

# Aesthetics of Immediacy: A Comparative Study Between Minimalism and Techno Music

## Estética da Imediaticidade: Um estudo comparativo entre o minimalismo e a música techno



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**Abstract:** This article proposes aesthetic and ideological connections between American minimalism and techno music through the notion of immediacy, a critical concept that elucidates the transformations of the schemata of experiences within late capitalism. While numerous studies have noted the similarities between these genres in terms of their techniques, experiential dimensions, or historical influences, this work demonstrates that immediacy serves as a crucial analytical framework for understanding a shared ideological dimension. The study begins by examining the philosophy of John Cage and his influence on early minimalist composers such as La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich, highlighting their pursuit of immediacy through specific compositional techniques. The analysis then identifies two key dimensions of immediacy: 1) formal aspects, particularly the use of extreme repetition and stasis, drawing on Jonathan Kramer's concept of "vertical time," and 2) the intended perceptual effects of these techniques. The second part of the article employs these two dimensions of immediacy as analytical keys for approaching techno. By comparing the use of techniques like looping and extended repetition in both minimalism and

techno, the study reveals how both genres cultivate an experience of a perpetual present and its consequences on the role of memory and formal reflection. This analysis thus provides a framework for a more critical understanding of contemporary musical experiences and their broader social and political implications.

**Keywords:** techno music. minimalism. experience. immediacy. repetition.

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe conexões estéticas e ideológicas entre o minimalismo americano e a música techno por meio da noção de imediaticidade, um conceito crítico que elucida as transformações dos esquemas de experiência no capitalismo tardio. Embora diversos estudos tenham destacado as semelhanças entre esses gêneros em termos de suas técnicas, dimensões experienciais ou influências históricas, este trabalho demonstra que a imediaticidade funciona como um quadro analítico fundamental para compreender uma dimensão ideológica compartilhada. O estudo começa examinando a filosofia de John Cage e sua influência sobre os primeiros compositores minimalistas, como La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Terry Riley e Steve Reich, destacando sua busca pela imediaticidade por meio de técnicas composicionais específicas. A análise identifica então duas dimensões-chave da imediaticidade: 1) aspectos formais, em particular o uso de repetição extrema e estase, tomando como referência o conceito de “tempo vertical” de Jonathan Kramer, e 2) os efeitos perceptivos pretendidos por essas técnicas. A segunda parte do artigo emprega essas duas dimensões da imediaticidade como chaves analíticas para abordar o techno. Ao comparar o uso de técnicas como o looping e a repetição estendida tanto no minimalismo quanto no techno, o estudo revela como ambos os gêneros cultivam uma experiência de presente perpétuo e suas consequências para o papel da memória e da reflexão formal. Essa análise, portanto, fornece

um quadro para uma compreensão mais crítica das experiências musicais contemporâneas e de suas implicações sociais e políticas mais amplas.

**Palavras-chave:** música techno. minimalismo. experiência. imediaticidade. repetição.

Submitted on: March 7, 2025

Accepted on: April 19, 2025

Published on: July, 2025

## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies have explored the connections between techno music and American minimalism, examining their techniques, experiential dimensions, or historical influences.<sup>1</sup> This article contributes to this body of research by appealing to the notion of *immediacy*, a reading key that allows us to analyse the aesthetic and ideological links between these musical expressions. The study begins by outlining certain assumptions and objectives of the North American composer John Cage, who had a direct influence on early minimalist musicians. Subsequently, the voices and works of La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Terry Riley and Steve Reich are examined to highlight how *immediacy* became part of their aesthetics. This analysis, which will allow us to circumscribe the notion of immediacy, will be carried out through 1) technical and formal approach, primarily the role and consequences of exaggerated repetition, and 2) the intentions and consequences of the effects of such techniques on modes of perception. In the second part of this work, these keys will be addressed to reflect on how they are expressed in the aesthetics of techno music. For the consideration of the formal and structural organization of techno music, we will consider concepts proposed by Jonathan Kramer, which will allow us to understand the formal stasis of the vertical time in this genre. Finally, several authors are examined to provide a description of a type of experience of *immediacy* present in techno music.

The comparative analysis based on the notion of *immediacy* aims to point out a shared ideological dimension in this aesthetics, consonant with the motives of a “crisis of experience” in late capitalism or the “culture industry.” From the early debates within Critical Theory to current analyses framed in this tradition, the

<sup>1</sup> Vease Philip Sherburne, “Digital Discipline: Minimalism in House and Techno,” in *Audio culture*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Bloomsbury, 2017); Zachary Schwartz, “Alternate Minimalisms: Repetition, Objectivity, and Process in the Age of Recording,” (Diss., Pomona College, 2016); Susan McClary, “Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Audio culture*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Continuum, 2004); Sean Nye, “Minimal understandings: The Berlin decade, the minimal continuum, and debates on the legacy of German Techno,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25, 2 (2013): 154-184; Robert Fink, *Repeating ourselves. American minimal music as cultural practice*, (University of California Press, 2005); Isabel Stoppani De Berrié, “Escape and Build another World: Relocations in Classical Minimalism and Minimal Techno,” in *Relocating Popular Music*, ed. Ewa Mazierska and Georgina Gregory (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

notion of immediacy has served to understand a “poverty of experience”, a liquidation of the individual. The crisis of experience manifests itself as a crisis of the individual’s role as an active, expressive agent in perception. In this context, such mediations are reduced to the automatic deployment of given associations, to perceptual schemas internalized through the culture industry, which dictate what is what. This automatism hastens identification, producing an effect of immediacy that consequently imbues both the act of perception and the perceived object with an aura of naturalness. Immediacy thus presents itself as an experience that negates mediation, creating an illusion of unmediated access to reality. This immediacy, as facilitated by these internalized schemas, ultimately functions to obscure the underlying power relations and structures that govern both production and perception.

