of production, which utilizes drum machines, synthesizers and sequencers, and secondly, in their mode of presentation and distribution. In EDM, the DJ is positioned at crowd-level and flat networks are to be found not only on the dance floor but also in the broader scene structure (cf. Straw 1993). Beginning in the disco era, access to new technologies of music production gradually became more widely affordable (cf. Toop 1995:214ff) making possible a democratisation of production, so that one can speak (with Toynbee 2000:148ff.) of ‘networks’ of production in EDM that challenged the forms of cultural production which had been dominant in the music industry until then:

‘Networks have changed the terms and conditions of entrepreneurship and the profit-making routines which developed in the rock era. In rock the album is the key commodity. It depends for its success on a complex and expensive marketing strategy consisting of more or less simultaneous radio play of a single taken from the album, media appearances and reporting, live tour by the band and national retail distribution of records in different formats. In dance music, conversely, the club DJ alone initiates the dissemination of just one sound carrier, the 12-inch single’ (Toynbee 2000:151).

A new division of labour between music producer and DJ-performer was established, so that in EDM ‘the dance music producer tends to be anonymous’ (Toynbee 2000:131). The labour process in EDM clearly differs from rock styles, as the ‘DJ “finish[es]” dance music by inserting records into a continuous as a function of discourse – as both physical and mental, material and ideal. Yet with their exclusionary focus on sound as the single medium of music, Gilbert and Pearson all too quickly foreclose further discussion on music discourse. They return to a notion of music as a ‘more physical type of discourse than others’ (1999:52) and treat this ‘physical, material discourse’ as being just as separate from linguistic discourse as other experience-oriented approaches to EDM.
mix in the club’, and ‘leaves producers dependent on DJs as performers of their music [...]’, which ‘limits [their] role [...] and reduce[s] the potential for the ascription of auteur status to either role [...]. (“Live” performance by producers in concert or personal club appearance [being] exceptional’ (Toynbee 2000:161, ICO).

Due to both the collective experience of EDM sounds and their new production and distribution situation in a network with increased feedback between music makers and audiences, scholars diagnosed a (new) kind of networked sociality in EDM (cf. Toynbee 2000:161). The autonomy of this ‘networked sociality’ has since been a subject of intensive and far-reaching discussion. To most scholars the networking arrangements represent a far-reaching paradigm shift in popular musicianship (e.g. Stahl 2003, Eshun 1998, Reynolds 1998) deviating from subjectivist approaches such as those prominent in rock music. These scholars follow a rhetoric present within the dance music scene, which is one of rupture, paradigm shift and a utopian view of the future. Here EDM ‘presents itself as an absolute music which has immediate effect on mind and body’ (Gilbert/Pearson 1999:179) and by virtue of its very existence claims to represent a challenge to the ‘representing function’ that music has in other, older genres such as rock where an individual author ‘sang for a better world on behalf of a community of youth’ (Toynbee 2000:131,162, ICO) or represented the values of a community in its star figures.

To other scholars the networking arrangements characteristic to EDM represent a continuation of inherently collective principles of popular music production (e.g. Toynbee 2000.130ff.). Indeed, popular music is characterized by collective modes of production as a consequence of its paradigmatically disintegrated form of production. Popular music has always been an adjunct to a larger industry: ‘historically cinema and radio, [...] more recently [...] electronic hardware manufacturers’ (Toynbee 2000:19). Pop music is also characterized by a dispersed mode of reception as it is presented in a variety of media such as the phonograph, radio broadcast, digital music player, film soundtrack, music television, live concert, advertisement, internet stream etc. For musicians, this means working in a variety of contexts and medial forms. Due to the highly disintegrated production form of the pop music industry, every pop music production is, in fact, the result of a collective effort wherein it would be difficult to identify one single author (cf. Middleton 2000). Collaboration with other
musicians and intermediaries of the cultural industries\(^7\) is inevitable, especially since music made under studio conditions requires the cooperation of many individuals to manage the complex production processes. Seen from this perspective, the networked sociality of EDM, rather than representing a historically singular paradigm shift, is a continuation of principles, which were in place before the introduction of an ideology of the author into popular music by the star system.

David Hesmondhalgh acknowledges that EDM favours networked socialities and elevates indifference towards artist’s authorship to an ideological goal (cf. Hesmondhalgh 1998:238f.), but concludes, that ‘all of these innovations need to be set against the limited impact of dance music at the organisation of musical creativity’ (Hesmondhalgh 1998:249). Although EDM offered up utopian ‘discourses of collectivism’ (1998:248f.), it did not effectively provide an alternative to the mainstream music industry, at any rate not to the degree of a counter-economy in the manner of the ‘politicized anti-corporatism’ (Hesmondhalgh 1998:249) of the independent record companies that emerged, for example, in the wake of punk.

Here the question arises whether the agenda of the scholar is compatible with that of the musician. For while the music scholars claim to represent a transformation or even a historical shift in pop music production and experience, the EDM scene rarely presents itself as explicitly anti-capitalist or political. Apart from the ‘“heroic” period of British dance (1988-94)’ (Toynbee 2000:132), when British dance music came into conflict with the state and scene protagonists took part in direct action – a juncture that received a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention (cf. Huq 2006:101) – politicisation is evident only in parts of the (habitually hedonistic) dance scene. Yet being politically non-explicit must not be equated with ‘political quietism’ (Middleton 2000:87) or nihilism.\(^8\) Its hedonism earned the dance scene a reputation for being apolitical, while within the scene its passivity was understood as an anti-enlightening subversion (cf. Stöger 2001:5); subversion here meaning that political aims are advanced by the very fact that they are not articulated in language and discourse but in a speech-

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\(^7\) I use the plural ‘cultural industries’ to indicate the complexity and differences within the various types of cultural production in industries as various as broadcasting and recording industry (see for a discussion Hesmondhalgh (2002:11ff.)).

\(^8\) Middleton (2000:87) critiques the solipsistic effect of the ‘internally spiralling intertextual practice’ of recent electronic dance music culture and makes the author’s disappearance in EDMs radical intertextuality and the self-referencing circularities of the music accountable for its ‘political quietism’.
less sounding (cf. Marchart 2000) — a posture similar to the ‘no demands’ claims by the Occupy Movement since 2011 or the strategies of anonymisation and massification of so-called ‘black blocs’ in street demonstrations (cf. Galloway 2011). In the self-conception of the EDM scene, it is this withdrawal from discourse and the corresponding antagonism to explicit language that forms a voice that is outspoken without ever saying a word.

It seems that either/or approaches dominate. Outsiders oppose the non-explicitness of EDM as politically ineffective, inward-looking and nihilistic. Insiders (and with them many EDM scholars) celebrate its non-discursivity as a new form of politics in sound, with the sound material or its democratic production situation considered to be political in and of itself. It was in the 1990s that pop music scholars in great numbers discovered the sensory, non-semiotic qualities of pop music as sound and its capacity to stimulate and collectivize in self-organising, processual networks beyond an emblematic, linguistic communication. Since then, sound-centred perspectives have become the new horizon for analysis of pop musics and have triggered the large-scale abandonment of previous language-oriented research on pop music as a practice of reinterpretation of signs in a ‘semiological guerrilla war’ (Eco 1985) or as deconstructive play (cf. Jauk 2009:126f.).

The new focus on sound allowed pop music scholars to theorize EDM as existing outside discourse and lacking representational, identificatory functions such as ‘naming’ a person or ‘producing’ an author. Unfortunately, stressing the non-discursivity of music often leads to neglecting the importance of discourse altogether. Yet, for their theorisations scholars themselves rely on discourse, and critical, distanced language remains the medium for scholarly investigations into music – be it classical, pop or dance music. Here one faces a central problem of scholarly accounts of EDM: a position of critical distance is required of the modern academic as well as evalu-

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9 Some arguments about the politics of sound in EDM concentrate on its material qualities and production situation. Other, more contemporary theorisations argue that EDMs antagonism to discourse requires demonstration in a public forum (for example the volkstanz.net demonstrations with loud music, dancing and non-speaking crowds in the early 2000s in Austria) to be called an ‘actual sound politicisation’ (Marchart 2000, TM).

10 With the Occupy movement of 2011, the practice of anonymity attained wider visibility and was frequently commented upon in mainstream media.

11 Not only research on dance musics but also older, non dance-oriented genres of pop music have since been reformulated to focus on sound, often using the vocabulary of emotion and stimulation, body music, event and immediacy.
ative judgements and mutual preclusions of positions. Thus, a scholar is left with two opposed ways of reading anonymity in EDM – either utopian or pessimistic.

Instead of adding another form of evaluative reading of anonymity or attempting to resolve an alleged conflict between utopia and dystopia, I would instead like to expose the gap between these two readings. For me, ‘exposing the gap’ does not mean adopting the position scholars of EDM have sometimes claimed for themselves, namely that of a postmodern scholar who favours plurality and parallel world views and sees her/his job in describing the diversity of possible judgements in order to ultimately conclude that there is always more than one discourse about the cultural object of anonymity. Instead, I would like to address the practice of ‘naming’ and delineating an object within critical or theoretical discourse itself.

