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Article

Breach the Peace: Revisiting Spiral Tribe's Utopian Techno Future

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Abstract

This article explores the complexities of revisiting, remembering and revising the cultural philosophies and aesthetics associated with the free festival and rave scenes of the early 1990s. The analysis here examines and comments on the rave sound system Spiral Tribe and the moral panic that resulted from their activities during the infamous rave on Castlemorton Common in May 1992. Informed by scholarship from figures such as Mark Fisher, Danny Cookney and Graham St John, the article engages in a close reading of archive footage found on YouTube. From this, a discussion regarding the complex interplay of mediation, techno aesthetics, memory and narrative emerges and develops. Viewing the footage now is both curious and uncanny. The clear and optimistic vision of the future offered by Spiral Tribe clashes and contrasts with our atomized and passive relationship with technology in the twenty-first century. As such, watching these faded versions of a potential future is a hauntological experience full of ghosts and spectres.

Keywords: rave; archive; hauntology; Spiral Tribe; techno; video

1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, a new set of folk devils appeared on the British media landscape. Over a week in late May 1992, approximately 20,000 ravers¹ gathered on Castlemorton Common in the Malvern Hills in rural Worcestershire (Chester 2017). Their purpose was simple; they were here to dance to acid house and hardcore. The event quickly became the lead item on broadcast news and took up front page prominence in both the salacious tabloids and the patrician broadsheets. This was a different scene from early raves in the late 1980s (also a cause of grave moral panic). These groups, sound systems and collectives were, as Alice O'Grady writes, 'developed as a direct result of the convergence of travellers with sound systems' (O'Grady 2017, p. 77). This was not the entrepreneurial 'weekender' culture associated with figures such as Tony Colston-Hayter². No, this was a confluence of punk, crusty, and acid cultures developed through the free festival scene and consolidated on Micheal Evis' Pilton fields. The scene drew on saturnalian folk traditions and celebrated anarchy, hedonism and resistance. It offered a vision of alternative and utopian living via networking and through the adoption and adaptation of analogue hardware and emerging digital software. It was, as O'Grady confirms, 'one of the most potent subcultural crossovers of recent history' (O'Grady 2017, p. 77). The controversies generated by the event revolved around anger at supposed police complicity and sensationalised tales of drug use, ill-defined rituals and suspected sexual deviance. The previous decade had seen Margaret Thatcher rail against the 'enemy within' and violent skirmishes with traveller and crusty communities³. The battle lines were drawn and a moral dichotomy set up between



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the self-proclaimed decency of middle England and the chaos and mess associated with this new iteration of rave culture. Ultimately, this debate and discourse would lead to the [Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994](#) (2020) and its infamous banning of music ‘wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats’⁴.

Of the several sound systems participating in the Castlemorton event, one is of particular interest here. A few members of Spiral Tribe were pupils at my school and the collective’s reputation in my middle-class commuter-belt city bordered on mythical. Even now, 30 years on, I still boast of my proximity to Spiral Tribe as if it is somehow going to build my credibility (it’s probably the reason I decided to embark on this research too if I’m totally honest). Part of their charm (or the inverse depending on perspective) was their future-facing aesthetic. Borrowing heavily from the quasi-military style of Detroit techno warriors Underground Resistance⁵, members of Spiral Tribe wore black bomber jackets, black joggers (often termed ‘trance trousers’) and black trainers. They shaved their heads and sported the Spiral Tribe logo on bags and t-shirts.⁶ The logo itself, silver on black, was a loose appropriation of the sort of tribal art associated with indigenous cultures in North America and Australasia (which was very fashionable in the 1990s). Above all, though, their images and their purported values were about the potential freedoms offered by technology. Whether this was the ability to communicate through early mobile phones, the equipment required to make their brand of acid techno and hardcore, the decks and rigs used at raves and on pirate broadcasts or the design options offered by the then-exciting developments in DTP, technology offered freedom, autonomy, resistance and self-determination. It meant that they could remain ahead of the law, it meant that they could break with the now-commercialised events associated with the initial rave circuit. They were on a path to techno utopia.

The specific research questions explored here regard engaging with all of this 30 years later. It seems, superficially, that this vision of the future has mostly failed. The failure is economic, legal and cultural in its nature. Historically speaking, the Criminal Justice Act chased away the free party scene. The members of Spiral Tribe either moved abroad or simply got older. The technology that offered freedom is now harnessed by a small group of companies owned by a small group of opportunistic and despot-adjacent billionaires. But the failure also speaks to something deeply personal in me. The failure of the future promised to me in my youth—a future of liberty, rebellion and hedonism without consequence—creates in my reading and analyses a sense of melancholy. A whole alternative world has been taken from me and, as I sit in front of my MacBook watching YouTube, I realise that my own powers of resistance were only ever an illusion.

