Techno-tourism and post-industrial neo-romanticism in Berlin’s electronic dance music scenes

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Abstract
This article profiles the ‘techno-tourists’ of Berlin: music fans who return repeatedly to the city in order to participate in the local electronic dance music scenes. Based on interviews, this article sketches a profile of these music-minded voyagers, surveying their motivations, their attitudes, their patterns of travel and their strategies for making this mode of travel possible in terms of work and money. It also situates this recent wave of tourism within a broader history of tourism in Berlin, as well as considering its representation in local popular discourse. Local debates about the impact of tourism are reflected in interviewees’ ambivalence towards tourist identities, as they strive to describe the terms of their socio-cultural belonging within a sub-cultural scene that is spatially distant from house and home.

Keywords
cities, electronic dance music, ethnography, ethnomusicology, music scenes, post-industrialism

Introduction
From 2007 to 2012, Bob and Donna\(^1\) would travel every third or fourth weekend to Berlin from their home in London. Arriving Friday night, they would drop off their luggage at a local friend’s apartment and then head straight to one of Berlin’s many nightclubs, following an itinerary of music events that they had planned out meticulously, maximizing their time with their favourite disc jockeys (DJs), venues and fellow...
partygoers. They would usually sleep only 5 or 6 hours over the entire weekend, taking a
return flight Sunday evening or very early Monday morning, in order to return to their
jobs as a high-school French teacher and sales data analyst.

These are the techno-tourists of Berlin, primarily young music fans who return
repeatedly to take in – and to participate in – the city’s electronic dance music (EDM)
scenes. Every weekend, thousands of tourists come to Berlin, immerse themselves in
the ‘hip’, alternative, post-industrial atmospheres of the city and trace a circuit through
the city’s nightclubs, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Euros and seemingly
endless quantities of sweat (see Figure 1). Their patterns of movement, spending and
activity diverge from the diurnal sightseeing-museums-shopping circuit associated with
mass urban tourism, and these divergent patterns impact Berlin’s nightlife scenes both
in how they function and in how they relate to the city as a whole, as they seem reluctant
to integrate into the more established and professionalized infrastructures of entertain-
ment tourism that exist in other international nightlife destinations (e.g. Las Vegas,
Ibiza, London, New York). And yet, these techno-tourists seem to share with other
‘alternative’ tourists a neo-Romantic orientation: having internalized prevailing cri-
tiques of conventional mass tourism, they spurn typical touristic sites and activities,
instead striving to access the perceived authenticity of a place through the affective
atmospheres of local micro-cultural scenes and everyday life. Interestingly, this form of
tourism seems to involve a kind of post-industrial urban pastoralism that remaps the
non-urban/pre-globalization imaginaries of alternative tourism (e.g. backpacking and
slow tourism) onto cities such as Berlin.
This article aims to examine the entanglement of Berlin’s EDM scenes with the rise of ‘EasyJetSet’ music tourism (Rapp, 2009, 2010) to the city. Based on interviews with these so-called ‘techno-tourists’ as well as with local participants in Berlin’s EDM scenes, it sketches a profile of these music-minded voyagers, surveying their motivations, their attitudes, their patterns of travel and their strategies for making this mode of travel possible in terms of work and money. It also situates this recent wave of tourism within a broader history of tourism in Berlin as well as considering its representation in popular discourse and local public debates. These emergent patterns of tourism have both invigorated and pressurized local music scenes, sometimes engendering negative attitudes towards techno-tourism among local stakeholders. These tensions emerge in interviews, where interlocutors articulate complex and ambivalent identifications with the label ‘tourist’ while struggling to describe the terms of their belonging in a sub-cultural scene spatially distant from house and home. Although these ambivalences are not new to tourist discourses (McCabe, 2005), the novel ways in which these are routed through the specificities of Berlin’s music scenes and post-industrial urban landscape is worthy of attention.

Tracing the shape of nightlife tourism in Berlin

The intersection of music and tourism has become a growing field of inquiry, encompassing a broad range of disciplines such as ethno/musicology (Krüger and Trandafoiu, 2014; Mason, 2004), popular music studies (Cohen, 2012; Stahl, 2014), anthropology (Bruner, 2005; D’Andrea, 2007; St. John, 2009, 2010), geography (Gibson and Connell, 2005; Krims, 2007; Saldanha, 2002), leisure studies (Henke, 2005) and tourism/travel studies (Kay, 2006; Lashua et al., 2014; Long and Morpeth, 2012; Waitt and Duffy, 2010). In a recent Special Issue of this journal dedicated to music and tourism, the editors note that ‘people travel to music either as fans, pilgrims, concert goers, festival attendees, or more incidentally where the sounds of places enter the travellers’ consciousness’ (Lashua et al., 2014: 4). Similarly, Chris Gibson and John Connell’s (2005) somewhat functionalist definition of music tourism focuses on ‘evolving clusters of tourists, activities, locations, attractions, workers and events that utilize musical resources for tourist purposes’ (p. 167). For techno-tourism, however, music is not only the soundtrack or ‘authenticity-effect’ of a toured place, but rather the thing to be toured itself – rendered all the more tantalizing and romantic by the intangibility and temporal evanescence of musical performance. But music is nonetheless place-specific, grounded in particular sites and scenes that serve as tourist destinations. As part of a larger ‘experience economy’, music tourism requires actor-networks that include venues, artists, organizational infrastructure, technology and audiences; and it is the clustering of these networks in Berlin that makes it a destination for repeated travel for EDM.