**Discursive acts about (musical) anonymity**

In a poststructuralist view a discursive term brings an object into being; ‘naming an object’ constructs our knowledge and experience of this ‘object’ rather than neutrally describing an autonomously existing object. In general, ‘[t]he production of knowledge about music is [...] performative [...]’: it acts, both reflecting and forming our musical values, practices and institutions’ (Born 2010:205, IO). Already the designation ‘music’ is value-laden; it constructs an audio-visual phenomenon as valuable for listening and analysis and for being experienced as ‘music’ rather than mere ‘noise’. Our experience of the sound of music, sometimes called ‘the music itself’ or the ‘discourse of music’, cannot be separate from the discourse about music and from the discursive terminology. From here I would like to follow Bruce Horner (2008:30) in his conclusion that, rather than keeping with the idea of a discourse about music that is separate from the ‘music itself’, the scholar has to transgress her/his role as neutral observer: ‘we need to abandon the ideal of resolving conflicts among ways of talking about popular music and accept our role in participating in these conflicts. [...] The terms we use in discoursing about popular music, and our inflections of these terms, matter’. Although I am in favour of such a new role for the scholar, I wonder how exactly to grasp the dialectical relationship between the object of musical analysis and the terms of musical analysis. How can the relationship be apprehended without falling back on another absolutism, that of the ‘inescapable’ discourse (cf. Horner 2008:27)? Horner (2008:32) suggests that ‘we can ask of any discursive acts (that of others and our own) what difference that way of talking about a particular instance of popular music might make, for whom, under what conditions, and how, and why we might want to perpetuate such
effects or not’. This would constitute a rather extensive programme, and further-reaching questions of how to employ it methodologically would certainly remain. I doubt that a mere indication of plurality through the words of the scholar is the best way of engaging with the performativity of knowledge about music. Rather, I think that this performativity of knowledge urges the music scholar to dissolve the traditional subject-object dichotomy of critical scholarly inquiry – with consequences for the choice and definition of ‘objects’ and the medium of analysis.

Being that the aim of this study is a multi-dimensional investigation of the effects of discursive acts about anonymity in electronic pop music, I suggest combining the poststructuralist impetus with a transdisciplinary methodology that productively (not just nominally) transgresses the subject/object-divide and reconfigures the activity of the scholar. For this, Serres’ ((1981)2007:224-244) and Latour’s (1993:51) notions of the ‘quasi-object’ are useful to destabilize my own position (as a scholar of whom it is expected to decide between the positions of either constructivism or realism as her/his grounding epist-ontology). I assume, that as much as practices of anonymity in EDM have a factuality and substance beyond discourse, anonymity is also fictionalized and turned into an ‘object’ by scholarly, journalistic and scene-internal discourse. For me as a scholar, anonymity therefore forms a quasi-object; it is both factual (substantial) and fictional (discursive). Anonymity is an aspect of EDM ‘music itself’ – the discourse of music – as well as of the discourse about music. In this study, indicating the gap between the dystopia and the utopia of anonymity will neither be done by simply using the ‘name’ anonymity12, nor by merely displaying the full range of its possible connotations. Investigating the quasi-object of anonymity, a necessarily unstable particle influenced by the processes of its naming and prone to ephemerality, will be undertaken via a methodological tactic developed by Latour (1999). I will report on the critical knowledge practice on anonymity developed by agents other than myself and follow pop music agents in their cultural ‘laboratories’13 – projects in which they perform discourse on anonymity. This study is not scholarship-critical per se and I will not make scholarly discourse about anonymity as such the object of my investigation. Instead, I will engage with scene-internal discourse-centred performances of anonymity by musico-artistic agents. Beyond the fact that I follow anonymity

12 The vocabulary of ‘anonymity’ indicates an ambivalence, but is at the same time prone to re-essentializing a non-dualistic worldview.

13 I use the vocabulary of the ‘laboratory’ from Latour’s science and technology studies, despite the humanities background of this present study.
as an object of other agents’ investigations, what makes anonymity a ‘quasi-object’ of this study is that I engage with projects from electronic pop music practice that self-critically and reflexively perform anonymity.

**Anonymity performance**

In these projects, self-critical performance does not mean self-theorisation, i.e. engaging in theoretical discourse about one’s own (distinctly non-discursive and purely sonic) musical practice. In contrast, the projects under investigation here engage with the ‘double-faced nature of anonymity within discourse’: since the mid 1990s, anonymity has become synonymous with collectivity within electronic dance and pop music, while the mystique created by nameless tracks has helped to build esteem for certain records and DJs (cf. Toynbee 2000:151), and the wearing of masks as well as the enforcement of ‘no-photo-policies’ have fostered the integrity of individual artists (cf. Cookney 2015). The projects selected here do not balance these paradoxical assessments of anonymity within discourse, they engage with anonymity on a meta-level, performing it with both an approving and a disapproving face. The direct action practices of sonically producing anonymity are not presented as being separate from their discursive representation. The projects selected for this study are not a mere doing of anonymity as in the case of sonic anonymity practices, but are engaged in performing anonymity as discursive anonymity performances. These artist critiques use practices of anonymity developed within electronic dance music for a critique of the institution of pop personality, but crucially, these do not take place outside of the (discursive and media) institutions of pop music.

**Discursive anonymity performance in electronic pop music**

Although broadly locatable within the tradition of EDM, the two field projects I focus on employ discursive representation and engage in public media. While it is their discursive aspects that are of most interest to my work, it is also clear that these musico-artistic projects have functions other than producing critical, discursive knowledge. Nevertheless, these projects’ inherent discursive focus is undeniable; they decidedly engage in autonymity and pseudonymity and do not exclusively rely on sonic abstraction (although they certainly also make use of it). Instead of disappearing into nameless sound and/or idolizing anonymity in

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14 An example of self-theoretisation practice can be found in Mille-Plateaux label head Achim Szepanski’s and Marcus S. Kleiner’s book project *Soundcultures* from 2003.
discourse about music, they find alternative ways of critically performing ‘nymi-
ty’ and subjectivity in pop music. They do so by making use of the same horizontal and processual aspects of popular music that are regularly emphasized in dance musics, but they also utilize the theatrical and vertical aspects of ‘pop music’ – for example, auto- or pseudonymous (star) personalities, live club appearances and the (album) record as commodity. While they are not limited to the horizontal aspects of dance music, their sonic aesthetic remains based in electronic sounds, and therefore I will call their music ‘electronic pop music’.

One of the electronic pop music projects chosen for this study comes from the USA and the other from Europe. Electronic pop music started as a transatlantic phenomenon of musical co-inspiration between the USA and Europe, initially as an outgrowth of the subcultural form of electronic dance music (EDM). The by now well-established origin story recounts that dance music producers from Detroit and Chicago, fascinated by European synthesizer music (the classical reference here is Kraftwerk), infused it with elements of African-American soul and disco and began exporting it back to Europe under the banner of house and techno in the mid-1980s.

While EDM was the subject of much theoretical inquiry in Europe from early on (its sound and its forms of production and reception were the focus of self-theorisations within the European EDM scene), in America, EDM remained a predominantly dance-oriented body music largely ignored by journalists and scholars of popular music. Moodymann emerged in a second flowering of the Chicago and Detroit house scenes and, taking the form of critical practice rather than theorisation, his performances stand in contrast to the intellectualisation of body-oriented dance music in Europe. Ursula Bogner is a European project and emerged in the late 2000s – some 15 years after Moodymann. In Europe, where electronic music has been more popular than in the USA (at least, until relatively recently (cf. Reynolds 2012)), subcultural spheres of EDM coexist with a broad spectrum of popular and commercially projected versions of the music. Ursula Bogner is situated within the subcultural stratum of European EDM and is specifically positioned as a project in the tradition of avantgarde of European electronic music. Frequently performed in art galleries and concert venues (rather than clubs), the Ursula Bogner project represents intellectual European electronic music and stands for a version of the music that is removed from dance- and body-orientation of the Detroit- and Chicago-styles and is more closely aligned with certain highbrow strata of cultural production.
0.3 ON CRITICAL PRACTICE: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS WITH FEVER RAY

In this chapter I will develop the methodology for investigating my quasi-object of anonymity via the musico-artistic practices of electronic pop musicians – practices that are critical of individualised pop music personality and celebrity. Electronic music culture, and especially its earlier form of electronic dance music, is renowned for the critiques it engendered of pop music stardom and celebrity. Since the late 1980s, this field has been a laboratory for enacting and probing a poststructuralist politics of identity favouring instability and fluidity. It has been notorious for eluding discursive representation and for its ephemerality. With my research matter I am therefore engaged with a precarious object: the agents in the field of electronic pop music, and its (historical) forerunner electronic dance music, play with their identity or hide and deliberately dissociate themselves from identifying markers of individuality. They aim to stay anonymous or, more to the point, play with anonymity. How can scholarship engage with such an elusive field that is critical of identification? Critiques of pop personality were part of an offensive on institutional frameworks of subjectification in electronic pop music that has been taking place on many fronts since the 1990s. And although a variety of motives and ideologies intermingled here, I will concentrate exclusively on the resulting strategies of critiquing pop music