Life online offers an illusion of choice that masks the never-ending hunt for advertising revenue on platforms designed to create compulsive addiction and emotional extremes. This becomes apparent when watching footage of Castlemorton and its fall out on YouTube. You can watch news footage, roughly patched images and sounds from raves and pirate broadcasts and attempts at documentary. All are accompanied by ubiquitous advertising and a bottomless pit of algorithmic recommendations. This, it seems, is a fair distance from what was envisaged in the 1990s. Despite this, I do rather enjoy watching old videos of raves and clubs on YouTube. I do it while I’m eating my packed lunch in my office. The footage is curious. Ravers are sweaty and their serotonin-flooded faces pull all sorts of contortions. Their eyes are wide and their pupils dilated. None of them wield phones and they are un-self-conscious in a way that seems strange to twenty-first-century eyes. They are being filmed though. An invisible eye roams the rave and captures fleeting moments of connection. Sometimes, I know that I was at the event being filmed. I dread seeing my younger self engaged in sweaty dancing, convinced I was part shaman part techno cultist (I was neither of these things). Revisiting a future-facing techno utopia on YouTube, then,

is an incongruous, uncanny and sometimes deflating experience. But is also a fascinating one. I find that I am haunted by my own memories of raving as an occasional first-hand experience and, much more frequently, as one that was and is mediated. I remember the moral panics (echoed by my conservative parents and their peers) and the horror stories in the tabloids. I also remember how cool it was that a couple of notorious bad lads at my school had joined Spiral Tribe. As I got older and started raving in a post-Criminal Justice Act climate, I wondered what it was about this music and these people that terrified some members of older generations and those sitting in political positions of authority. So, despite attempts at some kind of objective scholarly purity, I can't help but be shaped by these autobiographical ghosts and the spectral remains of them that sit in my record collection, a few grainy photographs, some crumpled and roach-torn fliers, and in the often-repeated anecdotes of old friends.

Choosing the material for inclusion in this work has been a fraught process and one that I have had to develop a set of parameters for. Watching hours of footage on YouTube suggested three broad categories of narrative shape and aesthetic. I have used examples from each in the close readings that make up the majority of this article. Firstly, I am interested in the news and media footage generated by Spiral Tribe and their place in the free festival movement and its various associated controversies. This footage is both very much rooted in its own context but also familiar in its heightened and fear mongering discourse. The second category is best described as 'found footage'. This is much less formal material and is captured on home video cameras (rather than broadcast quality equipment). The editing is haphazard and the VHS tapes themselves, now uploaded to a digital platform of course, show visible signs of deterioration. The films capture the dense claustrophobia of strobe-lit raves, backroom machinations, drug taking, and free-ranging conversation. The third set of videos see attempts to narrativize and historicize Spiral Tribe and their cultural significance. These range in date from the mid-1990s into recent events and speaker panels recorded at festivals. I have restricted myself to what is available on YouTube and have tried to let the algorithm make some decisions for me. This is because the genesis of this work grew out of my unthinking consumption of YouTube content. I watch videos to kill time, and this has been the case for several years. However, an uncanny moment when I spotted an old friend at a 1993 CJA protest woke me up somewhat. What is it that I am doing? What memories are being unlocked as I sit and add to the huge pile of advertising revenue being generated by this turbo capitalist platform? Is there a way that I can both theorise this and understand how the autobiographical processes are working? During the research for this work, I watched many more films than are discussed here. Those included offer a clear example of the three categories without shutting down the fluidity of the viewing experience or making empirical or hierarchical claims that serve little purpose.

All of this seemingly disparate material is unified by a methodological focus on the manner in which we narrativize memory through written, visual, auditory and moving images.⁷ Alongside these analytical and critical exercises, I am also drawing on my own experiences and my own memory lags. My methodology, therefore, employs a creative-critical paradigm that rejects dichotomies between these two versions of myself. The complexity and self-conscious hybridity of such approaches are discussed and explored in my ongoing work alongside colleagues Robert Edgar and Helen Pleasance. We stress that, in this mode of discourse, 'there is still a recognisably academic quality to the interrogation and that there is a conscious placing of 'I' in and amongst the subjects being considered. This is where the approach is solidified, not in a single simple definition, which can be applied but where there is recognition of different forms' (Edgar et al. 2019, p. 196). We place the scholarly self and the subjective self into the same process. They often clash

and rarely sit neatly but the gaps between these two iterations make for dynamic and open-ended analyses and conclusions. We draw on a range of disciplinary loci that includes autoethnography, creative nonfiction pop music studies, memory studies and the mechanics of memoir and associated life writing forms across written and visual media.