Contemporary music tourism has its roots in changes in human mobility, telecommunication and mass production that took place during the industrial revolution. What began with cultural elites travelling to remote pastoral settings for classical musical festivals continued into jazz festivals in equally elite European pastoral settings, and then into more accessible folk, rock and popular music festivals, ‘weekenders’ and eventually urban music festivals and heritage tourism (Giorgi et al., 2011; Laing, 2004; McKay,
At the same time, musicians since Paganini and Liszt have gone on tour, drawing together fans who may travel significant distances to enjoy an evening of entertainment and communion. Although there is certainly a great deal of continuity in this historical narrative, the explosion of pop/rock festivals (e.g. Woodstock, Isle of Wight) in the late 1960s and early 1970s was an important moment for the consolidation and formalization of music tourism as an industry, establishing ‘tours, festivals, and music heritage’ (Lashua et al., 2014: 4) as its basic infrastructure, which in turn provided various ways to cater to (and profit from) the passions of dedicated music fans. Berlin’s techno-tourism seems to enfold elements from all three of these forms of music tourism, while also presenting novel mappings between musical artists, listener-dancers and locales.

The term Techno-Tourismus (German: techno-tourism) first emerged into popular discourse with local journalist Tobias Rapp’s book, Lost in Sound: Berlin, Techno, und der Easyjetset (2009, Suhrkamp; 2010 Innervations), a collection of narratives and essays covering Berlin’s electronic music scenes since the turn of the century. Rapp coined the term ‘the EasyJetSet’ to describe the ‘weekend-warrior’ party tourists that characterize Berlin’s scenes, pointing to the importance of budget air travel for making this phenomenon possible (see Casey, 2010), while also ironizing the contrast in wealth and resources between the affluent jet-setters of the mid-twentieth century and the younger, financially precarious nightlife tourists of twenty-first century Europe. Since then, the idea of technotourism has been absorbed by local media and popular discourse in and around Berlin.

The size and scale of Berlin’s Techno-Tourismus is difficult to ‘measure’ using quantitative methods, especially since these tourists have a preference for informal, ‘budget’ and unconventional modes of travel that are rarely captured by statistics collected from conventional hotels, air carriers and employment registries. Added to this is the difficulty of tracking the dimensions and economic impact of the performing arts, data collection for which remains low-priority for most government agencies and also difficult to quantify (Kabanda, 2014). Nonetheless, one can at least track the growth of tourism as a whole and its related hospitality industries in Berlin, which can provide a frame of reference for techno-tourism. Berlin’s history as a tourism destination can be traced back at least to the 1760s, when it and several other German courts came to be added to the ‘Grand Tour’, that rite of passage initially practised by primarily British upper class youth (Towner, 1985: 321). Although fin-de-siècle Berlin already had a flourishing entertainment industry, the era of the Weimar Republic is notable as a high-water mark for nightlife tourism in the city (Gordon, 2006; Storer, 2010). The upheavals wrought by the Third Reich, the ensuing war, post-war occupation and Cold War schisms prevented Berlin from fully participating in the development of mass tourism as it took place in other major European cities. But, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, tourism has become an increasingly prominent issue for Berlin, as growth in this sector has far outstripped expectations. In 2004, a strategic whitepaper published by the Berliner Senate and the city’s tourism board (http://VisitBerlin.de) set 15 million overnight stays by 2010 as a goal for the city’s tourism industry. The city surpassed this goal by 2006, however, and by 2010, overnight stays exceeded 20 million (VisitBerlin.de/Berlin Tourismus Marketing GmbH, 2004, 2011).

Marketing GmbH, 2011), tourist activity in Berlin has almost quadrupled in the two decades after German reunification, with overnight stays rising from 7.3 million in 1993 to 27 million in 2013. But these figures can only provide the lower bounds for the actual number of tourist visits to the city, as the Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg only surveys registered hotels that have nine or more beds. They do not collect data from the smaller bed-and-breakfast establishments, privately run vacation rentals (especially through websites like AirBnB.com) or unlicensed ‘grey-market’ hotels that are becoming a larger part of Berlin’s hospitality infrastructure. As a result, most of the inexpensive lodging options preferred by techno-tourists are not captured by these statistics.

Berlin’s hospitality industry also seems to have grown significantly, according to statistics published by Germany’s Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2007–2013a). Over this 7-year period, employees in Berlin’s Gastgewerbe (hospitality) sector grew by 25.3 percent (48,036–60,193) to become 4.9 percent of the city’s 1,240,364 registered workers. A more detailed set of data that breaks down employment statistics using Germany’s work-sector classification system reported 10.4 percent growth (2373–2619 employees) in the ‘drinking establishment’ category (getränkegeprägte Gastronomie; after 2008: Gastronomie – Ausschank von Getränken), which groups together bars, pubs, nightclubs, lounges and discotheques (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2007–2013b).