1 Among these were egalitarian-democratic ideals (‘anyone can make music’), anti-imperialistic/anti-racist discourses (‘pop music is an appropriation of minority positions’), socialist ideals (‘music production can be a collective enterprise exemplified by the independent sector of electronic dance music’) and genius- or author-critiques in the form of aesthetic productions. This broad coalition for anonymity also retained aspects of older subject critiques including remnants of methods of the historical avant garde, which had criticised the unitary and rational artist-subject, and the critique of the author-subject from poststructuralist literary critique. Yet in pop music discourse it was the notion of the star, rather than the notion of the artist or author, that had been upholding the rhetoric of the autonomous subject. Since punk in the 1970s the main target of critiques of institutions of subjectivation in pop music has been the star – a subject concept established by the cultural industries perpetuating the private/public distinction of the bourgeois personality. One finds continuities with 20th century avantgardisms and poststructuralist author-critiques, but – as is typical in pop music – they are rarely drawn upon as explicit references. Rather, these references are mainly of formal significance and should not be over-interpreted. I will note them where they appear but do not base a full historical argument in them.
personality. To clarify, personality and celebrity in pop music are the *objects* of critique of the musicians I choose to study, while anonymity performance is their strategy or tactic of critical investigation. The musicians’ tactics of anonymity performance are the objects of my investigation, while at the same time I aim to learn from these tactical operations and use my findings towards developing a methodology.

*In January 2010, the Swedish vocalist and electronic pop musician Fever Ray, a.k.a. Karin Dreijer Andersson, delivered an anonymity performance when appearing on Swedish television music award show ‘P3’ to receive an award for her 2009 debut solo album.* Wearing an upper body- and face-covering red costume, she took award and microphone in hand, yet instead of delivering the requisite acceptance speech, she raised the upper head-masking part of her costume only to reveal a second mask of abstract alien-animal form – evoking melting skin – from which she exhaled a deep, throaty wheeze.

Revealing her face covering at the award show, Fever Ray’s performance evokes the theme of pop music stardom. The culture-industrial figure of the pop music star is constructed as a subject that hides a private reality behind a public mask.

2 Karin Dreijer Andersson and her brother Olof Dreijer formed the electronic music duo The Knife in 1999. The Knife have also appeared in public wearing masks and costumes (in the style of Venetian masks with bird beaks and ape costumes) and have boycotted award ceremonies of a number of industry and media awards. With the release of their 2013 album *Shaking The Habitual* they dropped the masks and in a teaser film entitled *The Interview*, released at the same time as the album, they explain: ‘We felt too safe behind the masks. The mask has become an image of The Knife. Something that was meant to question identity and fame became a commercial product, ... an institution. [...] I think there are no real “us”. Behind the masks are other masks. [...] The process has become so important to us ... creating a space in which we want to exist’ (The Knife. *Shaking The Habitual* – The Interview, CO. Published on YouTube April 9th, 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4F37Yg17-JQ [20/08/2013]).

3 Fever Ray’s performance evokes many other themes which I will not touch on in my discussion as they are introduced to the scene iconographically rather than scenographically or processually; for example the issue of gender is indicated with the choice of a red headpiece and its mythical histories in the tale of the little red riding hood, or with the burqa-like style of the headpiece used in the performance.
The performance by Fever Ray here deals with a specific problem, namely that the finely tuned theatrical processes of revelation and unmasking are already built into the phenomenon of stardom. It is precisely through unmasking that the magic of stars, gods and spirits operates in the first place, the unmasking that augments the mask is already part of these phenomena. Michael Taussig (1999: 249) has noted, that ‘[j]ust [the] attempt at erasure of mystery through unmasking’ creates mystique; and ‘[t]he slightest knowledge of rites of unmasking in so-called primitive societies [...] would [be] enough to raise doubts about [the] hubris of “enlightenment” and, what is more, about the older metaphors of biblical and Platonic “revelation” on which such enlightening depends’. How can one critique such a phenomenon, when critiquing only ever adds to mystique and star power?

The critique of pop music personality: Star studies

Stardom and celebrity have been established objects of academic investigation since at least the 1960s. However, the critical investigation of star personality within the various academic disciplines of star studies consistently failed to register this entanglement of critique in the production of star power, which will be shown in the course of this subchapter.

Having long concentrated on cinema and film, the field of star studies⁴ established its premises on the basis of Hollywood actor stars of the 1930s and 1940s and comparatively little work has been done on the pop music star (cf. Shuker 2008:70). Furthermore, music personalities of the 1990s and 2000s – with a few, scarcely sufficient exceptions (e.g. Büßer 1997, Jacke 2004, Holert 2005) including recent interest in stars of casting shows (e.g. Holmes 2004, Fairchild 2007, Helms/Phleps 2005) – remain largely uninvestigated.⁵ There ex-

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⁴ With ‘star studies’ in the following I refer to studies on stars as well as celebrities.
⁵ The new music cultures of the 1990s/2000s largely disregarded the ‘personality’ on ideological grounds and therefore almost liquidated the star from both the scene-internal and scholarly vocabulary (cf. Holert 2005:22).
ist a few accounts of stars of pre-1990s music genres (e.g. Negus 1992, Frith 1996, Leach 2001, Hawkins/Richardson 2007, Borgstedt 2008:237ff.) including many who achieved popularity through music television (e.g. Schwichtenberg 1993, Auslander 1999:61-111, Goodwin 1992, Mercer 1989). But only a handful of articles deal explicitly with the pop music star on a theoretical level (e.g. Faulstich 1997, Marshall (1997)2006a, Auslander 2006a, Diederichsen 2008a: 55-88) and it is remarkable that none of these authors are from the field of pop music studies or musicology.\(^6\)

One cannot discern a clear field of research on stars in pop music – delineated neither by discipline nor by personnel. However, since star studies have always been a multidisciplinary field, one also finds works of sociology and film studies that had significant impact on the study of pop music stars. While early on sociological and culture-pessimistic perspectives dominated the multidisciplinary field of star studies (e.g. Boorstin (1961)), after film scholar Richard Dyer’s important cultural studies work on stars (Dyer 1979,1986) various aspects of stardom have been differentiated (cf. Lowry 1997:11ff.). Since then, star phenomena have been analysed through various aspects of their production and reception\(^7\) – a differentiation that can also be found among studies of pop

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6 In pop music studies itself the star appears only sporadically, commonly in discourses about music television (e.g. Goodwin 1992, Frith et al. 1993). Yet even there the star is dealt with as a mere side effect. Apart from these studies, accounts are largely confined to the biographies of individual pop music personalities (cf. Shuker (2008:70), e.g. Kruse (1988)1990, Carson (1979)1990)), and lack theoretical elaboration of the pop music star as such.

7 Although suspended between the two poles of production and reception, since the earliest theorisation of Hollywood stardom, the scientific work on the subject has tended to fall into one or the other camp. On the production side, star images have been investigated in regard to their technology and/or the sociology of their media as well as their economics. On the reception side, stars’ effect on fans and their socio-cultural significance have also been analysed. Among the approaches to the star as phenomenon of reception one finds two main strands. The first group may be labelled ‘fan studies’. Fans, considered the ‘most visible and identifiable of audiences’ (Lewis 1992:1), have been the subject of research in various disciplines since the 1980s (cf. Krischke-Ramaswamy 2007:37). Pop music fan studies were initially dominated by the works of Fiske (1991:95-113, 1993:94-123,181-89) and Grossberg (1992a,1992b). Utilizing theories of intertextuality Fiske developed an expanded notion of ‘text’. For Fiske the text recipient is always a fan, a member of the audience actively engaging with the text. Parallel to Fiske, one finds the works of Grossberg, who analyses fan re-
music stars. Yet beyond this basic differentiation one detects a common tendency within pop music star studies; stars are understood as staged constructions that claim a reality behind the stage. Within theoretical works on the production of stars (as constructions of the cultural industries, media technology etc.) this claim to an off-stage reality is either criticized as an ideology (especially in economic argumentations of culture-industrial manipulation8), – and thereby replaced by another claim to a (even more ‘true’) reality – or perpetuated (especially in media-theoretical argumentations about the ‘indexicality’ of star media9). In theoretical studies on the reception of stars – as constructions by fans

tception by means of theories of affect (e.g. Grossberg 1992b). Today pop music fans are a well-researched subject (cf. Cavicchi 1999). A second school, coming from media and cultural studies, has studied the social impact of stars by the (partially empirical) analysis of processes of identification (e.g. Fraser/Brown 2002, Marcus 1991). Another cluster of research within the second strand is characterised by a Durkheimian social sciences approach and parallels the star cult to the reverence of religious worship (e.g. Frow 1998, Rothenbuhler 2005).