*Immediacy* is not merely a mechanization of experience, reducing it to simple associations. Rather, it is a form of integration, a unity between the given object and the subject’s interiority. As Adorno and Horkheimer observed, the technical development of media in late capitalism ironically achieves the Wagnerian project of the “total work of art,” where “the accord between word, image, and music is achieved (...) perfectly”<sup>2</sup>. It becomes “angels’ tongue”<sup>3</sup> [Sprache der Engel] in which stimulus, meaning, and the subject’s affective response are integrated without individual mediation. This integration intensifies the sense of the given as something natural, while dismissing the delays inherent to reflection. By hypostasizing *immediacy*, the media experience contributes to an “affirmation of life” and a positivation of the existing.

In this sense, immediacy and its gratifications have functioned as an experiential key to compensate for alienation and the subject’s increasing impotence against the social totality. This ideological dimension of immediacy has intensified and taken on new forms in current technical-aesthetic media. Anna Kornbluh analyzes the production and circulation of 21st-century cultural

<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment*. (Stanford University Press, 2002), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. *Introduction to the sociology of music*. (The seabury press, 1976), 44.

phenomena, demonstrating the intensification of a trend towards disintermediation in contemporary experiences.<sup>4</sup> “Autoemanation, flow, blur”, “essentialization of presence”, “immanentization and instantification”, “emanative intensity”, and “lustrous manifestation” are fascinating aesthetic consequences achieved by new techniques that disregard their mediations, determinations, and historical-social conditioning. The fascination with immediacy becomes particularly useful for the smooth operation of production and consumption, captivating the subject, trapping them in the polychrome phantasmagoria of appearance and the adoration of sensual stimuli.

The following comparison between North American minimalism and techno does not pretend to be exhaustive but rather to offer a precise key to understanding the continuities of shared ideological aspects in the constructive technique and the experiences of these musical expressions. It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest a linear and direct relationship between techno music and certain North American or European aesthetic projects of the 20th century. Reading the history of music from the materials and procedures of techno leads us to agree with the counter-genealogy proposed by feminist musicologist Susan McClary.<sup>5</sup> Following her genealogy, it is possible to find the influence and persistence of temporal cyclical structures already present in the music of the African diasporas or Asian music.<sup>6</sup> It would also be possible, in line with the author’s point of view, to consider the set of meanings that are constructed in collective dance practices and in communitarian forms of creation and exchange of sound materials. However, this work is limited to analyzing how certain searches and intentions of John Cage’s and North American minimalists’ aesthetic projects can be found, in an updated form, in techno music. We argue that it is necessary to examine the exacerbation and the supremacy that immediacy acquires in techno music in order to develop an understanding of a contemporary mode of experience and, as Anna Kornbluh invites

4 Anna Kornbluh. *Immediacy: Or, The style of too late capitalism*. (Verso Books, 2024).

5 Susan McClary, *Feminine endings: Music, gender, and sexuality*, (University of Minnesota Press., 1991)

6 Susan McClary, “Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time”

us, to delve deeper into the styles of immediacy in late capitalism. If the goal is a theoretical construction that not only recognizes the importance of the progressive and pleasurable moments but also their ideological dimensions, it is therefore necessary to delve deeper into the complexity of the techno music experience.

## 2. Immediacy in Minimalist Aesthetic Proposals

In this section we will discuss how the notion of immediacy can be traced in the proposals of John Cage, Philip Glass, La Monte Young, Steve Reich and Terry Riley. This study will review cases in which *immediacy* can be deciphered as an ideal that organises composers' aesthetic goals, examining how it is reflected in their compositional choices and in the desired experiential qualities of their works.

Michael Nyman managed to link, early on, Cage's work with that of the North American group of composers, for whom he coined the category of *musical minimalism*.<sup>7</sup> Although Nyman is recognized for being the first to use this category, he was not the only one to approach the analysis of the techniques of this movement and its links with Cage's aesthetics. This work is based on the notions and descriptions of minimalism by Wim Mertens, Edward Strickland, Keith Potter, and Kyle Gann, which were then critically reviewed by Susan McClary and Marija Masnikosa.<sup>8</sup> Mertens, Strickland and Potter have focused on La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, and somehow have collaborated in consolidating them as the main exponents of minimalism. However, the legitimization of these men has left in the background composers that could equally fall into the category of minimalists, such as Pauline Oliveros, Loren Rush, Charlemagne Palestine, among others.

In spite of the fact that the theoretical works cited so far allow the recognition of a diverse variety of techniques that distinguish each of the four composers, Kyle Gann summarizes twelve technical

<sup>7</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental music: Cage and beyond*, (Cambridge University Press., 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Susan McClary, "Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time"; Marija Masnikosa "A Theoretical Model of Postminimalism and Two Brief 'Case Studies.'" in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, ed. Keith Potter and Kyle Gann, 297-311, (Routledge, 2013)



aspects that contribute to a definition of minimalism: static harmony, continuous repetition, gradual additive processes, phase-shifting, permutational processes, steady pulse, instrumentation, linear transformations, unintended sounds—which he calls metamusic—, interest in pure tones, influence of Western philosophy and music, and presentation of audible structures.<sup>9</sup> Not all minimal works are entirely created using this set of techniques, nor do these techniques represent all the resources of minimalism. In fact, in a first reading we can even notice a certain clash between some of them. Even so, Gann's schematization allows us to make an approach to the technical proposal of this avant-garde genre.