This article, therefore, is a rumination on temporal elasticity. It is both an analysis of engaging with representation and a reflection on the experience of doing so. It is an exploration of memory, and multidimensional spectrality. Clearly nostalgia is a complex term with many iterations. For this work, I refer to Jamie Sexton's recent study of musical hauntology (2025). He uses the phrase 'meta-nostalgia' (Sexton 2025, p. 83) and defines it as 'an embrace of the gaps and fissures that constitute our knowledge of the past both personally and socially, as well as an interest in how media can decay over time' (Sexton 2025, p. 83). The fluidity and self-awareness of this iteration of nostalgia speaks both to creative practice (as both object of analysis and methodology) and cultural focus. Taking this approach means that I can develop a cultural narrative that bridges the relatively prelapsarian end of the analogue era and the algorithmic quagmire we find ourselves in a quarter of the way through the new century. It is a piece of work that is subjective, creative and personal as well as one that holds critical and analytical ambitions that speak to the broader aims of this special edition. Specifically, the research question here asks what it means to watch a mediated version of a potentially radical future 30 years after the event. I want to know what this means in terms of autobiographical narrative, shifting understandings of historicity and how recent debates regarding hauntology and music might help in framing all of this.

2. Spiral Theory

As well as these complex and subjective aspects of my experience and memory, the reading and interpretation here are shaped by text and scholarship. Spiral Tribe and adjacent topics such as the free party movement, crusty culture, New Age Travellers, psychedelia and quasi-mysticism have generated a wealth of written material. Engaging with the material informs my analysis, certainly, but it also offers another haunting dimension. Despite the sometimes-glacial experiences of writing and publishing in the academic humanities, reading material written a decade or two ago reveals surprising shifts in how culture is read, scrutinised and theorised. This is especially the case with dance subcultures and their radical power. Christopher Partridge, for example, argues for the 'spiritual and ideological' (Partridge 2006, p. 53) value of the free festival scene in the 1990s and its 'utopian model of an alternative society' (Partridge 2006, p. 42). He looks to both the recent cultural past ('Pagan, punk, anarchic, hippie' (Partridge 2006, p. 52)) and a muddier engagement with indigenous cultures and their appropriated aesthetic appeal in explaining 'the underlying philosophy of the Spiral Tribe' (Partridge 2006, p. 53). The appropriation of global indigenous cultures is familiar to anyone who has attended or witnessed any kind of large-scale outdoors dance music event or festival in the last thirty years. The quasi-Paganism on offer at Glastonbury or the smorgasbord of mystical reference points at Burning Man are often, as Scott Hutson has argued, evidence of a 'grossly romantic and idealised misrepresentation of premodern cultures' and 'cavalier appropriations of tribal images and buzzwords' (Hutson 1999, p. 65). During the early 1990s, this sort of imagery was ubiquitous in rave culture. Nods to Buddhism, Hinduism, Rastafarianism and the myriad belief systems of Native American people and Australian Aboriginal people⁸ were there on flyers, on projection screens and in generic terms for subcategories of techno ('tribal', 'goa', 'psytrance' for example). The psychoactive impact of MDMA was often used as the basis for an ill-defined (but no doubt powerful) shamanic experience. The images employed by Spiral Tribe were designed to evoke a resistance to

hegemonic western cultures and an appreciation of plurality and globalism. However, as with headresses at Coachella and posters of Marcus Garvey on students' walls, these acts of appropriation ultimately feed into commodity culture. As I discuss later, Spiral Tribe were laser focussed on branding and visibility and their vague nods to global cultures were central to their aesthetic.