8 The economic argument maintains that stars are either a tool of manipulation of the cultural industry – these approaches refer to theories of political economy and Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s theories on cultural industries (e.g. Buxton (1983)1990) – or they follow a cultural industries approach that focuses specifically on the pop music industry (e.g. Wicke 2001, Negus 1992), positing the star as a criterion for product differentiation or market risk minimisation (e.g. Garofalo 2000:142ff., Borgstedt 2008:41ff., Ryan 1992). A variant on this cultural industries approach follows the theories of organisational sociology and sees the star as a result of negotiation processes between media personnel active within a specific ‘culture of production’ (e.g. Negus 1997).

9 Among the media theories one can discern approaches that focus either on media as technology or media as social and aesthetic institutions (i.e. pop as a medium). The media-technological approach focuses attention primarily on the sound carrier itself, whereby the shift from sheet music to the single (e.g. Faulstich 1997:170) or record album (e.g. Corbett 1990) is understood as the development that triggered the rise of the star phenomenon in pop music. Here, it is argued that it is the indexical character of phonography (e.g. Diederichsen 2008a:73ff.) – supported by developments in close-up microphoning techniques (e.g. Marshall 2006a:200) – which leaves us to search for the origin of the ‘disembodied’ voice and produces a ‘visual lack’ (Corbett 1990:84) plus a corresponding commodity fetish. In addition to phonography, Diederichsen (2008a:84, TM) also counts photography, television and radio – all media of proximity ‘that broadcast indexical traces of the physical presence of the stars’
and recipients – the claim to a (non-representational) reality is located in recipients’ identifications with stars and their exemplary negotiation of notions of the ‘authentic person’. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1990s (cf. Marshall 1997, (1997)2006a) ‘discourse’ became a favoured frame in star studies for integrating differing perspectives on stardom. This discursive approach may be described as the poststructuralist school of star studies. Integrating perspectives from ideology-critique to media theory, it posits the star as a system of discourses and thus locates her/him within a field of production, representation and consumption. Within such a poststructuralist perspective of stars as a ‘developing field of intertextual representation’ (Rojek 2001:44) the reference to a reality outside is no longer proven empirically (if at all, historically). The analytical frame of (social/ media/industry or fan/recipient) construction versus a pre-representational reality is left behind thus opening up a new critical theoretical perspective on stars that is not from the first entangled in a process of critical ‘revelation’.

Boltansky and Chiapello (2003) have shown how critique also perpetuates what it criticizes – not only true for the critique of capitalism, which is easily absorbed and used by capitalism itself to correct and improve its course. There is a ‘curious flip-flop of power’ inherent in the act of critique itself, which ‘often adds to the power of the thing critiqued’ (Taussig 1999:43). This flip-flop might be understood as already implied and built into certain objects of critique (such as stardom or capitalism). ‘[H]ow to react to this observation [...] [and] the sobering conclusion that negation merely completes the object of critique and was its destiny?’ (Taussig 1999:43) How to provide an effective critique of stardom, if any revelation and unmasking adds to the power of stardom itself?
Due to major shifts in political and social power structures in the last decades of the 20th century the operation of critical negation is undergoing a crisis. In the ‘control societies’ (Deleuze (1990(1995)) of today’s ‘age of transparency’ (Arns ((2008)2011:256), where flexible modulations rather than enclosing rules exert power, permanent self-disclosure has become the norm. What new forms of analysis and critique have been developed since flexibility has become imperative and difference and critique have become commodified? It seems to me that the practices of electronic pop musicians provide an auspicious domain in which to seek out models for dealing with the current cultural situation. After all, electronic pop musicians have engaged with the problem of ‘consuming difference’ since the 1990s. Therefore a short excursion into the context of pop music stardom since the 1990s is in order.

The refusal of pop music personality: Electronic dance music critiques

For a musician, conducting a critical discourse on stardom can itself lead to stardom. For example, the grunge stars of the 1990s, and before them the punks, turned rebellion and rule breaking into a marketable image. With the development of electronic dance music at the turn of the 1990s, a specific new mode of critique developed. In contrast to the marketing of rebellion in the cases of grunge, punk or indie, the critique of stardom from within electronic dance music did not operate at the level of text. For the most part, text and discourse were neglected in favour of practice-immanent critiques. The critique then was formulated not within the star figure role text, as may be expected in the case of the indie/grunge anti-hero, but in the manner of its own performance – with critical detachment reserved not for the content – the role text or social values represented by the star hero – but for the representational procedures of stardom themselves; the idea of re-presentation (as a process that grants appearance) itself was rejected. In practice, this critique was regularly carried out not through the use of critical discourse but by non-discourse and disappearance. In the 1990s, anonymity and authorial disappearance became much-lauded characteristics of electronic dance music, taking not only the form of ‘no photo, no interview’ (anti-) public relations strategy, but also looming in the production apparatus of pop music itself, whereby changeable nome de disques on record labels made it difficult to identify a series of releases as one author’s ‘oeuvre’, while tracks without vocals or with ludicrous lyrics denied any legibility of message.
This refusal of pop music personality on the level of the whole subculture of EDM nevertheless became itself the subject of another discourse: journalistic and academic discourse about EDM. Its radical ‘politics of anonymity’ mobilized audiences ‘attracted to obscurity, to secret knowledge about music’ (Hesmondhalgh 1998:235,239). Radical obscurity earned EDM prestige amongst youth audiences and the press, while glamorizations of radical secrecy were not long in coming and soon became the regular forms of articulating EDM to a wider public (cf. Cookney 2015).

In August 2011 dubstep and grime producer Zomby appeared in a Guy Fawkes mask on the cover of experimental music magazine The Wire. The magazine announced the accompanying article about Zomby as ‘a rare in-person interview with UK bass’s mystery man’ (The Wire 330, Aug. 2011:3).

During a process of becoming the subject of journalistic or academic discourse, the direct action strategies of anonymity in EDM were named and, in a further stage, visualized. Starting in the first decade of the new century, masks became an increasingly utilized material object in the public media appearances of

10 Dubstep and grime are version of electronic dance music with origins in the UK.
musicians and producers from the field of electronic dance and pop music. While a material mask factually grants individual agents potential indiscernibility, the masking object of the Guy Fawkes mask (popularized by the Hollywood film *V for Vendetta*) of the 2011 Occupy Movement also objectified and iconized anonymity as a strategy of aesthetic and political criticism. Here again, critique – although acted out in refusing discursively produced pop music personality – became re-appropriated by discourse and represented via visual marks and the linguistic brand term ‘anonymity’.

**Critical practices of pop music personality: Electronic pop music critiques**

Beyond a negating critique of pop personality (one that perpetuates what it criticizes), and beyond EDM’s anti-discursive refusal of personality (which became the subculture’s brand), the electronic pop music projects investigated in this study engage in critical practices of pop music personality; rather than negating personality and discourse, they engage in mimesis and repetition. In his book *Defacement* Taussig (1999:43) developed such a notion of ‘critique as repetition of [a] phenomenon’. The critical operation of defacement engages in mimesis and repetition of the face and its ‘public secrecy’ (Taussig 1999:2). The face is a pragmatically lived and live figure of contingency, residing at the ‘crossroads of mask and window to the soul’ (Taussig 1999:3), of constructed self and real self. Rather than merely deconstructing the face as a mask from a neutral atopical ground, *defacing* takes the contingency of the face seriously and attempts to ‘bring the otherwise obscure or concealed inner powers flooding forth’ (Taussig 1999:43). It is a form of critique that activates the object of critique and brings out its ‘inherent’ magic rather than leaving a ‘dissected corpse’ (Taussig 1999:5, 43). As with defacing, critical practices of electronic pop music, which mimic stardom, take into account the fact that, under current conditions of neoliberalism, objectifying forms of negation can feed back into commercial opportunity.

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11 The ‘icon’ of Guy Fawkes is well chosen as Fawkes, a member of a 17th century group that attempted but failed to blow up British Parliament, is traditionally remembered only for his ‘failure’ in the British cultural tradition of ‘Guy Fawkes night’, where in a reactionary cultural performance a Guy Fawkes effigy is burned. The Hollywood film *V for Vendetta* has (on the basis of a comic book) re-configured the cultural figure of Guy Fawkes and brought us the stylised object of the Guy Fawkes mask.
Instead, these critical practices have developed critical ‘no’s’ that are affirmative and productive.

An overview of the conceptual history of critique will help to discern the various layers of critique touched on by critical practices in electronic pop music.

**Concepts of critique in theory**

Since the 18th century, the notion of critique has not only referred to discerning thought and interpretation (such as judgemental opinion and the critical, emancipatory reading of clerical texts), but – according to Kant (1781) – also to a self-critique of ‘reason’. However, judging the critical faculty of reason from an even more critical standpoint – the practice of meta-critique – can lead to the problem of infinite regress. While immanence is mentioned as a quality of critique by Kant (in the context of his notion of self-critique), the sole focus on thought operations in Kant’s criticism turned the project of critique into a merely theoretical operation – philosophical self-critique.