As Peter Burger points out, avant-garde projects have had as a common element the attempt to overcome the boundaries that were built during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries between the arts and life or, in the author's words, the arts and "life praxis".<sup>10</sup> This pursuit implied the perception and experience of art would become indistinguishable from that of everyday life. The distinctions between these spheres would dissolve, resulting in a unified form of experience. Furthermore, the avant-garde horizon offered alternative life projects to those created by twentieth-century Western capitalism. With this in mind, the reunification of the arts with life would evolve into a new vital praxis.<sup>11</sup>

John Cage was no exception regarding these avant-garde intentions. His aesthetic and philosophical proposals, together with those of the Fluxus movement, contributed significantly to the pursuit of dissolving the boundaries between art and life. This blurring was upheld not only from a theoretical and philosophical standpoint but also through compositional work itself and musical technique. Music was to take a step forward and get closer to life; consequently, life could take its own: as Cage stated, "Art has erased the dividing line between life and art. Now it is up to life to erase the dividing line between life and art."<sup>12</sup>

9 Kyle Gann, "Thankless attempts at a definition of minimalism," in *Audio culture*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Continuum, 2004), 300-3.

10 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (University of Minnesota Press., 1984)

11 Ibid., 50.

12 Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, (Kahn & Averill, 1988).



Here, *immediacy* means breaking the dialectical relationships between art and life, the contradictory distance of art itself, the 'double character' of art as both 'autonomous' and as a 'social fact'. All negativity of art in its capacity to expose the fissures of given reality, distance from everyday modes of determination and behavior, is annulled. Art manages to become a language of effective and affective affirmation of the given world. Cage sought to turn art into a reconciliatory language: "We need a new language which can be experienced by all human beings immediately, (...). Chinese ideograms did this anciently. We need ideograms that will do this now".<sup>13</sup> On another occasion, he clarifies, "the wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical."<sup>14</sup> The *immediacy* is presented as the rejection of forms of mediation of thought as a way for a supposed universal experience. What is implied in his words is what Benjamin Piekut manages to trace in Cage's philosophy as a modern European ontology.<sup>15</sup> Cage's concern focused on direct access to the nature of sound without human interference, an undistorted experience. The horizon for an immediate experience of nature is implicit, the possibility of understanding something without intellectual mediation. The experience of an immediate language, which Cage believed he found in Chinese ideograms and in some art forms, would imply an absence of the subject, an interruption of every intellectual process involved in the creation of and relationship between signifier-signified, or between sensitive stimulus and idea. A language that is experienced immediately should exclude every moment that delays, strains, or questions the relationship between sound and meaning. At least in this way, immediacy would be apparently experienced.

The lack of negativity and contradiction in the music of Cage's aesthetic project can be analyzed from his answer to the question, *what is the meaning of writing music?* As he states, it "is an affirmation

<sup>13</sup> John Cage, *The selected letters of John Cage*, (Wesleyan University Press., 2016), 425.

<sup>14</sup> Cage, as cited in Nyman, *Experimental music: Cage and beyond*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Piekut, "Chance and certainty: John Cage's politics of nature," *Cultural Critique* 84 (Spring 2013): 134-163.

of life — not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.”<sup>16</sup> What can be highlighted from his statement is the idea of a life given in advance that would be excellent only from a supposed absence of the subject, from an exclusion of their cognitive faculties and desires. Cage is inclined to think that, in this way, without the intervention or mediation of the subject, one would let life and sound be themselves rather than a vehicle for the expression of the human being. The desire to experience the sounds themselves may be linked to the lack of awareness of the mediated dimension of immediacy.

Cage insists on the moment of identification, on a full and uncontradicted recognition between the subject and the object, a pure experience of nature, and a direct correspondence within language and nature. Following Cage's philosophy, the “here and now” —immediacy in space and time— is revealed as an expression of unity between a first and an ultimate meaning, excluding their historical and temporal dimensions. The aspiration towards an immediate identification between sound —or any other sensitive stimulus— and sense implies a disregard for the subject-object dialectic and the historical aspects that underlie immediacy. Any opposition to the given reality, any association that denies the arbitrary relationship with the meaning, any negative element that may arise in the experience, is rejected in favor of elevating the immediacy of experience to the degree of undeniable truth.

The pursuit of immediacy in musical experience can also be examined through the work of Philip Glass, who contends that music no longer serves a mediating function, referring to something beyond itself, but rather embodies its own essence without mediation. Glass posits that music should be apprehended as a pure sonic event, emphasizing the primacy of its immediate physiological impact on the listener.<sup>17</sup> Similar to Cage, Glass

<sup>16</sup> John Cage, *Silence: lectures and writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Phillip Glass as cited in Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 88-89.

advocates for a mode of listening that prioritizes the sound's effect on consciousness, rather than the listener's active mediation of the piece's meaning. He suggests a reevaluation of the subject's role in musical experience, positioning the listener as a receptive vessel for the musical influx. Consequently, the immediate effect of sound on the subject's state becomes paramount. In pursuit of these concepts, Glass developed compositional techniques that resulted in expansive, undramatic, and anti-teleological musical structures. These structures significantly impact the construction of meaning and its attendant cognitive demands. Faculties such as memory, expectation, and the ability to forge connections between scattered fragments lose their traditional significance within these structures, which instead concentrate their force on the immediacy of the present moment and its direct impact. The past holds no sway over the present's meaning, and no formal trajectory guides future expectations. A notable example is his opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), whose performances can extend beyond five hours. The sheer scale of this work renders sustained attention and the retention of detailed information virtually impossible. The opera's objective is not a teleological, narrative, or linear progression, wherein connections between distinct moments and materials are established throughout the piece. Rather, it invites the audience to immerse themselves in the "here and now" of the sonic experience, to focus on the "pure sound" itself, disregarding conventional temporal and formal relationships. While the piece does present distinct structural moments, these are not causally linked to contribute to an overarching narrative or sense of the whole.