These statistics only track sozialversicherungspflichtige Beschäftigte (employees subject to social insurance deductions), since they rely on registration for welfare contributions. However, the Statistical Office for Berlin-Brandenburg also released data on the broader category of Erwerbstätige (workers, including self-employed, entrepreneurs and freelancers) based on a yearly micro-census (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2014), which projected the 2012 Gastgewerbe workforce to comprise 97,346 workers. These statistics also must be taken as a lower bound to the true dimensions of the hospitality workforce, as it does not capture informal and casual labour. Although precise data on earnings and salaries are difficult to ascertain, in 2011, the Statistical Office surveyed more than 400 hospitality-related businesses in Berlin (out of an estimated 13,600) and estimated that this sector earned €4.13 billion in gross revenues and paid out €840 million in wages to its approximately 89,200 employees and correspondingly, estimates for the Gastronomie sub-sector are €2.5 billion in turnover, paying €550 million to its 72,550 employees. Again, none of these data capture undeclared wages, tips, informal labour and other touristic activities.

Over this same period, there has also been increasing coverage of tourism in Berlin in local, national and international media, often taking the form of a debate over tourism’s impact on the city (Bernt et al., 2013; Novy and Huning, 2009), on local creative scenes (Bader and Scharenberg, 2010; Novy and Colomb, 2013; Stahl, 2014) and on processes of urban renewal/gentrification (Bader and Bialluch, 2009; Bernt and Holm, 2005; Cochrane and Jonas, 1999; Novy and Huning, 2009; Reimann, 1997). Among other consequences, tourism has contributed to a spike in demand for urban space and amenities, accelerating cost-inflation for housing, food, services and consumer goods. Particularly pernicious in this regard is the conversion of apartments into vacation flats, budget hostels and informal hotels – all preferred modes of lodging for techno-tourists – which reduce available housing stock in residential rental markets.
Berlin is an unusual case in that its ‘new tourism areas’ (e.g. Kreuzberg, Prenzlauer Berg, Friedrichshain) are not secondary to conventional tourist zones, like Shoreditch in London or Canal St. Martin in Paris, but are in fact central to the city’s appeal (Novy and Huning, 2009). The relatively high visibility of ‘alternative’ tourism zones in Berlin places pressure on economically vulnerable districts lacking sufficient infrastructure while also raising the stakes of preserving these neighbourhoods’ distinctiveness and perceived ‘naturalness’ in comparison to more planned and regulated tourist zones. Furthermore, the clustering of nightlife activity related to techno-tourism in particular areas of Berlin creates friction with local residents, who complain of noise, litter, property damage and safety concerns – problems nearly identical to those that led to the discontinuation of the Love Parade in Berlin (Nye, 2009). For Berlin’s nightclubs, these conflicts manifest in increased scrutiny by local authorities alerted by local complaints, the imposition of volume-limiting technology on the sound-systems of venues with outdoor areas and/or the demand for prohibitively expensive noise-proofing of indoor areas, police crackdowns on informal ‘open air’ parties near residential areas and sometimes in vandalism of venues and/or violence against patrons and workers. Ironically, despite the role nightlife scenes can play as the vanguard for gentrification, they are often the first to be driven out by intensified residential settlement and increasingly privileged neighbours (Hae, 2011). Beyond local news media, discussions of travel to Berlin have become increasingly prominent in online communities dedicated to EDM (e.g. Resident Advisor, Digital Transmission, Rest-Realitaet), accompanied by the development of travel-related websites (Slow Travel Berlin, Unlike) and even technotourism in particular (TechnoTravel.com, TheTechnoTourist.net).

The techno-tourists: an ethnographic sketch

There are limitations to what statistical and quantitative approaches can offer in describing techno-tourism, and so ethnographic and qualitative methods play an indispensable role in this study. Interviews with 19 techno-tourists provide a rich and detailed source of emic perspectives, while my own long-term participant observation in Berlin’s EDM scenes (since 2008) provides me with an experiential ‘archive’ from which to describe and recognize broader patterns. Approximately two-thirds of the interviewees are European (English, Irish, French, Scandinavian) and one-third North American (United States), ranging in age from 24 to 37 years. They are thus substantially older than the audiences associated with the recent ‘boom’ of large-scale, mainstream EDM festivals. Based on long-term observations as well as conversations with stakeholders in Berlin’s nightclub scenes, the majority of techno-tourists seem to be White-European, middle-class and relatively young, but this generalization requires a number of qualifications. First, the higher cost of overseas travel results not only in a higher proportion of European techno-tourists but also differences in social class and frequency. North American and Latin American techno-tourists, for example, are either wealthier or visit far less frequently (e.g. once per year). They are also more likely to be somehow involved in the EDM industry itself, thus allowing them to justify the higher cost of intercontinental travel as professional development (networking, promotion and/or talent-scouting). Also, since Berlin has become a hub for EDM artists, labels and agencies, those with
professional connections usually know local residents who can host them or aid them in finding inexpensive lodgings. Second, the racial/ethnic diversity of techno-tourists often reflects that of their home countries, although this is complicated by racialized differences in the financial resources available for travel; for example, South Asian, Middle-Eastern and African ethnicities are more visible among travellers from the United Kingdom, while African-Americans remain underrepresented among US techno-tourists. But regardless of origin and financial background, most techno-tourists are relatively young, living as students or creative-industry workers and surviving on thin and unpredictable income streams.