In contrast to a solipsistic notion of pure critique, later critical projects such as those of Karl Marx or the Frankfurt School’s critical theory have brought forth a notion of critique that concerns itself with practical transformation. Although these latter day critical projects also take a theoretical form, they concern themselves with concrete historical phenomena and not solely with the self-inspection of reasoning. They too are capable of self-critique, but crucially not by reconstructing rationality-internal conditions for critique but by reflecting on conditionality within a concrete historical context. Nevertheless, in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, critique is still an abstracting, and mostly negative operation: it reflects the (social) structures as totalizing and repressive and aims to overcome them.

**Critical practice**

Since the 1960s, British and Anglo-American cultural studies have brought forth a project of critique which mediates between the two notions of critique as a philosophical self-examination of reason and a phenomenon-specific intervention, and which accommodates a degree of positivity (cf. Sonderegger 2008:671 ff.). Michel Foucault’s re-evaluation of power as a positive force (one that generates social relations) is relevant in the cultural studies project of critique: central to Foucault’s project of ‘discourse analysis’ is the thesis that the power of discourse is at the same time totalizing and subjectivizing (cf. Husemann 2009: 44). In Foucault’s approach the meta-analytical element of critique is neither grounded in reason’s self-reconstruction of its universal limits (cf. Sonderegger
On critical practice

2008:669) nor in the autonomy of a (self-emancipating) subject (see critical theory), but rather in a ‘critical attitude as virtue’ (Foucault 2007:43) of a subject who is reflexively intertwined in hegemonic constellations. And notably, Foucault is here not ‘referring to something that would be a fundamental anarchism [or] an originary freedom, absolutely and wholeheartedly resistant to any governmentalization’ (Foucault 2007:75), but to a ‘resistance to coercion [of a constrained subject, that] consists in the stylization of the self at the limits of established being’ (Butler 2002:221).

One finds the conceptualisations of critique as practiced by Butler and Foucault grounded in a specific performative production of the self and a disassociation from the voice of a self-assured critic. Foucault’s critical project is to be found largely between the lines of his phenomena-specific and historical studies (cf. Sonderegger 2008:672). However, in the 1978 lecture entitled ‘What is Critique?’ ((1978)2007) Foucault addressed the matter of critique itself. Interestingly, Foucault himself, as a theorizing subject, struggles here when defining critique and turns to a peculiar practice of verbal gesturing to tentatively circumscribe the matter.

Starting from a ‘very general and very vague or fluid’ preliminary definition of critique as ‘the art of not being governed quite so much’, Foucault (2007:45) then turns to further evasions:

‘If governmentalization is [...] this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. Well then!: critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the de-subjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth’ (Foucault 2007:47).

Notable here is Foucault’s performative delivery of his description of critique. Avoiding an unconditioned definition of critique, Foucault delivers – in the form of a speech act with a self-stylisation of himself as the theorizing subject – an interrogation of critique (see also the ‘question form’ (Butler 2002:213) of his title ‘What is Critique?’). Butler has pointed out that Foucault here ‘ask[s] us to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing’ (Butler 2002:215). When Foucault, for example, proposes the operation of an ‘examination of “eventualization”’ (Foucault 2007: 59, CO) of conjunctions of discourses and practices, of knowledge and power, he does not refer to a merely descriptive, distanced reconstruction of the know-
ledge-power-nexus. Rather than a de-subjectivized, historical-philosophical analysis, in this lecture he presents – as Butler (2002) has pointed out – instances of critical practice himself. And such a

‘critical practice does not well up from the innate freedom of the soul, but is formed instead in the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylisation of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts). This stylisation of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as a “practice”’ (Butler 2002:219).

While Foucault – via the practice of virtue – initially disengages critique from the theoretical and positions it within the practical, Butler develops the artistic and aesthetic elements of critical practice even further. She highlights the theatricality and performativity of this ‘art of not being governed quite so much’ and thereby provides (although not explicitly) a connection to her own theory of social performativity: it is the concrete act (usually the speech act, or the artistic act), that performs desubjugation – but without any presumption of a prior freedom.

If only for the sake of clarification I might now tentatively aim towards providing myself (with the help of Judith Butler) a heuristic definition of critical practice, and say that critical practice (in the field of cultural studies, following Foucault’s approach) engages in the two traditionally separated fields of criticality (self-criticality and object-field specificity) and ‘establish[es] critique as the very practice that exposes the limits of [the] epistemological horizon [of an object field] itself, making the contours of the horizon appear […] in relation to its own limits’ (Butler 2002:217). In addition to a reflexivity about the epistemological horizon of the object field, critical practice – moreover – includes an (ontological) reflexivity about the formative horizon of the subject of critique, namely it ‘entails self-transformation in relation to a rule of conduct’ (Butler 2002:217). This means that critical practice implies an act or a performance of the self of the critic.

Critical practice establishes a particulate and immanent notion of critique, where – coherent with its provenance from cultural studies – subjects are not a priori opposed to (social) structures but engaged in them through their cultural practice. In critical practice subjects are therefore always involved with (rather than distanced from) the critical matter, but at the same time these subjects put themselves at risk: ‘To gain a critical distance from established authority means for Foucault not only to recognize the ways in which the coercive effects of knowledge are at work in subject-formation itself, but to risk one’s very forma-
tion as a subject’ (Butler 2002:225). The ethico-political project of critical practice is therefore not a de-subjectivized operation but might rather be understood as a de-subjectivizing or subject-disintegrating practice. Anonymity performance in electronic pop music will be investigated in this study as such a critical practice.12

Against this background of theory, Fever Ray’s performance of pop music stardom at the award show (2010) can be understood as such a critical practice that engages at once in the disparate fields of criticality: self-criticality, phenomenon-specificity and positivity/affirmation.13 In her award show performance, Karin Dreijer Andersson a.k.a. Fever Ray transcends a sweeping-philosophical, universal critique of reasoning in so far as she goes beyond a simplistic accusation of pop stardom as a repressive, totalizing system. Her critical performance is entirely specific to the particulars of pop stardom, and it avoids a simple identification of the criticized: at the end of her award acceptance performance, conforming to the protocol of the award ceremony, a voice is heard emanating from the melting skin-masked figure. This voice does not deliver a speech – neither accepting nor denouncing the award, nor delivering a concrete argument about pop stardom. One certainly assigns this voice to Fever Ray, but Fever Ray speaks out without uttering words: a grunting, non-human sound emanates from the mask, which, while formally following the conventions of pop music stardom, does so in a decidedly transgressive manner. This is a sound, not a voice, and there is no argumentative content. It is not the voice of a (self-assured critic or transcendental) subject, but a mere sound(ing) – positively enacting an epistemological reflexivity as well as ontological reflexivity on the status of objects and subjects. Fever Ray’s sounding here provides a practical critique that does not fully

12 Foucault himself has proposed the ethico-political attitude of ‘having the enormous presumption of becoming anonymous one day’ ((1967)1998:291.); he proclaimed anonymity as a long-term objective and ethical horizon: ‘Now it is a question of how an individual, a name, can be the medium for an element [...] that, [...] effaces or at least renders vacuous and useless, that name, that individuality [...]’ (Foucault (1967)1998: 290f.).

13 Following Foucault and Butler, I regard the three aspects of concreteness, positivity and self-criticality to be important for a discussion of critical practice; a similar (but not accordant) identification of three aspects in Butler’s delineation of critical practice can be found in Klein (2013:139ff.): ‘the concept of practice, the realm of critique and its framework’.
dissociate itself from pop music stardom but rather makes its protocols concrete and discernible for the audience.

Against the everyday connotation of negativity in critique, Fever Ray upholds a certain *positivity* by mimetic affirmation of pop stardom; this concreteness and specificity to her object-field of pop stardom is amended by her reflexivity to the precarious subjectivity of the critic. While Fever Ray adopts an ‘attitude of critique’ towards stardom – just as Foucault identified critique ‘with an ethos, a way of acting and behaving’ (Butler 2012:21, IO), ‘critique [here] is not merely, or only a sort of nay-saying’ (Butler 2012:20), entirely or *per se* negating stardom. Fever Ray’s concrete critical acts are both negative – ‘refusing subordination to an established authority’ (Butler 2012:21) such as the industry’s star system and productive in the sense that the ‘no delineates and animates a new set of positions for [her as a] subject’ (Butler 2012:24), and that it results in a set of new *practices* (other than verbal dissent). Fever Ray’s performance concretizes what Foucault ((1978)2007) and Butler ((2000)2002) developed with the notion of critique as practice. In the following, I do not investigate her performance as an example within my study. I instead would like to here and now designate her performance my study’s guiding principle for knowledge production. Consequently, I must delve deeper into Fever Ray’s approach and also think through the possibilities of transdisciplinary transfer from artistic to scholarly projects.