Somehow in line with Glass, La Monte Young has been interested in the effects of harmonic intervals on the mental states of the listener. In fact, La Monte Young's theory has allowed him to construct a systematization of the effects and feelings that each interval would provoke. His theory postulates a linear logic between certain areas of the brain and the basilar membrane area that is more sensitive to frequencies:

When a specific set of harmonically related frequencies is continuous or repeated, as is often the case in my music, it could more definitively produce a psychological state since the set of harmonically related frequencies will continuously trigger a specific set of the auditory neurons which, in turn, will continuously perform the same operation of transmitting a periodic pattern of impulses to the corresponding set of fixed locations in the cerebral cortex.<sup>18</sup>

Each harmonic interval would affect, through its impact on the neural wiring, the mental state of the listener, maximizing the effect by repeating the interval.<sup>19</sup> The subject is conceived here, once again, as a mere passive recipient of a sensitive stimulus that mechanically affects their organism and mental state. From this perspective, it would be the music, but more precisely the intervals that compose it, that induces and defines the subject.

Beyond their shared religious background as students of Pandit Pran Nath, Terry Riley and La Monte Young harbored a common interest in the immediate impact of music on mental states. The mystical dimension of their musical endeavors can be understood through the idea of *identification with the sound*. They posited that selfless surrender to "pure sound," particularly in its static or repetitive forms, facilitated a complete identification with nature, even with the divine. This identification, in their view, aligned with Young's notion of "To get into the sound: The sound is God, I am the sound that is God."<sup>20</sup> As Mertens observes, Riley employed the repetition of rapid patterns within a static or gradually evolving musical framework. Through this technique, which bears relevance to our later analysis of techno, Riley discovered a means to induce states of trance or a sense of weightlessness.<sup>21</sup> For Riley, the technique of repetition, with or without subtle variations, was the quintessential method for influencing the listener's emotions and ultimately achieving an ecstatic state of self-transcendence.<sup>22</sup>

18 La Monte Young as cited in Kyle Gann, "The Outer Edge of Consonance: Snapshots from the Evolution of La Monte Young's Tuning Installations" in *The Bucknell Review*, 40,1 (1996): 161-162

19 Kyle Gann, "The Outer Edge of Consonance", 162

20 La Monte Young as cited in Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 91.

21 Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 91.

22 Ibid., 37 and 91.

We will now delineate several key consequences of these aesthetics centered on immediacy, which are central to this study and instrumental in organizing our analysis of the techno music experience. The presuppositions and interests of these composers are discernible in the specific techniques and structures they employed. On one hand, certain works are characterized by independent musical moments devoid of logical-causal relationships. This could refer to the concept of '*moment form*' as articulated by Stockhausen and further developed by Kramer. On the other hand, some works exhibit a formal *stasis*, seemingly without variation. Within this latter category, we can differentiate between compositions that are strictly static, extending a single sound over time with minimal or no variation or direction —La Monte Young's Composition 1960 #7 serves as a prime example—, and those that possess a predetermined structure that linearly governs the unfolding of the musical process, as exemplified by so-called *process music*, especially linked to Steve Reich. We concur with Kramer in characterizing this specific type of processuality as fundamentally static, despite any superficial movement, since the underlying logic of the piece is established at the outset and remains unchanged, proceeding along a predetermined linear trajectory.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, these structures arrange sounds in a manner that eliminates any vestige of teleology, enabling individual sounds or sections to become isolated and independent from one another in the construction of meaning.

However, it is arguably the technique of exacerbated repetition, the loop, that achieves the most profound effects in terms of "disintermediation". Works such as Piano Phase and the hypnotic repetitions of Come Out (1966) exemplify the use of extreme repetition to manipulate the very temporality of the musical discourse. Looping, as a compositional device, stands in opposition to the teleological structures that dominated Western music, favoring instead a prolonged engagement with the details of the present moment. This stasis, however, should not be interpreted

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan D. Kramer, *The time of music: New meanings, new temporalities, new listening strategies*. (Schirmer Books, 1988): 54-57.

as an absence of activity or a reduction to mere repetition, but rather as a fundamental shift in the constitution of musical time and meaning. The loop facilitates the aims of immediacy by drawing attention to the minutiae of the isolated sonic event, fostering an absorbed listening experience and a detachment from broader context. This emphasis on the immediate presence of the loop, on its “here and now,” dissolves the tension between past, present, and future, generating the “macro-time” or “vertical time” that characterizes certain minimalist works, and which we will also observe in our subsequent analysis of techno.

The faculties that were traditionally required to construct the sense of the piece are largely postponed and become disadvantaged. Memory, imagination and reflection would lose their *raison d'être* in a discourse that does not establish formal or temporal relationships in its evolution. It is no longer necessary to recover the past, what has happened, in order to encode it in the present. Even memory might get in the way of the moment of *surrender* to the immediate sound. Faced with the formal stasis of the pieces and the desire of an immediate reaction, there is little for reflection and imagination to do but to let schematism follow the historically automated associations between sensitive impressions and their effects. Finally, due to the mediation these three faculties imply in the experience, they make the effect inefficient, hinder immediacy and create a suspicion about the validity of an *immediate language*.