As the opening ethnographic sketch of Bob and Donna suggests, techno-tourists tend to keep rather distinctive patterns of mobility, and the rhythm of such visits is to a great extent set by the temporalities of Berlin nightlife. Due to the city’s lack of regulated closing hours, this often means partying until well into the afternoon of the next day and sleeping during hours when conventional touristic activities would take place (such as museum visits, tours, sightseeing and shopping). Eager to get the most out of their limited time in the city, some techno-tourists will make use of drugs that enhance their experience (e.g. MDMA, ketamine, marijuana) and/or increase their stamina (e.g. amphetamines). A typical visit might involve landing in Berlin Friday night, checking into one’s hostel/hotel, having a late dinner and then heading to the first nightclub by about 2:00 in the morning. By 6:00, one might move to a club with later opening hours such as Panorama Bar/Berghain, which would remain open until at least noon on Saturday. Perhaps picking up a ‘breakfast’ snack on the way home, Saturday afternoon would be spent sleeping, followed by another late dinner upon waking. Saturday evening would likely begin with drinks in a bar sometime around midnight. At this point, the revellers would have a decision to make: either go out now and stay up all of Sunday, or take another nap, wake up early Sunday morning, and then spend all of Sunday and perhaps Monday morning dancing before their return flight. During the summertime, there may also be ‘open air’ events that run during the daytime on Saturday and Sunday, thus making it possible to participate in music events non-stop from Friday night to Monday morning. During a weekend trip to Berlin, there is virtually no time left to do anything other than to go to music events, sleep, eat infrequently and perhaps engage in some out-of-club socializing with friends.

Managing costs

On average, interviewees visited Berlin five to six times per year, usually for two to four nights (Friday–Sunday or Monday), with the occasional week-long visit. Between 2007 and 2012, average travel costs were €131 per visit for those travelling within Europe, while all other costs (e.g. food, club entries, drinks, drugs) amounted to an average of €251. Nearly two-thirds of interviewees reduced travel costs by staying with friends in Berlin, but for the remaining one-third, the average cost of lodging was €77 (entire visit, per person).

Since techno-tourists tend to have limited financial resources for travel, they engage in a number of cost-saving measures to make frequent trips to Berlin feasible. They have a wide range of occupations (graphic designer, student, audio engineer, sales representative,
journalist, marketing manager), nearly all of which involve some degree of flexible working hours; notably, many of them work in the creative industries, with all of the flexibility and income-precarity that entails. Monthly income among interviewees averaged to €1681, ranging widely from €650 to €4167. Most interviewees reported living on a monthly budget of approximately €400–€600 after housing expenses, and so they experienced strong pressure to reduce travel costs. All of them elected to fly on budget airlines (e.g. EasyJet, RyanAir, Germanwings, Aer Lingus), carefully choosing their flights and buying them well in advance to keep them as low as possible. Notably, they have become experts in mitigating the tactics these ‘low-cost’ airlines use to extract additional revenue from the traveller, such as additional fees for services usually included by conventional airlines (e.g. checked luggage, meals, seat reservation), disorienting websites, last-minute fluctuations in pricing, punitive fees based on constantly changing luggage regulations, the added transportation costs of ‘cheap’ secondary airports and so on. Many stayed in hostels, rented vacation flats or stayed for free in the apartment of a local friend. Indeed, one of the advantages of repeated visits to the same music scene was that techno-tourists frequently developed friendships with local residents, upon whom they could call for lodging and ‘tour guide’ services during future visits. While in Berlin, techno-tourists usually prefer to eat at snack stands (Imbiss) or very cheap restaurants, so that they can funnel their limited funds towards admission fees for clubs, beverages, record shopping, drugs and other party-associated costs.

Many interviewees reported financing their trips to Berlin by sacrificing weekends in their home city. This was an easy sacrifice for Bob and Donna, who had grown disillusioned with the London clubbing scene; they travelled to Berlin near every third weekend but hardly ever went out in London. Most of the other interviewees employed a similar strategy of scaling back their nightlife activities at home in order to make regular visits to Berlin financially feasible. However, the cost of travel to Berlin can require substantial personal austerity for techno-tourists living on small incomes. Henry, for example, used to spend roughly €200 when he would come to visit his girlfriend in Berlin; as a college student living on Ireland’s €800 ‘Back to Education Allowance’ at the time, €200 represented not only a quarter of his monthly income but also all of his remaining money after paying for his €600 apartment in Dublin. Unsurprisingly, Henry’s visits were far less frequent, but it nonetheless speaks to the attractiveness of Berlin’s music scenes that he made repeated visits in spite of how it impacted his financial situation at home.