**Methodological considerations: Transdisciplinarity, quasi-objectivist approaches, and performance ethnography**

Fever Ray’s approach – of being intimately bound to the object of critique – secures concreteness, self-reflexivity and a positivity of critique, all of which I would like to adopt as characteristics for my own transdisciplinary research project here. Over two decades of research, transdisciplinary projects have proven themselves to be problem-driven and action-oriented. Within the by now diversified field of transdisciplinary research, my project could be considered a transdisciplinary research centring on a scientific problem (cf. Jahn 2008:30) and reconfiguring scholarly practice itself. While there are numerous transdisciplinary research projects that approach real-world problems by consulting science or integrating scientific and non-scientific knowledge, this study emanates from a problem of scientific knowledge itself, namely: how does one produce discourse about a corruptive and resistant cultural phenomenon such as ‘anonymity’? Simultaneously, agents in the field of electronic dance and pop music also face this very problem, and I intend to ultimately integrate their solutions within
my academic practice. The goal of this research is therefore a methodical-theoretical innovation.

One basic challenge in transdisciplinary research is the coordination of divergent research ideals and values in the scientific field and in the real world (cf. Krohn 2008:369ff.). Searching for general solutions by exemplary cases, scientists ‘see a case as an exemplar of similar cases’, while non-scientific actors are interested in ‘solving their specific case, not a general problem’ (Krohn 2008: 372). Wolfgang Krohn proposes a new type of learning in transdisciplinary research – one that is capable of ‘coordinating the two ideals’ and he finds this manifested in ‘expertise[,] a concept of knowledge’ that continues ‘both the singular and the general by the means of the typical’ (Krohn 2008:375).

Sorting through my chosen field of electronic dance and pop music I found such expertise knowledge in projects from the field – projects in which electronic pop musicians position themselves at the margins of electronic dance and pop music as genre-crossers and instigators of avantgarde projects. These ‘experts’ are neither interested in solving the problem of the precarity of anonymity in general nor in solving it only for their singular, individual cases of artist personality. Instead, they engage with the issue of precarious anonymity as such and enact anonymity performances as alternative procedures of a-personality. In my transdisciplinary methodology these expert field projects (musico-artistic projects) serve as laboratory (not exemplary) cases of anonymity performance; the expert knowledge produced in these laboratories should ultimately be made productive for the scientific field.

The potentials and pitfalls of such ‘expert knowledge’ gathered by transdisciplinary research processes navigating between the general-objective and the specific-subjective have been much discussed in anthropology, my field of training, since its ‘crisis of representation’ of the 1970s. Since the 1920s, when Malinowski (1922) introduced fieldwork\(^\text{14}\) as the discipline’s distinctive method, scholars had temporarily participated in ‘other, native’ cultural life and concurrently and subsequently ‘objectivated’ their temporarily ‘native’ yet necessarily subjective experiences through a textual transcription of a culture. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the meta-standpoint of the scholar (cf. Berg/Fuchs 1999:36f.) – purportedly objectivizing not only her/his own but also the cultural ‘native’s’ subjective experience, i.e. their ‘point of view’ – became the target of an epistemological (and ethical) critique. The subsequent ‘reflexive

\(^{14}\) Malinowski ‘along with Radcliff-Brown in Australia and South Africa, and Franz Boas in the USA [...] established fieldwork as the modus operandi of anthropology departments throughout the world’ (Hutnyk 2006:352).
Anonymity performance in electronic pop music

The ‘cultural turn’ in anthropology – strengthened also by the postcolonial debates of the 1990s – led to a re-evaluation of the discipline’s basic principles, notably its representational medium of text and the representational authority of the ethnographer (cf. Clifford 1988). This crisis had repercussions in the broader field of the humanities and with the subsequent ‘cultural turn’ of the 1990s it became fashionable for scholars to ambiguously position themselves between an (understood as impossible) objectivity and a pure (individually arbitrary and plural) subjectivity. Neither the theoretical perspective of constructivism, which understands cultural realities as constructed and partial but still ‘objectively’ accessible to the scholar, nor the position of subjectivity, which understands the reality of culture as the mere aggregation of a plurality of individual realities, seemed adequate any longer (cf. Bourdieu (1997)2000:188). This collapse of scholarly objectivity and critical distance often led to an ‘automatic reflexivity’ (Hutnyk 2006:353) on the respective methodological and theoretical basic assumptions often serving as nothing more than an addendum to the otherwise unchanged scholarly practice. The collapse of objectivity also provoked fatalism (see for example Baudrillard’s (1981)1999) notion of the implosion of meaning) and reactions that addressed the random nature of cultural constructs with re-materialisations of an underlying reality, predicated for example on the body or on spirituality. Such post-objectivist approaches nonetheless leave the privileged position of the scholar untouched; although s/he might present her/his knowledge as only ‘partial truth’ (Clifford/Marcus 1986:1), it remains his/her job and privilege to speak and identify these (however partial) truths.

Performance studies

Yet there is another way of dealing with the collapsing of critical distance that I find more promising: the transdisciplinary endeavour that arose from performative cultural anthropology and developed into the field now known as performance studies – spanning anthropology and ethnography, sociology, psychology and linguistics, as well as theatre studies and theatre practice and pedagogy. Within anthropology, one important development stemming from the reflexive turn and its ‘crisis of representation’ has been an intensified focus on the ‘rhetorical practices’ within cultural productions – not only considering the media of self-construction within cultures themselves, but also considering the tropes and stylistic operations within the discipline of anthropology. After all, ethnography conducts a ‘textualisation’ of cultural processes and is therefore

15 Toynbee (in Quirk/Toynbee 2005:404) describes these scholars in the field of music studies as ‘postmodern’ academics.
itself dependent on rhetorical means of representation (cf. Clifford/Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988). One important advance has been the turn towards a performative cultural anthropology, which understands culture as a symbolical practice and consequently – unlike cultural semiotics – does not concentrate on the cultural meaning of the symbols but on the process of symbolisation itself. This new focus on the processual dynamics of culture rather than on a (centralised) system of meanings is also crucial for the position of the scholar her/himself. In performative cultural anthropology the scholar deals knowingly with more than one objective ‘pluri- or meta-reality’ and neither simply agglomerates the plurality of subjective cultural realities in an (purportedly objective) academic text nor distils one objective meta-reality from his/her research on individual subjective realities. Instead, the concept that culture is performance and the concept of culture as performance are upheld in parallel.

**Performance ethnography**

The concept of ‘culture is performance’ deals with culture as a collective and dynamic ‘reservoir’ of tropes and metaphors by which social practice is conducted. Here, the focus of analysis is on strips of social life that are evidently performances, for example rituals where ‘symbols in movement’ (Turner (1982) 1989:33) can be grasped. While the concept that ‘culture is performance’ deals with the social reality of culture, the concept of ‘culture as performance’ concentrates on the scholarly reality of the ethnographer. Just like the social acteurs, the scholar also relies on metaphors and tropes as essential ethnographical tools for the representation of culture. Thereby the ethnographer’s engagement with culture itself becomes a performance – maintaining both an objectivist concept of culture as objectively accessible subjective-individual, partial performances and a subjectivist concept of culture as the construction of the scholar. Instead of representing ‘the’ reality of culture, the scholar uses metaphorisations and tropes to eventually re-materialize ‘a’ reality of culture. In order to do so, the performance ethnographer has to believe in two (or more) cultural ‘truths’ at the same time and use a ‘dual, bifocal point of view’ (Bourdieu (1997)2000:191).

Along similar lines, Latour (1999:135) argues that an attitude of ‘constructivist realism’ can be engaged by an academic scholar. He maintains that it is a question of her/his textual rhetorics to uphold ‘two entirely unrelated epistemologies’ (Latour 1999:129) in approaching one ‘object’ of investigation. In his writings, Latour developed the rhetorical focus from ethnographic studies further into a critical toolbox for the study of science. Like Bourdieu’s conception of bi-focality, which was developed in the context of social vernacular practice, Latour diagnosed that double epistemological situating is a prevalent scientific
practice. What makes Latour’s approach interesting is that in his critique of scientific reasoning he does not position himself at a distance to the scientific practices, but ‘symmetrical’ (Latour 1993:111). Rather than upholding objectivity and classical-critically showing that science violates its very own standards of objectivity, Latour develops a method that I understand as being ‘intimately bound to its object’. Latour follows other (academic-scientific) agents’ practices in their double epistemological situating in constructivism and objectivist realism. In contrast to Krohn, who, for the principle of transdisciplinary research, upholds a general antagonism between the epistemologies of the scientific and the non-scientific field, Latour proposes a general duplicity of epistemologies with the agents from both fields. Following Latour, a quasi-objectivist ethos can be assumed in both fields of knowledge production. I would like to uphold such a basic epistemic duplicity for my (musico-artistic) field projects and my own project. By concentrating on such transdisciplinary continuities between scholarly practice and non-scientific practice in the tradition of symmetric anthropology, I also bypass discussions of transdisciplinarity under the term of ‘artistic research’, which examine continuities between art and research. Rather than a priori singling out art as a distinct form of practice, a symmetrical approach is better supported by a notion of ‘aesthetic practice’ (Reckwitz (2012)2017:14ff.) as a form of social action that can be found in a variety of fields – from everyday action to scientific practices to the arts (cf. Reckwitz 2015, Elberfeld/Krankenhagen 2017).