In his work *Repeating Ourselves*, Robert Fink elucidates the shared techniques employed in minimalism, repetitive dance music —such as disco and techno—, and advertising. In all these contexts, continuous repetition within extended structures contributes to the hypnotic effects of the experience. Drawing on Tom Johnson's concept of hypnotic music, Fink notes that the tempo of such works “must be rather fast and must remain exactly the same throughout. The main concern is to lull the listener into a sequence of melodic or rhythmic patterns that shift very gradually as the music progresses.”<sup>24</sup> This technique, utilized for

<sup>24</sup> Tom Johnson as cited in Fink, *Repeating ourselves*, 239



spiritual purposes by composers like La Monte Young and Terry Riley, or to induce altered mental states, was employed not only in minimalism but also in advertising, where it aimed to captivate and persuade the audience. Furthermore, the repetition of energetic patterns produces an auditory effect that Fink describes as “fast-yet-slow.”<sup>25</sup> This effect can be described as kaleidoscopic, wherein rapid movement within each pattern generates a sense of stasis or slowness due to the absence of a clear directional trajectory. Wim Mertens also recognized this perceptual phenomenon, observing that “the very rapid patterns (...) produce slow movements that nevertheless feel like a vibrating motionless trance.”<sup>26</sup>

The allure of sensory richness and hypnotic states also pursued a form of immediacy through identification with the sound, a merging with the sonic environment. As we have seen, La Monte Young’s work epitomized this aspiration, aiming for a dissolution of the self within the sound. Coupled with the musical techniques previously discussed, this pursuit sought to blur and ultimately eliminate the boundaries between the listener and the sonic object, fostering a sense of unity between both. This suggests an experience of reconciliation, a (re)union of subject and sound, veiled in a mystical aura. This transcendence of historically established distances and contradictions between subject and object generates a feeling of profound satisfaction. However, Mertens characterizes this as a pseudo-satisfaction, arguing that the abandonment of temporal dialectics in this music occurs not in reality but on an imaginary plane. This imaginary satisfaction, he suggests, bears a relationship to the Freudian concept of regression; in turn, this return to an infantile state is linked to a form of “hallucinatory satisfaction.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, identification yields pleasure by dissolving the boundaries and distinctions between subject and object, constructing an illusory but pleasurable experience of unity with the world -or with the divine-.

<sup>25</sup> Fink, *Repeating ourselves*, 105.

<sup>26</sup> Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 124.

### 3. Immediacy in Techno Music

You cannot avoid this (techno) music, it is everywhere. I actually think it has an aspect to it that is very similar to what I was trying to do. It is the obsessiveness, it is the way of obliterating consciousness with a very compulsive sound. Once you are drawn into it, you cannot avoid it, you are just drawn up into it. It just frees the mind, in a way. It is very similar to what we were trying to do with tape loops.

Terry Riley<sup>28</sup>

The comparison between techno and the aesthetic pursuits of the minimalists is unavoidable, as even Terry Riley himself acknowledges. However, in this study, it is the notion of *immediacy* that provides a novel framework for bridging these two genres. Immediacy will be analyzed not only through its manifestation in techniques and forms, such as the repetition of the loop and the construction of structures based on stasis, but also through its impact on listening modes. This comparative analysis not only highlights the aforementioned connections but also allows for a more nuanced understanding of immediacy's central role in shaping contemporary aesthetic experience.

#### 3.1 Formal Stasis: The Immediacy of the Present Moment

The repetitive nature of techno is perhaps most apparent in first encounters with the genre. It would not be unusual for someone accustomed to rock concerts or pop music clubs to perceive monotony after an hour spent in renowned techno clubs like Berghain or Tresor. The experience might even become overwhelming. The omnipresent kick invades every corner of the room and body, punching each pulse with machinic precision, providing a ground for layers upon layers of looped sounds that

28 Terry Riley in Tilman Baumgärtel, *That technique would give you a different versions of reality*. Accessed on 30 January 2025 at <https://loopsbuch.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/terryriley.pdf>

seem to lack a clear trajectory. A techno track like I Hate Models' "Daydream" could prove unbearable to ears expecting harmonic progressions with chords that change every few seconds, a sequence of markedly different and varied moods, with clearly demarcated and familiar verse-chorus structures. However, as listeners become more familiar with the genre, they often develop a mode of hearing that discerns the subtle differences and unique characteristics of each techno track, without denying its fundamentally repetitive quality.

### Loop

As Zachary Schwartz observes, the emphasis on the repetition of motivic figures is perhaps the most readily apparent similarity between early minimalism and techno, albeit one that manifests primarily on a surface level.<sup>29</sup> Both minimalism and techno have employed repetition to an often extreme degree. While it is inaccurate to claim that all minimalist works rely on the repetition of short fragments, as Strickland rightly points out, this technique is nonetheless a defining characteristic of much of the minimalist canon, though it does not fully account for works like those of La Monte Young, which are better understood through the concept of "sustenance."<sup>30</sup>

In his book on the aesthetics of the loop, Tilman Baumgärtel offers a concise definition of this concept: "short sound or image sequences that have been recorded in analogue or digital form and can be repeated any number of times"<sup>31</sup>. These loops are often generated using digital technologies, such as a short audio file in a digital music player that plays continuously. In techno music, digitally produced loops predominate, as opposed to repetition executed by the physical actions of instrumental musicians. Although the fragment to be repeated, its duration, and content are defined by a human, it is the machine that is responsible for

29 Zachary Schwartz. "Alternate Minimalisms", 60

30 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism*, 133-145

31 Tilman Baumgärtel, *Schleifen: zur Geschichte und Ästhetik des Loops*. (Kadmos, 2015), 22. The original text reads "kurze Klang- oder Bildsequenzen, die analog oder digital aufgezeichnet wurden und beliebig oft wiederholt werden können".

its reproduction. As a consequence, repetition gains in accuracy, although it simultaneously loses variation. As Baumgärtel describes it, "The immobilized sound embalms the moment".<sup>32</sup> To counteract the potential mechanical appearance, techno artists often employ techniques that lend fluidity to the repetitions, introducing a "groove" through offsets or micro-variations that compensate for the inherent rigidity of the process. However, despite these procedures to mask its artificial nature, the logic of the loop persists, exerting its inherent repetitive force. In this sense, we can understand the loop as a kind of exacerbated machinic iteration.