This curious mix of familiar cultural touchstones and quasi-mystical reference points informs and shapes the utopianism so often associated with Spiral Tribe and the free festival scene. Graham St John calls this new vision a 'futurist technoculture' (St. John 2013, p. 58) and argues that its 'post humanist forms are embellished with dramatic quests for freedom born from estrangement' (St. John 2013, p. 58). For St. John, Spiral Tribe's aesthetic is 'fashioned according to repurposed design and chance arrangements, with sonic artifice, computer technology and sci-fi cinema appropriated in pursuit of the raceless ascension, cyborgian mutation, the alien nation' (St. John 2013, p. 58). This is a techno utopia. The hardware used to make acid house is more than synth waves; it is a path to murkily defined yet palpable emancipation.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that it sounds almost hopelessly naïve in this particular cultural moment. Reading this scholarship is an unsettling experience. It is only really quite recent, but the rapid and bewildering pace of technological and political change renders it anachronistic. There is a feeling of dramatic irony as you read material published before anyone really took social media seriously and when AI was theoretical at best and bad science fiction otherwise. If we go back a little further to the late 1990s, the scholarship has an almost evangelical tone. Michel Gaillot, for example, claims that 'Techno is, without a doubt, where the most concrete experimentation on a new configuration of the world is being conducted.' (Gaillot 1998, p. 18) and these experiments are happening in a 'laboratory of the present' (Gaillot 1998, p. 16). He goes on to write that techno's 'relationship to contemporary technology, to machines' is something that 'derives from the willingness, even the need, to appropriate them, then divert them, making them from an instrument of isolation and reduction to identity into an instrument form bringing people closer together' (Gaillot 1998, p. 19). As I sit typing with my headphones on, listening to a streaming service that responds to my own taste by algorithmically imposing more things I should like until my taste and the imposed taste are indistinguishable, these words sound almost impossibly idealistic. Technology now atomises us. Hardware is an aesthetic choice with which we might choose to perform a contrarian indifference to the more convenient digital alternatives. Mark Fisher, who I will offer further engagement with later in this article, suggests that the 'difference between analogue and digital' (Fisher 2014, p. 47) is a thematic and aesthetic concern of those engaging with histories of electronic musical cultures. As our own futures vanish, we turn to the 'physicality of analogue media in the era of digital ether' (Fisher 2014, p. 47). Gilbert and Pearson offer a didacticism in their analysis of dance music cultures. They warn that 'critiquing techno-optimism which sees technological developments as always enabling creation or subversion should not necessitate a return to humanist fear and loathing of technology, always the instrument of capital or state power' (Gilbert and Pearson 2002, p. 110).

The version of the future offered by Spiral Tribe was, to its advocates, possible and necessary. It was a hybrid of ideas, attitudes and aesthetic style. After rave's initial radical surge in the late 1980s, the large-scale events had become much more commercialised. Organisations such as Dreamscape and Fantazia⁹ saw the commercial opportunities offered by the emergence of a genuine subculture and the attendant media frenzy. Raves now featured branding, entry fees, merchandise, and extortionate prices for water, tobacco and rizla papers. This was in addition to the notoriously violent sub-economy that revolved around security and the supply of ecstasy. As with other subcultures, discourse around

authenticity and membership divided the hardcore faithful from the ‘weekenders’ and ‘cheesy quavers’¹⁰. The emergence of genres such as ‘toy town techno’¹¹ and the awkward manner in which mainstream pop fixtures such as *Top of the Pops* and *Smash Hits* magazine leaned into the strange new world alienated those who saw themselves in the original vanguard. What Spiral Tribe and their peers sought (and eventually offered) was an alternative to commercialism.

Graham St John places this type of cultural juxtaposition into broader histories of resistance linked to traveller, punk and anarchist communities. Spiral Tribe and the ‘mobile techno sound systems’ were, he argues, ‘the latest, and loudest, in the history of the traveller exodus’ (St. John 2009, p. 35) an ‘anarcho-dance alliance’ (St. John 2009, p. 36) and, crucially, ‘a techno tribe for whom new technologies were critical to performance’ (St. John 2009, p. 37). To reiterate then, Spiral Tribe rejected commercialism in favour of an atemporal blending of English folk and subcultural histories. These generated and synthesised a vision of techno future in which traditional rites of activism and collectivism were made possible by hardware and software. Acid house relies on drum machines and bass machines¹². Volume is achieved via powerful subwoofers and crystal-clear tweeters. All of this is made possible by two turntables and a mixer.