Managing work and school

Since the average Techno-Tourismus visit to Berlin spans Friday through Sunday, most techno-tourists have to grapple with reconciling weekend leisure travel with their work or school schedules. For those working as freelancers or shift-workers, this was usually a matter of rearranging shifts or contracts; for those in academic settings, this often involved front-loading homework/grading ahead of the trip. But for those with more inflexible working hours, this sometimes meant leaving directly from work to the airport on Friday evening and/or arriving directly from their return flight to the office Monday morning.
Séamus, a 31-year-old animal nutritionist from Ireland, finds it relatively easy to reorganize his work schedule: since most of his work involves sales meetings with livestock owners, he is usually free to organize his time as he wishes – so long as weekly targets are met. Thus, he would often front-load his work during the week and take a half-day off on Friday without having to claim a vacation day. Nigel, a 25-year-old graduate student at a university near London, England, is in a similar situation, often managing to clear his Friday and Monday schedule by front-loading work and making use of ‘dead’ travel time: ‘I’ve gotten very good at working on the journey. Because if you leave my university in the morning, you don’t get to Berlin until the evening. So, you really have a solid day to read and such’.

Bob and Donna, however, deal with much more rigid work schedules. Bob is a schoolteacher, so he must come into work by Monday morning and stay at work through Friday afternoon; but he is free during school breaks and summer holidays. Donna works as a data analyst for a media-marketing firm, so she can take vacation days whenever she likes, although she prefers to save her vacation days for other kinds of travel. And so, both of them go to great lengths to fit their Berlin visits within a 2-day weekend. As a result, this couple had the tightest travel schedules of those interviewed: they often left London immediately after the end of Bob’s workday Friday afternoon, arrived into Berlin very late that night, and then on Sunday evening went directly from the nightclub to the airport to return home. Given these constraints, it is an indication of the strong pull of Berlin’s electronic music scenes that Donna and Bob manage to visit the city 20 times per year.

Why Berlin?

Many interviewees became aware of Berlin’s vibrant nightlife scenes through word-of-mouth channels that were routed through the social and professional networks of the EDM scenes in their home cities. But when asked what drew them to return to Berlin regularly, nearly everyone claimed that it was ‘the people’, first and foremost. ‘It took me a long time to realize this’, said Nigel, ‘but I think it’s the people’. Although Berlin has by far the highest density of EDM events in Europe per weekend (based on listings on ResidentAdvisor.net), Nigel dismisses the city’s musical offerings as the primary motivator. He claims that while one can hear good EDM in any other city from time to time, ‘the people who surround you in that place have an energy and enthusiasm and a knowledge of what’s going on around them – and also the ability to just completely throw that out the window when something new is coming at them’. But while Nigel prioritizes Berlin’s music fans over music, he does so by emphasizing their attunement to and knowledge of the music itself.

Tabitha and Xavier, two 25-year-olds from the United States who moved to Berlin after just two visits, also recall being impressed by the musical acuity of the crowds there. ‘People seemed so tuned-in to the moment-by-moment process’, said Xavier, ‘As the track built up, people reacted to it’. Tabitha concurred, adding, ‘I don’t remember many live sets where people are following every measure and whistling and hooting’. They were also both thunderstruck by the music they heard when they first visited Berlin: ‘This was the first time we were hearing minimal techno on a huge sound-system’,
explained Tabitha, ‘and it blew our minds. It really did’. Similarly, Xavier was impressed by the skills of local performers: ‘We had never heard DJs playing a sound-system like an instrument’.

Many interviewees also cited the sense of freedom and tolerance that they felt in Berlin as a whole, framing the city’s nightclubs as a condensation of this liberal, Bohemian and hedonistic atmosphere. ‘It was so easy to meet people’, said Xavier, ‘And people were just so unashamed to enjoy themselves. [Local partygoers] even saw it as … really a shame if you were going to deny yourself a fun Saturday night out’. But while techno-tourists’ sense of affinity sometimes encompassed the city as a whole, it could also be tightly focused on a specific site: ‘If I’m honest with myself’, said Nigel, ‘If [the nightclub] Berghain didn’t exist, I wouldn’t come here as frequently as I do’. Making a parallel with the British notion of the ‘local pub’, he adds that ‘This is my local club, even if I have to get on a plane to come here’.

In these accounts, both the people and the music animating Berlin’s EDM scenes are crucial points of attraction and identification for techno-tourists. This goes some way towards explaining their acute interest in accumulating scene-specific cultural and social capital, such that they can partially adopt the role of a ‘local’ participant and thus party ‘like a Berliner’. Ironically, it should be noted that what counted as the ‘local’ Berlin EDM crowd at the time of these interviews was in fact a rather heterogeneous mix of ‘native’ Berliners (from both East and West), domestic migrants from elsewhere in Germany, European nationals on training and exchange programmes (such as Erasmus), an international cadre of expatriates and a not-insignificant proportion of techno-tourists who have been coming to the city often enough to have gained status as a ‘regular’ within these music scenes. And it is also significant that music plays a central role in grounding these techno-tourists’ affiliation with Berlin’s EDM, providing the initial point of discovery as well as the predominant social activity by which techno-tourists invest considerable personal resources into gaining access to a music scene spatially distant from their home cities.