The techno loop functions as a technical device that propels the music towards stasis. The degree of perceived stasis, the threshold of immobility, depends largely on the rate of new information flow per unit of time.<sup>33</sup> As Kramer states, this rate creates "a static impression, while more information produces motion".<sup>34</sup> This stasis involves a prioritization of simultaneous relationships over linear, causal-temporal ones between musical materials. In the absence of temporal implications, the past and future fade in favor of an immediate present experience. The power of the loop lies in its ability to focus attention on the present material, on the suspended now, which remains static, creating a rupture in the horizontal coherence of the musical discourse and isolating and consecrating the present moment, the here and now, as a totality.

The loop's exacerbated use in techno brings to the fore an internal contradiction inherent to the here and now, as Simon Reynolds describes it:

Techno and house create a subtly different form of heightened immediacy (...). Timbre-saturated, repetitive but tilted always toward the next now, techno is an immediacy machine, stretching time into a continuous present. (...) music itself drugs the listener, looping consciousness then derailing it, stranding it in a nowhere/nowhen, where there is only sensation, 'where now lasts longer'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. The original text reads "*Der errierte Klang balsamiert den Moment ein*".

<sup>33</sup> Kramer, *Time of Music*, 210.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, Simon. *Generation ecstasy: Into the world of techno and rave culture* (Routledge, 2013), 55.

This pursuit of the here and now aims to access the most immediate aspect of sound, that which becomes instantly present in sensory experience. However, as Reynolds suggests, this results in a paradoxical sensation of a distorted here-and-now. Within the musical experience, due to the weakening of temporal relationships, the atomized sound loses its specificity. It becomes a *now* detached from logical time, making it impossible to grasp as a concrete or particular now. It is not a *now* that has evolved from a specific past moment, nor is it a precursor to what will come. This very temporal disarticulation transforms the now into a lost point, a nowhere/nowhen, as Reynolds might put it.

The logic of the techno loop consists of deepening the present through the abandonment of expectation and the attenuation of memory. It operates by making the past recur, by rendering the past present. Simultaneously, it features a future that, as an expectation of what will happen, is progressively weakened: what will happen is what is already happening. In this sense, directionality and the anticipation of change are nullified. The connection between what was and what will be loses its meaning.

### Structural stasis

While it is possible to identify the loop logic with an exacerbated form of stasis, reducing techno to a mere loop would be an oversimplification. The track "Daydream" by I Hate Models serves as a representative example of the kind of non-directional, linear continuity described by Kramer, a music that moves aimlessly. Repetition is evident, albeit on different levels, each with its own dimension. Despite appearing fluid and varied, exact repetition remains a fundamental formal element, from the kick that repeats insistently on each beat to sustained notes oscillating within eight-beat loops. The layering of loops can create rich textures without teleological arcs. It is a static form of movement.

In fact, it is easy to draw a parallel between the structure of this individual track and the unfolding of a DJ set over the course of a night in a techno club, as the sequential chaining of loops within

a track often mirrors the chaining of tracks in a DJ set, constructing a sense of fluidity in the transitions. It is in these extended events where techno phenomenologically expresses the vast plateaus, the plains of hypnotic stasis, that its techniques virtually embody.

As we have emphasized, a defining characteristic of many minimalist projects is the rejection of teleological musical discourse in favor of a musical stasis, devoid of traditional temporal development. Just as in minimalism, we can also apply Kramer's concept of "vertical time" to techno. Despite the vertical complexity that may arise from the superimposition of loops and the often rapid tempo, these elements can generate expansive plateaus of sound that do not convey a sense of directionality toward a different musical moment. This is not to say that absolute stasis is possible. Just as Cage challenged the notion of absolute silence,<sup>36</sup> one might question the possibility of complete musical stasis. Subtle variations inevitably exist within the constituent elements of a sound and are further influenced by the acoustic environment. Moreover, the inherent dynamism of our attention and perception makes the experience of absolute stasis unlikely. And it is also important to acknowledge that certain subgenres of techno, such as "Peak Time," do construct tension arcs lending the music some clearer directionality that could be understood through Fink's concept of "recombinant teleology".<sup>37</sup> However, similar to how minimalist pieces such as La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #7* strive for a sense of stasis,<sup>38</sup> in techno, the vertical time of these sonic plains allows listeners to focus on different details of the texture, enabling an individual sonic exploration akin to examining a sculpture.

In techno, this perceived stasis can be achieved through the consistent repetition of a regular pulse that underpins a series of layered, looped sounds. Even the consistent unfolding of a process,

<sup>36</sup> Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence. John Cage's 4'33"* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> See Luciano Pascual, "Technique, Experience and the Social Function of Techno Music" in *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 14, 1 (2023): 23-38.

<sup>38</sup> In this paper we take into consideration the sonorous results of the composition, although we recognise that the series of works that make up "Composition 1960" manage to incorporate non-sound aspects, such as the score itself or the performative character of the actions to be done.



whose underlying logic remains unchanged, can create this effect, much as it does in minimalist process music. The loop, performed by each layer, represents the minimal unit of this overall formal stasis. This formal organization suspends traditional causal-temporal relationships between musical elements, prioritizing instead their simultaneous interplay. Devoid of conventional temporal development, the past and future recede, giving way to an experience focused on the immediate present. Herein lies the connection to immediacy: the emphasis on the present material, on a sustained and static now, creates a rupture within the horizontal coherence of the musical discourse, effectively isolating and consecrating the present moment as a self-contained totality. Each sonic event within the loop gains validity and interest primarily through its presence in the here and now, rather than through its mediated relationship with other temporally displaced events.