3. Spiral Archives

Archivist and rave historian Jonathan Barnett¹³ posts video clips on his YouTube channel¹⁴ that document much of the traveller and crusty culture that surrounded Spiral Tribe. Videos of the aforementioned violence near Stonehenge in 1985 and the Poll Tax Riots of 1990¹⁵ sits alongside more celebratory reportage of the Notting Hill Carnival and gigs by experimental acts such as Mutoids and Rip, Rig and Panic. His Spiral Tribe video (the most popular on his channel) is described as ‘Spiral Tribe rehearsing in Shepherds Bush and live in a warehouse somewhere on the outskirts of London plus the aftermath of Castlemorton, and the Hyde Park/Trafalgar Square Advance Party Anti CJB demo, with comments from Debbie & Mark’ (Barnett 2015). The material is, he adds, ‘originally edited using domestic video players’ (Barnett 2015). It is this production detail that creates a vivid temporal tingling when watching. The clumsy segues from scene to scene and the visible signifiers of tape deterioration are like a portal to the pre-digital world. However, I am watching them on a laptop using a platform that holds a seemingly infinite amount of digital visual data. VHS tapes were once parts of collections and were ubiquitous household items that were looked after, archived and documented. They were used to record and then to record again, over-writing the material that was already there. Tapes would often begin with glitches and flashes of the material that had been lost. They were moving image palimpsests. Watching now, these blemishes and imperfections are an aesthetic and nostalgic pleasure. As the material is recorded, however, the camera operators and the subjects have no way of knowing this. That sense of dramatic irony is there again. I am in a future that does not resemble the future they are seeking to create.

Danny Cookney’s recent research on the ‘ahistorical rave archive’ is very helpful in explaining the complexities at work here. He argues that ‘despite some prevalent technoutopia narratives and a purported reputation for newness, electronic dance musicians have an intense relationship with the past that, while often underexplored, has its manifestations’ (Cookney 2024, p. 115). For a 1990s culture like the free festival movement, this might involve looking back to folk traditions and the pastoral¹⁶. For the YouTube viewer, it is almost entirely hauntological. Even the memories that are shared in comments are spectral in their mapping of responses over the period that the video has been posted. Cookney tells us that ‘while memories of [...] early UK raves live on within online communities, these [...] sit alongside an arguably more regressive use of the comments section that details a

sentimental longing for an unexperienced past' (Cookney 2024, p. 118). This is a history of memory and memory of historicity. But it is also a simulacrum of memory. Comments are not exclusive to those who 'were there'; they come from those who 'wish they'd been there' too. The vintage analogue appeal of the VHS recordings plays a part in this too. Cookney explains that:

[...] despite the uploaded media's poor quality, thousands of YouTube users are undeterred from engaging with these recordings. If anything, their grain and lack of production values are a patina: with the low resolution likely contributing to understandings of a video's age and authenticity.

(Cookney 2024, p. 117)

So, like era-specific hardware, the visual signifiers of age and degradation become a pleasurable aesthetic experience. They offer an alternative to the sleek lines and smooth surfaces of contemporary images. The fallibility of human design is inherent and evident and, in an age of AI anxiety, the prelapsarian feel of this footage is reassuring and comforting. When the footage was created, this was the cutting edge. When viewed decades later, it is a warm reminder of simpler times or an alternative space where time has been flattened.

This particular video opens with familiar rave tropes. A strobe-lit industrial space with abrasive hardcore is populated by group of shaven-headed ravers. There is a stage with a DJ and an MC. The MC's words are lost in the noise. Behind them, computerised fractal visuals play on a screen. It is an oppressive and somewhat joyless scene. A fuzzy cut takes us to a bedroom containing a woman making artwork on a bedsheet. Music plays and includes a sample that says, 'Network 23 transmitting to the world'. In this sample lies a tangible signifier of the developing philosophy coming out of this culture. The number 23, ubiquitous in Spiral Tribe logos and communications¹⁷ nods to their interest in numerology and mysticism while the notion of a network speaks to technological possibility and activism that lies outside of conventional hegemonic control. The philosophies are rooted in an ahistorical engagement with myth, mysticism and conspiracy theory. They are interpolated, as Tobias Van Veen explains, 'through technical means, applied throughout complex interstices of technoglobalization, from telecommunications in general to rave culture's amplification of technosonic ritual' (van Veen 2010, p. 38). Reaching into an infinite past and an infinite future in this way serves in breaking down linear understandings of culture. From a distance of more than 30 years, however, the power of these ideas has dissipated. Now they are an aesthetic shorn of impact. Their future-facing radicalism is now little more than a nostalgic pose.

As the video continues, technology continues to be foregrounded. A Spiral Tribe-branded DAT recorder is zoomed in on and blinks in and out of focus. A serious-looking young man leans over Technics 1200s and starts to mix. A radio transmitter sits nearby. Another cut back to the strobing industrial space and now ravers are on a gyroscope machine, and the acid house continues to pummel them. Back to another room. It looks like it might be a squat. An MC spits into a loud haler and the DJ wears Hi-Vis. Images of police harassment and lurid news headlines are superimposed over this scene. Across the room, a telephone conversation is taking place. An event is being planned. Alongside Spiral Tribe, rigs held by 'Wastage and Bedlam Sound' will be there. Bookings have been made for '4K, laser and lights, and a fractal projection screen'.