**Local intimacies and neo-romanticism**

While interviewees embraced the ‘techno’ aspect of techno-tourism – in the sense that they were quick to identify EDM as their primary motivation for travel to Berlin – attitudes were far more divergent regarding the term ‘tourist’. Some identified unequivocally as tourists, some ambivalently so and some disidentified themselves from the term entirely, coining instead new terms or making comparisons to other roles associated with travel and music scenes. Notably, various notions of ‘localness’ were picked up by interviewees to articulate their relation to tourism. The following exchange between Bob and Donna encapsulates this range of identifications succinctly:

**Author:** Do you consider yourselves tourists?

**Bob:** Well, what’s funny is that people [in Berlin] don’t consider us to be tourists –

**Donna:** – Whereas I consider myself to be a tourist.

**Bob:** Really?
Donna: Of course! I still consider myself a tourist.
Bob: I’m, uh … undecided on that point, really; because it’s not really tourism, in the sense that it’s techno-tourism instead. We’re the ultimate ‘EasyJet techno-ravers’. But, since we’ve taken this to such an extreme, most people consider us to be ‘part of the furniture’ (faisant parti des meubles) in Berlin. So, if you’re part of the furniture there, you can’t be considered a tourist.
Donna: Well … yes … yes, but what do you do more than the those who just come casually once or twice? You just come more often. […] I’m a regular tourist, but I don’t see any particular pejorative feeling in the fact that I’m called a ‘tourist’. Yes, I’m a tourist, but just a more regular one; because I have the means to do so and I have reasons to go more frequently. (Bob and Donna, 2011)

Séamus combines both Bob’s and Donna’s perspectives ambivalently, conceding that ‘strictly speaking, I am a tourist: I don’t live in the city and I only come once a month’. At the same time, however, he points to a gap between his ostensibly tourist behaviour and his affective experience:

Now, I don’t so much feel myself as a tourist. I feel that I know a decent few people. When I go to certain places in Berlin, I feel like I’m part of that. You become used to the atmosphere, you become used to the people that are there. People acknowledge you, would class you as a friend.

As with Bob’s argument, it is the recognition of other local stakeholders that underwrites Séamus’ sense of non-tourist belonging in Berlin. Nigel is similarly ambivalent, positioning himself in

this grey area where – yes, I don’t live here and yes, I get on a plane to come here and stay in a hostel and do the things that tourists do in that sense – but I really don’t consider myself a tourist to the city. I consider myself as … not even a visitor. It’s really just somewhere I go.

Rejecting the label of ‘visitor’, Nigel insists that Berlin is simply part of a personal topography of mobility. He echoes Séamus’ insistence that he is only a tourist in form (i.e. patterns and means of travel) rather than content (i.e. motivations and attitudes), although both he and Séamus base this distinction on a stereotypical image of mass tourism. Nigel goes further by emphasizing the role that local knowledge plays in differentiating his travels from conventional mass tourism:

I guess it’s local knowledge. I know how Berlin works in the same way as I know how London works: I know how to get somewhere; I know how much it’s going to be if I go on the U-Bahn; I know what time these things go on at; I know when people are going to be at parties; I know where to find the information that I need online.

The musical experience that forms the centre of techno-tourism requires local clusters of actors and resources, and it is techno-tourists’ varying degrees of embeddedness in and
intimacy with these local clusters that enables the perception of their own mobility to blur between tourism, migration and leisure.

These perspectives appear to be part of broader patterns in urban tourism, especially with the rising profile of Berlin-bound voyagers who self-consciously avoid conventional mass-touristic activities – all the while striving to consume the city as they imagine locals would. In vernacular, specialist and marketing discourses, familiar terms have been re-purposed and new ones have been coined to describe this particular form of tourism, including sub/cultural tourism (Bader and Scharenberg, 2010; Colomb, 2012), hipster tourism (Berlin Global, 2014; Franta, 2014), new urban tourism (Novy and Huning, 2009), post-tourist tourism (Braun, 2010; Cohen, 2008; Rogers, 2015), slow travel (Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010; Fullagar et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2010) and neo-Bohemian tourism (Currid, 2009; Lloyd, 2002) – to which I would also add the adjective ‘neo-Romantic’ for reasons that I will explain shortly. Techno-tourism intersects with all of these labels in some respect: techno-tourists focus on a sub-cultural urban scene, they distinguish themselves from mass tourism and the identities they associate with it, they valorize Bohemian lifestyles and they seek out ‘authentic’ urban experience in post-industrial cityscapes. Indeed, most of these labels could be bundled together under headings like ‘alternative tourism’ (Butler, 1990; Munt, 1994) or the ‘tourist/traveller’ binary (Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003), although these distinctions are far from uncontroversial (McCabe, 2005). In any case, what all of these categories of tourism share is a self-conscious distancing from mass tourism, which enables ‘travellers’ to nonetheless engage in tourism without feeling implicated in the anti-tourist critiques that have become commonplace in popular discourse (Füller and Michel, 2014). In other words, these tourists seem to have absorbed the classic critique of ‘the tourist experience’ (Ryan, 1997) – as inauthentic, artificial, exploitative, commercialized and so on – preferring instead to engage in an oblique search for the ‘authentic experience’ of a location. They spurn museums, guided tours, shopping centres, sightseeing, landmarks and so on, in favour of activities such as ‘hanging out’ in cafés, wandering around ‘alternative’ neighbourhoods (such as Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Neukölln) and emulating the rhythms of local daily life. I describe this kind of tourism as neo-Romantic because it involves a renewed search for authenticity after accepting the idea that conventional tourism cannot help but generate artificial and distorted experiences of the city. This approach to authenticity seeks out verisimilitude in urban experience while romanticizing genuineness (Bruner, 2005: 149–151) – although in this case, authenticity is indexed through spontaneity and ordinariness. Here, optimal experience is imagined as immersion in un rehearsed urban life.