### 3.2 Experiences of immediacy: pleasure and reconciliation

#### Formalisation crisis

The immediacy and musical stasis of anti-teleological proposals no longer presuppose the pursuit of a goal or a sense based on the establishment of relations between sounds in time. Or at least not a goal within the music itself. The musical dramatic -and teleological- creation assumed a memory capable of retaining every possible component in order to achieve, in Theodor Adorno's words, a "meaningful context".<sup>39</sup> It involved both a devotion to the details of the materials presented and the establishment of their implications in form, a task "involving sensitivity of apprehension, intellect, and memory".<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the experience of the work was fundamentally processual, demanding that the listener follow, through individual reflection, the "roten Faden"<sup>41</sup>, linking the past-present-future of the materials.

<sup>39</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the sociology of music*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the arts, and ideas: Patterns and predictions in twentieth-century culture* (University of Chicago Press., 1994), 46.

<sup>41</sup> Theodor W. Adorno "Anweisungen zum Hören neuer Musik" in *Komposition für der Film/ Der getreue Korrepetitor* (Suhrkamp, 1963) 209-210.

However, in the context of immediacy, memory and reflection—those faculties essential for mediating musical meaning—become, in a sense, superfluous. Leonard B. Meyer classifies such currents that hypostasize immediacy as “empiricist radicalism” or “transcendental particularism.” For these currents,

What are truly real, and really true, are concrete, particular sense experiences. These are what we know. The rest is inference. Theories and hypotheses, hierarchies and relationships, are abstract, artificial extrapolations which come between man and the unique, existent facts of the universe. When perception is ordered in terms of such abstract conceptual categories, the primordial, concrete immediacy of things is obscured.<sup>42</sup>

Following Meyer’s characterization, one could argue that these faculties also obscure the immediacy in techno. Indeed, within the context of techno, the cognitive mediation that once served to grasp the overarching meaning of a piece are rendered almost irrelevant by the continuous repetition of materials, the non-causal juxtaposition of sections (build-up, core, breakdown, etc.), and the use of standardized formulas to produce sensory effects of *tension-release*, of *stasis-ecstasy*. When a sound is perpetually present within a loop of two, four, or eight bars, the need for memory to recall or connect it to a larger narrative arc is diminished.

### Pleasurable and hypnotic effect

Luis Manuel García-Mispirota has undertaken an analysis of repetition, specifically the loop and the practice of looping, through a novel approach that eschews both the celebratory appraisal of it as a transgressive technique and its denigration as regressive. His work establishes a link between musical repetition and listener pleasure, reformulating Karl Bühler’s theoretical framework. Bühler, a psychologist and philosopher, proposed categories alternative to Freud’s, allowing for an understanding of pleasure

<sup>42</sup> Meyer, *Music, the arts, and ideas*, 159.

in repetition uncoupled from the death drive.<sup>43</sup> Adapting Bühler's categories, García-Mispireta introduces the concept of "process pleasure" to describe the enjoyment derived from engaging in or being part of a process. In the context of electronic dance music, looping refers to the practice of adding and subtracting short, repetitive motivic units (loops) within a layered textural fabric.<sup>44</sup> García-Mispireta posits that the cyclical repetition inherent in looping allows the listener's attention to wander through the various layers and intricacies of the static texture, creating an individual auditory path. This experience of actively participating in a creative process, of charting a unique sonic path determined by attentional focus, is precisely what engenders pleasure.<sup>45</sup> Thus, according to this perspective, repetition, as manifested in the loop and looping, fosters a heightened sense of listener engagement, both in the production of the musical experience and in the journey through it.

The experience of pleasure is not the sole consequence attributed to continuous repetition in minimal and techno music; repetition's capacity to generate hypnotic effects has also been widely acknowledged. These effects are often associated with the perceptual illusions arising from the inherent tension between motion and stasis within these genres. We have already noted how Fink and Mertens refer to the sensory effect of the passage of time as a 'fast-yet-slow' or 'vibrating motionless trance'. Philip Sherburne, meanwhile, posits that repetition in techno engenders an illusion of stillness even while everything is ultimately in motion.<sup>46</sup> García-Mispireta, for his part, argues that the paradoxical effect lies in the perception of sameness despite continuous change.<sup>47</sup> These somewhat divergent perspectives underscore the inherent ambiguity and contradictory nature of the perceived movement generated by sustained repetition. While these perceptual effects

43 Luis Manuel García-Mispireta, "On and on: repetition as process and pleasure in electronic dance music," in *Music Theory Online* 11, 4 (2005): 5-7. <https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/mto.05.11.4.garcia.html>

44 Mark J. Butler, *Unlocking the groove: Rhythm, meter, and musical design in electronic dance music*. (Indiana University Press, 2006), 110

45 García-Mispireta, "On and on", 8.

46 Sherburne, "Digital Discipline", 322

47 García-Mispireta, "On and on", 7

were already present in minimalist music, they are further amplified in techno, where the induction of trance-like states is often an explicit objective. This is supported by Kathryn Becker-Blease's research on electronic dance music, where she cites that "Trance music is electronic music explicitly produced for the purpose of inducing trance states in its listeners."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, she highlights the work of Jimi Fritz, who notes that hypnotic trance music "is designed to take the listener on an inner journey and so features extended journey motifs with repeating and cyclic hypnotic elements."<sup>49</sup>

### Reconciliation

This final section analyzes the mystical dimension of *immediacy* as it relates to the experience of a seamless unity between listener and sound. While studies of spirituality in electronic music often focus on ritualistic experiences and communal unity among participants,<sup>50</sup> our focus here is narrower. We aim to connect the immediacy in techno with the mystical experience La Monte Young pursued in his work, as exemplified by his statement: "To get into the sound: The sound is God, I am the sound that is God."<sup>51</sup> Thus, we are concerned not with community bonding but with the individual subject's identification with the sound itself.