Employing Latour’s quasi-objectivist, symmetrical methodology, I will concentrate on laboratory cases of pop musicians engaging both bi-focality and the duplicity of epistemologies. These laboratory cases all involve cultural acteurs from electronic pop music who ‘perform’ anonymity and thereby both critique and participate in pop music stardom. Yet the question of my engagement as a scholar with these bi-focal, doubly ‘true’ pop musical performances remains. Here again it seems to me that the question of mediality is crucial.

The media of symmetrical investigation – practical considerations

When starting my research for this project, it quickly became apparent what it would actually mean to ‘follow the actors’ (Balke 2009:1): the electronic pop musicians I wanted to research were not willing to speak ‘officially’ or be interviewed by me. In hindsight it was perhaps to be expected that they would make no exception to EDM’s ‘no interview’-policies for me, despite my naïve promises of ‘full anonymity’. I had overlooked the classical methodological
problem of researching phantoms and secrets – namely that ‘by their nature they elude empirical research’ (Westerbarkey 2000:14, TM). For myself as an anthropologist this meant a change of direction: because I take the practice of pop musicians seriously and moreover, because I do not want to jeopardize their anonymity through my research, I found myself taking detours (cf. Westerbarkey 2000:12). One of these detours led me to the realisation that these cultural acteurs also ‘mediate’ their analysis in non-linguistic form; they use images and performances to conduct their investigation. This brings me back to Fever Ray and the question of method: how does one put forth an argument in performance media?

**Methodology and transcription of ‘critical practices’ of pop music stardom**

In her P3 award reception performance, Fever Ray takes off a veil and draws attention to a melting mask behind it. She presents us with the revelation of a mask underneath resembling melting skin instead of a substantial, enveloping cover. She does not speak or employ the linguistic term ‘mask’. At the very moment of the possibility of being objectified in vision or language, the ‘mask behind’ melts and emanates a sounding (rather than a voice). How can such a critical practice of pop music celebrity as Fever Ray’s performance be made useful for scholarly practice?

Fever Ray’s artistic investigation into pop music stardom uses a metaphor that seems to be easily transferable from the visual to the linguistic domain – the mask. For this reason her performance interested me as an ethnographically trained scholar; here the basic theoretical work, namely the metaphorizing of the cultural processes of stardom as ‘un/masking’, is done by a protagonist from within ‘the field’. A classic interpretive anthropology conclusion here would be that one should import this knowledge from the field by employing the field tropes into theoretical writing in a one-to-one-translation. But critical performances such as Fever Ray’s have one decisive advantage over academic descriptions of such critical practices: they are not legitimated by a maximal approximation to or ‘exposure’ of truth but by their efficacy within a sequential performative process. Therefore they do not merely drag a secret into the sheer light of terminological truth. In contrast, revelations such as Fever Ray’s aim to ‘do justice to [the secret]’ (Benjamin 1977:31) produced by masks; ascending the stage at an award ceremony in a head-masking costume and partaking in the

16 For other artistic investigations into anonymity in non-linguistic forms see Broeckmann 2017.
enigmatic powers of secrecy, Fever Ray tactically repeats the mask of stardom and ‘gain[s] power in that very act of copying’ only to eventually disrupt her mimicry by ‘un-masking’ (Taussig 1999:44) the mask as a double-mask. Within her critique of pop music stardom one senses an intimate bond to her object and therefore the mask in Fever Ray’s performance is never materially fixed, it remains a non-material form, a process. So if I as a scholar represent this process, I will erase the flexibility and sequentiality of Fever Ray’s tactical process by dressing it up in the term ‘mask’.

Academic writing on critical practice has to engage with its ‘object’ on a level beyond terminological ‘capture’ and question its methodologies. As in critical practices, the media of ‘truth telling’ are crucial; academic practice must also reflect this quality in writing. What are the media through which cultural studies’ research and writing can mediate a double epistemological situatedness? The illusion of merely ‘reporting’ when describing a tactical performance such as Fever Ray’s has to be abandoned. Am I not myself performing a critical practice when doing research and writing on this subject? And after this practice, how do I present my research ‘product’?

Fever Ray seems to contradict a distinction between process and product. She does not objectify her practically critical process by finally presenting a material mask or totalizing symbol – instead she performs the perpetual process of disappearance. Therefore, in her performance it is the process of un/masking itself, not the declarative abstraction of a tactical practice within a term or visual symbol such as the ‘mask’ that creates insight. If Fever Ray’s critical performance should form the guiding knowledge production principle for my study, must I myself also reject a clear distinction between process and product myself?

In the fields of cultural anthropology and cultural studies, ethnographical projects have recently been the subject of a transdisciplinary critique and with this, the process of fieldwork has seen a ‘reinvention and reimaginations’ (Marcus 2010:88). In a fragmented, globalized world, ethnographical projects face the challenge of ‘multisitedness’ (Marcus 1995). Fieldwork can no longer be imagined as – temporally and spatially – distinct from its ethnographical ‘transcription’. From the dates and places of my field notes reproduced in the introduction to this study one can deduce that the process of fieldwork was both temporally and spatially co-conducted with the writing of this text (and that the fieldwork may even continue after its publication). For my study, ‘[t]he empirical and theoretical stages [are] thought as formally analogous’ (Holbraad/Pedersen 2017:21). But how can I further transpose Fever Ray’s procedural approach into the chronotope of my text?
Similar to Foucault ((1978)2007), who in his lecture ‘What is Critique?’ transformed the task of ‘defining critique’ into a performative, ambivalent speech act, one finds a specific duplexity in Fever Ray’s performance. On the one hand, Fever Ray is doing a musico-artistic performance about pop music, and on the other hand she is putting forth her argument in the medium of pop music. Firstly, her performance tells us something about pop music: The act of revealing evokes the theme of pop music stardom: the culture-industrial figure of the pop music star is constructed as a subject that hides a private reality behind a public mask. However, in stardom this mask is there only to be pulled off, so that with the unmasking a link to a real or historical person behind it might be highlighted. At the outset of Fever Ray’s performance, before the cloth is lifted, the material also represents a veil. As an effective hiding tool, a veil can also provide anonymity, namely unlinkability to a historical or real person behind it. Fever Ray’s performance demonstrates this ambivalence of the veil or mask in pop music; that it can be employed for both stardom and for anonymity. Secondly, Fever Ray embodies this argument about pop music. Her embodied transformation of a veil into a mask into a melting skin emanating a grunting sound does not resolve into one conclusion. Rather, in her performance it is the process and its time-based dramaturgy and tactics that effect insight. Studying Fever Ray’s critical practice in order to transfer its operations to the academic field, its performative quality becomes central: a duplexity of iteration and generation, of representation and transformation, of representing a knowledge of something and of transferring this knowledge productively. Performance is always a performance about something and of something: a coinciding of object and method. How can this basic duplexity of performance become methodical in my own scholarly research practice?

What makes quasi-objectivism a valuable knowledge practice is its consideration of the tactics and time-based rhetorics of texts, performances and research processes – behind the scenes – being of equal significance as the ‘material’ these texts and processes engage with. It is with her transformation of a veil into a mask, that Fever Ray lets us think about the specific tactics involved in knowledge production – in the same way that Foucault exposed these tactics by highlighting rhetorics and performative elements in his reflection on critique. Fever Ray effects insight not by showing an absolute, conceptual discrepancy between the (covering) veil and the (in its concealment uncovering) mask; she does not present them simultaneously in a paradoxical, yet ‘static’ image. Instead, her time-based performance can point us to the sequential and tactical aspects of the dramaturgy of knowledge production: the transformation of veil to mask to melting skin and grunting sounds. Through its transformation of one
into the other and then into a vanishing material object, Fever Ray’s performance highlights the provisional quality and situatedness of knowledge. The performance does not arrive at a-rational indifference but rather at a detailed reconstruction of knowledge production. Viability (cf. Glasersfeld 1996:43) is the crucial constituent of performance that makes performance a quasi-objectifying medium: producing an object and showing the process of its objectification, i.e. retracing its knowledge networks or ‘milieu’. Quasi-objectivist approaches dissolve the subject/object-dichotomy by tactically objectifying – producing an object of knowledge – before the eyes of an audience. Here, objectification and fetishisation do not conflict with processuality. Fever Ray’s performance tactic (like the tactics of my laboratory cases) differs from radical techniques of negation and disappearance as practiced in performance art (e.g. Phelan 1993) and electronic dance music (e.g. Tagg 1994) in that she does not rely on absolute presence and the non-reproducibility of the performance event, but presents her continual performance of disappearance in the context of a well-documented, reviewable televised award show. Ephemerality and disappearance are secured here not by the irretrievability of presence in the event but by continuous re-signification and tactical repetition.