While this range of labels usefully highlights particular aspects of techno-tourism, it does not adequately describe this phenomenon as it has been unfolding in Berlin. For example, the term ‘new urban tourism’ (Novy and Huning, 2009) is useful for describing an emergent pattern of neighbourhood-specific tourism deviating from conventional touristic zones, but it remains unspecific and risks becoming misleading as these ‘new’ ways of consuming the city become more engrained. For the residents of Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Neukölln, there is hardly anything new about techno-tourists at this point. The term ‘traveller’ seems to cause more confusion than clarity in this case, in that it collapses an ‘objective’, generically descriptive term (i.e. anyone who travels) with an
‘ideological, moral, and political construct’ (McCabe, 2005: 91). In practice, the term functions to exclude (working-class) mass tourists (Munt, 1994) and instead designates someone with sufficient cultural, financial and social capital to travel independently of package tours (Casey, 2010). This is not to deny that similar distinctions are sometimes deployed by techno-tourists themselves, but rather that the term risks passing normative claims as mere description. Although ‘post-tourist’ could convey the stance that techno-tourists take in distancing themselves from conventional tourism, the term has already been developed by several scholars to designate tourists that are unconcerned with the question of authenticity and open to highly mediated modes of tourist experience (Cohen, 2008; Ritzer and Liska, 1997; Rojek and Urry, 1997; Urry, 2002); this seems in many ways diametrically opposed to the values and aesthetics of techno-tourists, who seek to escape the mediation of ‘the tourist experience’ through performative participation in local daily life.

In popular and journalistic discourses, the label ‘hipster tourists’ has surfaced to describe those visitors who spend their time earnestly performing nonchalance in the city’s cafés, clubs and parks rather than flocking to landmarks, museums and souvenir shops. The association of this mode of tourism with contemporary images of ‘hipster’ culture can be seen in an image taken from a series of caricatures called ‘The Tribes of Berlin’, in SugarHigh (2010), a bilingual English-German mailing list for local events. Parodying the conventions of a colonial research expedition, the fourth profile in this series features the ‘Summer Crasher’ (see Figure 2), complete with illustration and accompanying legend. The legend includes such entries as ‘#3: Ridiculous full-sized Rubik’s cube necklace’, ‘#5: Prized lomography camera’, ‘#6: Standard-issue dirty XXL Adidas tank top’, ‘#8: Ironic “Deutschland” cap’ and ‘#10: Ever-present bottle of Club-Mate’, a German alternative to the energy drink Red Bull, made with highly caffeinated
yerba maté tea. This profile goes on to describe Summer Crashers as a ‘migratory species’ that comes to Berlin primarily from Scandinavia and the Anglophone world; at home, they are ‘a grad student or in a noncommittal career from which they can take months off’. But for all of their recherché fashion style, they remain frugal in certain regards, being able to ‘list, prioritize, and rank, from memory, the best cheap falafel/kebab/mini-pizza/Vietnamese curry within a 1-kilometer radius’. Throughout this satirical profile, we see the hallmarks of youth, Bohemian living, eccentric fashion, lopsided frugality and intense nocturnal rhythms.

The term ‘neo-Bohemian’ is perhaps more useful than ‘hipster’, in that it describes a set of values and aesthetics shared by most of the techno-tourists whom I have interviewed or encountered for this study. For Richard D. Lloyd (2002), ‘Bohemia’ as an (urban) space describes a cluster of creative labour and precarious life-worlds that relies upon ‘a notion of diversity that often fetishizes the gritty and the illicit as authentic’ (p. 518). Neo-Bohemia, in turn, describes how these once-devalued characteristics are converted into valuable, profit-making factors in a post-Fordist economy (e.g. entertainment, tourism, gentrification). Notably, the processes of capital accumulation at work here are parasitic to the artistic production that identifies particular neighbourhoods as neo-Bohemian – like Chicago’s Wicker Park, in Lloyd’s (2002) case study: ‘from an economic point of view, most of the artistic activity in the neighbourhood produces a trivial amount of direct monetary gain’ (p. 526). In this sense, one could characterize the Berliner neighbourhoods that techno-tourists frequent (i.e. Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain, Neukölln) as neo-Bohémias; consequently, their patterns of tourism could also be considered neo-Bohemian, in that techno-tourists consume the artistic products of these ‘creative clusters’ while contributing to processes of secondary accumulation that both add ‘value’ to the neighbourhood as well as drive up the cost of creative production.