The compositional structures and techniques previously identified within minimalist currents, particularly those oriented towards the experience of "getting into the sound," are closely linked to the concept of vertical time, as described by Kramer, which we have also observed in techno. Wim Mertens offers a critical perspective on these techniques, arguing that they effectively blur the dialectical opposition between form and content, and

48 Kathryn A. Becker-Blease, "Dissociative States Through New Age and Electronic Trance Music," in *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 5, 2 (2004): 94. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J229v05n02\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J229v05n02_05)

49 Jimi Fritz, *Rave Culture: An Insider's Overview* (Canada: SmallFry Press, 1999), 90.

50 St John Graham, "Electronic dance music culture and religion: An overview," in *Culture and religion* 7,1 (2006): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01438300600625259>; Melanie Takahashi and Tim Olaveson, "Music, dance and raving bodies: Raving as spirituality in the central Canadian rave scene," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 17, 2 (2003): 72-96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44368995>; Scott R. Hutson, "Technoshamanism: spiritual healing in the rave subculture," in *Popular Music & Society* 23,3 (1999): 53-77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007769908591745>;

51 La Monte Young as cited in Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 91.

consequently, between subject and work.<sup>52</sup> According to Mertens, in this context, no moment of resistance or negativity arises between the material content, its distinctive features, and the overall formal meaning of the piece. Consequently, content becomes identified with meaning; the individual sound is perceived as exhausting the totality of meaning. Further, the dialectical opposition between subject and work is circumvented because “getting into the sound” or “being the sound” implies a direct identification with the “here and now” of *immediate reality*. This is precisely where Mertens locates a central problem: “But reality in this case is not to be considered in an historical or existential way. (...) Identification with the here-and-now presents a category of time beyond history, which excludes all development.”<sup>53</sup> Mertens’s critique can be understood as highlighting a disregard for the historical dimension of immediacy, prioritizing instead an identification between subject and work that transcends temporality.

The disengagement from the historicity embedded within the musical materials, coupled with the abandonment of formal construction based on temporal relationships, appear to be the very strategies employed to achieve what Mertens terms “macro-time,” or mythical time.<sup>54</sup> This “macro-time” transcends individual or contingent movement, constituting a stasis that coincides with a sense of totality. Mertens, drawing on the work of Francois-Bernard Mache, interprets this atemporal realm—seemingly a return to a lost unity between subject and object—as reflecting a “nostalgia for raw innocence and virgin nature.”<sup>55</sup> The notion of a time beyond time, in this view, suggests that history itself is responsible for contaminating or disrupting the immediacy of experience, thus barring access to an idealized “first nature.”

This very “macro-time” is discernible in the techniques employed in techno, techniques that not only lead to stasis, rendering each presented moment a totality, but also find a parallel in the ecstatic

<sup>52</sup> Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 87-92.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 116)

experiences of unity described by Simon Reynolds. Reynolds contends that, over time, rave music has evolved into a form of science focused on intensifying the ecstatic moment, a moment often linked to feelings of unity and reconciliation with otherness.<sup>56</sup> As Reynolds puts it, "house and techno producers have developed a drug-determined repertoire of effects, textures, and riffs that are expressly designed to trigger the tingly rushes that traverse the ecstatic body."<sup>57</sup> Beyond this, James Landau offers the following description of the techno rave experience:

the raver is consumed not only by an immediate 'experience' of the phenomenal world, but also by his or her body's subconscious knowledges of unity and alterity (not to mention genderless sexual specificity)—knowledges that are quite different from those of self-reflective thought. (...) in its indeterminacy and interwovenness, the raver is a mute witness to the blurring of once clear demarcations between himself and the crowd, between herself and the rave.<sup>58</sup>

Building on this argument, we can further suggest that the boundaries between listener and sound become increasingly blurred within this context. As these distinctions dissolve, an experience of unity emerges, a sense of reconciliation between historically divergent poles. This feeling of oneness with the phenomenal world resonates with the "immediate language" that Cage envisioned. The merging with the sonic stimulus suggests a moment of identification, an equivalence between subject and sound, where seemingly irreconcilable differences momentarily vanish. It is precisely this experience of unity that connects the mystical aspirations of La Monte Young with the immersive experience of the contemporary raver.

<sup>56</sup> Reynolds, *Generation ecstasy*, 308

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>58</sup> James Landau, "The flesh of raving: Merleau-Ponty and the 'experience' of ecstasy," in *Rave culture and religion*, ed. St John Graham (Routledge, 2003), 119.



## 4. Conclusion

This study has provided a contribution to the multiple linkages between minimalism and techno, using immediacy as the main conceptual key. As mentioned above, immediacy is a critical concept that reveals a fundamental ideological dimension. Through a comparative analysis of formal techniques and their experiential implications, this research shows how immediacy can be read in these musical genres. From the immediacy understood from compositional techniques that derive in a stasis, 'vertical time', that disfavours the interweaving of meaning, that 'disintermediates' sound in its musical sense, to the ecstatic and hypnotic experiences that blur the mediations between the subject and the heard. These shared traits, though potentially rooted in distinct artistic motivations, underline a continuity — and, in some respects, an intensification — of the impulse of immediacy in contemporary music.

Immediacy functions as a key to understanding how music can contribute not only to the naturalisation of modes of perception that conceal the social-historical mediations that underlie them, but enable intense experiences of fascination. This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which immediacy manifests itself in current cultural expressions, and to reflections on the broader role of art and aesthetic experience in the context of late capitalism, in particular on its capacity to contest or reinforce ideological constructions.

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## Publisher

Federal University of Goiás. School of Music and Performing Arts. Graduate Program in Music. Publication in the Portal of Periodicals UFG.

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