For the following research report I have therefore concluded that I want to make the dramaturgies of its knowledge production retraceable. However, this will take a form different from the ‘viability’ that artists apply to their performances. In my text I follow artists into their ‘laboratory’ and observe how they arrange a dramaturgy and tactic for their performances. I understand these performances as musico-artistic inquiries into star personality in pop music – the results of which reveal to the audience a viable network of knowledge that can be used to trace the production of the star subject in pop music. (These performances will at times objectify, and at other times sustain the circulation of their object.) These performative operations do not simply document stardom in pop music, but put this ‘object’ at a reachable distance and make the tactical objectification tangible before an audience’s eyes. This comes about through the artists reflecting on the position from which they speak and act within and during their performances. At a certain point – the last chapter of this study (ch. 3) – I will ask whether the spectators of these performances also stand outside the event, or whether they can take differing perspectives within it.

**Textual presentation of critical practices in this study**

Similar to the performances analysed in this study, my text is neither a distanced critique nor a pure documentation, but is itself a chain of operations that establishes relations. The objects of investigation will be allowed to circulate therein
and, as with my research, the backstage area and the ‘material’ of my investigation are allocated equal importance. Nevertheless, I will not present the production techniques, the tactics within the text itself, because although such a continuous reflexivity of my speaking position and the deictic quality of language would make the text a true performance, it would render the text relatively unreadable for an academic audience. In this regard, my academic practice differs from the artistic practices I investigate: I will present the quasi-objectivist dramaturgy of my research by a processual transformation of my research ‘matter’ with the help of various concepts, a meticulous demonstration of their inapplicability and, in consequence, by the discarding of these concepts. At the level of the text this will be an illustration rather than an enactment of quasi-objectivism. For example, I will discuss and ‘name’ the researcher’s change of positioning – from performance as a subject to performance as the method of study (see infra ch. 2). Additionally, I hope that through the broader dramaturgy of the text one can follow how this text was ‘made’ and how I experimented, failed and succeeded, as the case may be. The present text is the product of this success and failure of my experiment, but it documents this process in large part through reference and description. While the laboratory cases experiment with pop music stardom through critical performances that ultimately take the place of a pop stardom performance, my text remains distinct from the underlying research event – distinct with the exception of its rhetorical linkages via the usage of the personal pronoun ‘I’, its narration by the chronology of research events and the deliberately ‘thick’ description of the researched performances.

Dance and pop music writing

Finally, I want to return to the matter of how the ‘concreteness’ of critical practice can be acknowledged in writing about music. Since its advent, the non-representative and tentative character of EDM has been widely debated and a resulting ‘paradigm change’ for the study of pop music in general has often been proclaimed. Against the background of this avowedly non-representational dance music culture, the scholarly representation of music cultures as sites of alterity and marginality has come under vehement critique. Specifically, the ‘subculture’ paradigm descended from cultural studies and sociology was strongly attacked and subsequently abandoned (cf. Huq 2006). What replaced it in pop music studies was a focus on sound and the body. Dance as a practice that ‘seems to retain at its centre a solid resistance to analysis’ (McRobbie 1984:131) provided a challenge to scholarly objectivity. Since the mid 1990s the difficulty of
describing and historicizing the transience of dance music has been met by (persistently rationalistic) attempts to theorize its non-discursivity with new concepts and terminologies of the ‘sonic’ (see supra ch. 0.2). The problem of scholars positioning themselves at a safe, rationalistic distance (cf. Ward 1993) and ‘objectivizing’ transient dance practices has also been addressed by new strategies of writing. Some writers sought a solution by sticking to realist descriptions while prefacing their texts with (deconstructivist) disclaimers (e.g. Collin 1997:8). Others fully subjectivized cultural experience by delivering their text as personal, auto-biographical testimony (e.g. Stone 1995:33). Others still de-subjectivized their texts by referring to a socio-cultural context only in the form of the imaginations of extra-textual agents (human and non-human (e.g. Eshun 1998)). These approaches, developed in the service of critical reflexivity as provoked by dance music, may be summarized by drawing an analogy to the crisis of representation in anthropology and its outcomes, namely the ‘automatic reflexivity’ precipitated by the collapse of scholarly objectivity in anthropology (Hutnyk 2006:353). The ‘writing culture’ critique as put forward in pop and dance music studies mostly reflected on basic theoretical assumptions and, less often, on forms of textual representation, while otherwise leaving the scholarly practice unchanged. Here, as in anthropology, reflexivity ‘failed to generate new strategies [and] forms [...] of practice’ (Marcus 2010:84) – which could have integrated both writing and research/fieldwork. In order to develop this kind of productively transdisciplinary, quasi-objectivist account, I now suggest turning the attention to one particular early example of ‘dance music writing’.

In 1976 writer and journalist Nik Cohn suggested an interesting (but also problematic) solution to the problem of transcribing the ephemeral and non-verbal practices of disco into verbal documentation. Nik Cohn, freshly relocated to New York from the UK, where he had been an influential commentator on British youth cultures, started to engage with the then thriving disco culture. In June 1976 he published a cover story in New York magazine on the emerging disco dance culture. His story was quickly picked up by Hollywood-screenwriter Norman Wexler and formed the basis for his screenplay for Saturday Night Fever (cf. Goldman 1978:153) – which when released as a film became the representation of the disco phenomenon in popular media.

Cohn’s original article was not written as a screenplay, taking instead the form of an ethnographic report; [t]he article begins with a note claiming that ‘everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly by the people involved. Only the names of the main character have been changed’ (Cohn 1976:1). After this indication of participant observation, the text tells the story of Vincent, and his gang of working-class Italian-
Americans, who spend their weekends in disco excess – and occasionally recount their stories to a ‘man in a tweed suit, a journalist from Manhattan’ (Cohn 1976:2). In this way Nik Cohn wrote himself into the story as observing author, meeting his ‘informants’ on their occasional smoke breaks or car rides (e.g. Cohn 1976:2,15) – which always happened outside the club. The significance of this ‘outside’ was only discovered two decades later when Cohn admitted, that his story was ‘a fraud’ (Cohn 1994:12). He had

‘allowed his editors to believe that what they were getting was reportage, when what they were really reading contained a great deal more fiction than he would or could admit to at the time. The empirical foundations on which Cohn constructed his article were shallow – consisting of but two visits to the Bay Ridge discotheque’ (Gilbert/Pearson 1999:20).

After he had told the Guardian that his ‘story was a fraud’ (Cohn 1994:12), in 1997 he admitted outright to New York magazine, that he ‘wrote it all up; and presented it as fact’ (Cohn 1997 cited after Gilbert/Pearson (1999:36)): ‘I knew nothing about this world [...] [and] didn’t speak the language [...]. So I faked it.’ Read in retrospect, one easily finds hints at the fictions that the story contains, but given Cohn’s standing as a journalist with intimate knowledge of pop music scenes, it is understandable that readers took the author’s presence at the scene as fact.

The sheer ‘monstrosit(y)’ of the story, the exuberant machismo of the portrayed ‘ethnic’ group of Italians that, as soon as the ‘disco scene ha[d] become [...] familiar’ and crossed over to popular media with Saturday Night Fever, ‘sound[ed] a little fantastic’ (Goldman 1978:152). Yet when the story was originally published in 1976 it ‘made the reader feel that he had penetrated some strange submerged world where all sorts of grim and disturbing things were possible’; Cohn certainly took advantage of ‘the perceived truth value of journalism’ (Gilbert/Pearson 1999:21), but also of the reader’s appetite for exotic ethnography.

Although Cohn’s story contains contradictions, these were not apparent to most of his contemporary readers. Cohn’s case raises questions about the intellectual benefit of falsities and errors, but also about the obligations of ethnographers to their audiences and their research subjects. His account is rife with problems: among other things, he essentializes ethnicities and ignores disco’s origins in gay culture (cf. Gilbert/Pearson 1999:8). He is also ‘dance-deaf’ (Goldman 1978:154) and ignores the sonic and concentrates on the spectacular
aspects of disco dance.\textsuperscript{17} Without excusing Cohn’s essentialisms and ignorance of gay culture’s role in disco’s development, it might nevertheless be said that diachronically his fraud (unintentionally) provided an intellectual benefit: it exposed the conventions of specific discourses such as music journalism and music ethnography. In chapter 3 I will engage with contemporary tactical ‘fakes’ and their ethically less problematic version of ‘imaginary ethnography’ in ‘collaborative imagination’. Therein I will show that the theatrics of tactical ‘fakes’ are crucial to their efficacy as critical practices, and that collaborative imagination might provide a new scenography for ethnographical accounts of dance and pop music that can help develop new forms of practice, integrating critical reflexivity with fieldwork \textit{and} writing.

\textsuperscript{17} In their introduction to \textit{Discographies} (1999) Gilbert and Pearson point to Cohn’s article and especially show the fallacies of the ‘subculture’-approach, which Cohn allegedly falls prey to.