Many of the qualities of neo-Bohemian tourism can also be gathered under the rubric of ‘neo-Romanticism’, understood here as a cultural field that values authenticity, eccentricity, creativity and the dramatization of independent and idiosyncratic lifestyles. In techno-tourism, these preferences and predilections can be seen as a response to the perceived artificiality of modern tourist experience, which prompts a romanticized fetishization of ‘authentic’ experience in Berlin’s music scenes. This can be compared to the way that Romanticism in the early nineteenth century emerged partly as a response to the industrial revolution’s foreshadowing of a mechanized and mass-produced modernity. What makes neo-Romanticism ‘new’ in this context, however, is that the pastoral/urban binary of nineteenth-century Romanticism is remapped within the post-industrial city – more precisely, the post-industrial landscapes and urban decay of cities like Berlin are recuperated as a ‘new urban pastoral’. This Romantic view of post-industrial urbanity resonates with the Romantic dimensions that Wang (1999) identifies in the notion of ‘existential authenticity’. Admittedly, neo-Romanticism can describe a much wider field of Berliner tourism, including tourism oriented towards other ‘underground’ scenes (art, fashion, squatter/punk, anti-capitalist/anti-fascist) or the exploration of disused buildings. And so, while ‘techno-tourism’ remains the most precise term of analysis for tourism oriented towards Berlin’s EDM scenes, ‘neo-Romanticism’ describes an emblematic aspect of techno-tourism that it shares with other modes of urban tourism currently on the rise in Berlin.
When interviewees distanced themselves from behaviours they associated with mass tourism, they often strove to reframe their activities in Berlin in terms that resonated with ideologies of neo-Romantic tourism. For example, a brief exchange between Tabitha and Xavier – an American couple in their early 20s who visited Berlin on two occasions before deciding to relocate to the city – highlights the contours and stakes of this distinction:

Xavier: We came here sort of as tourists, but … rather than tourist sites or whatever, what we were looking to experience was –
Tabitha: – authentic Berlin, sort of.
Xavier: Yeah. And it wasn’t just to observe it. We had a feeling that … we would fit in. I dunno, I guess, to me, tourism implies a role of observation –
Tabitha: Gawking instead of participation. It’s sort of rubbernecking versus –
Xavier: And we really wanted to be absorbed in the personality of the city. I already felt quite in tune with it, whether I was right or not. We had this distinct feeling that this was already a kind of home for us. (Tabitha and Xavier, 2012)

Tabitha and Xavier associate passive observation and ‘rubbernecking’ with tourism, while highlighting the importance of participation, integration and ‘fitting in’ to local everyday life as a way of accessing ‘authentic Berlin’. In some ways, this echoes broader class-aspirational trends among ‘travellers’ to distance themselves from the working-class associations of mass tourism (Casey, 2010; McCabe, 2005; Munt, 1994; Wang, 1999). And yet, the statements made by these and other interviewees go beyond pure class distinction for its own sake: through their peculiar patterns and rhythms of travel, their neo-Romantic focus on post-industrial urban life and their intimate knowledge of the city’s music scenes, techno-tourists have developed a relation to the city that they see as distinct from what subtends conventional urban tourism.

To be sure, techno-tourism is part of a larger trend of neo-Romantic urban tourism that also envelops other sub-cultural scenes in Berlin. But techno-tourism stands apart in its almost exclusive focus on music and music events, which attract techno-tourists to Berlin in droves. Moreover, the high frequency of their visits to Berlin has had interesting consequences for their intimate social worlds. As Nigel describes it,

Techno tourism has made this interesting scenario, where no one is at home [in Berlin], and yet it’s the home of your relationship. It’s the home of your relation with these people. I wonder if this has ever happened before.

While I would not go far as to claim that this phenomenon is the first of its kind, Nigel’s comments nonetheless point to the significance of recent changes in long-distance mobility, which have made it possible for people to develop social worlds located hundreds or thousands of kilometres from their homes. Also, with the explosive growth of the ‘EDM festival’ circuit since approximately 2010, a new generation of music fans is currently developing patterns of festival-based tourism that merge aspects of techno-tourism with established ‘festival cultures’, albeit in a highly commercialized, mediatized and professionalized form.
In any case, techno-tourism is a remarkable phenomenon in the age of online communities and virtual telepresence: rather than sustain spatially distant cyber-networks through telecommunication technologies, techno-tourism relies on the attractive force of music to draw in face-to-face, embodied intimacy across a network of widely distributed, highly mobile music-lovers.

**Interviews**


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**Notes**

1. All names of ethnographic consultants are pseudonyms.
2. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) denotes a field of dance-oriented styles emerging out of the legacy of 1970s disco that includes a wide range of genres and sub-genres. Although it is difficult to identify sonic attributes that are universal to all of its sub-genres, EDM’s most common attributes include an emphasis on low-frequency sounds, particularly on kick-drums or analogous bass percussion; prominent rhythmic and metric patterning; a musical structure based on loops and grooves; and the use of sampled sounds (Butler, 2006). Although the first wave of historical accounts of EDM was published in the realm of music journalism (Brewster and Broughton, 2000; Reynolds, 1998; Sicko, 1999; Silcott, 1999), scholarly histories of more limited scope are increasingly available (Butler, 2012; Echols, 2010; Fikentscher, 2000; Lawrence, 2003).
3. Although not decriminalized, Berliner law enforcement rarely prosecutes the possession of small quantities of illicit substances for personal consumption, focusing instead on drug dealers.
4. Instead of the standard verse-chorus-bridge formal elements prevalent in most other popular music genres, EDM is more groove-based, focused on cyclical ‘loops’ of interlocking sonic layers that are added and removed to create a sense of change. ‘Live sets’ are performances where the musician improvises electronic music using ‘gear’ (drum machines, synthesizers, samplers) and/or software emulators, rather than mixing together ‘finished’ recordings such as vinyl records, CDs or MP3 sound-files.
References


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