The technology in these clips is cutting edge by the standards of the early 1990s but, when viewed three decades later, it acts as a hauntological signifier for lost versions of the future. A future in which I am viewing these intimate moments as a disembodied and distant subject. I remember the time, but I also exist now. The complexities of this are multifaceted and best explained through engagement with some of Mark Fisher's ideas. He writes that the 'jumbling up of time, the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy

of comment; it is now so prevalent that is no longer even noticed' (Fisher 2014, p. 39). Our daily engagements with culture are becoming muscle memory and so instinctive that we are not always aware of their strangeness and how unique this makes our contemporary subjectivity. When we do notice, we are aware of a 'crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion' that contrasts the manner in which the previous century made us feel that 'newness was infinitely available' (Fisher 2014, p. 40). So when I see Spiral Tribe in their immediate social environment hopeful for revolution and radical change, I know that they failed. Fisher argues that such failure is not the fault of the artist but the seemingly inevitable orthodoxies of capitalism's ideological hegemony. The prevailing economic machine may come replete with a 'rhetoric of novelty and innovation' but this is a mirage that hides the ways that neoliberal inequality 'has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new' (Fisher 2014, p. 43). Fisher argues that this is most visible and evident in electronic music. For so long artists produced futuristic and utopian sounds on machines and saw opportunities for sharing them and networking with co-producers and consumers in emerging digital technologies. Instead though, Fisher writes, the 'futuristic in music has long since ceased to refer to any future that we expect to be different; it has become an established style, much like a particular typographical font' (Fisher 2014, p. 41). The music then ceases to hold radical potential. It can be galvanising of course and still sounds extraordinary in a field surrounded by like-minded ravers, but it is nothing more than this. It is an aesthetic and style. It is culture that is now 'locked into pastiche and repetition' (Fisher 2014, p. 44). To experience its initial thrill is a chimaera. It is temporary and ultimately serves only as a reminder that what were once imagined plural futures are now singular and preordained. So what we are left with is musical culture and production that Fisher calls 'sonic hauntology' (Fisher 2014, p. 47). The 808s and 303s that produced the visceral radicalism of acid house were an economic necessity. They were the cheapest kit making the most adventurous sounds. Now, though, they are presented like an artisanal artefact. In the same way we might show our sophisticated taste in buying craft beer or cheese made in traditional ways, we are encouraged to buy vinyl records and tinker with 40-year-old drum machines. Doing so provides the sort of authenticity so sought after in exchanges of cultural capital. But the activity only refers to itself. An acid line is an acid line.

4. Spiral Panic

All of this cynicism, however, can cloud our engagement with seismic cultural history. Spiral Tribe were part of a movement that terrified middle England to the extent that allowed draconian laws regarding the right to gather to work their way through government. The Castlemorton rave was headline news for a week. It was described in the language of end times. Ravers were undoing all that was good and normative in rural and suburban English communities (the cities had long been abandoned to such dreadful hedonism). *The Times*, for example, reporting on 31 May 1992 as the weeklong rave started to dwindle, used the headline 'The Storming of Castlemorton' (Dalrymple 1992). The language of invasion and pollution, so familiar to a twenty-first-century readers used to scare stories and sensationalist tales of the threats posed by refugees, is employed throughout the article. This sort of martial language, of course, contains its own hauntings. References to the vulnerability of an island people and the threat of invasion and usurpation are familiar territory for conservative England. Defence of ill-defined value systems from outsiders, foreigners and all sorts of cultural bogeymen drive media narratives and populist engagements with history. So, during the Castlemorton rave, the presence of the travelling communities on common land is likely to create 'chaos, anger and the likelihood of violence'. The 'so-called ravers with their massive sound systems [...] live in a drug-soaked world of their own'

as a part of ‘travelling armies’. The peace-loving locals are so terrified that they think of ‘forming an armed vigilante group’. The same narrative applies here as in the Norman Invasion, the Peasants Revolt, the Napoleonic Wars, the Second World War, and, more recently the polarised discourse of Brexit, Trump and the reductive ‘war on woke’. The image of little Englanders donning their tin helmets to defend the village green draws on all of this and provides a handy narrative framework for the press to employ.

Sociologically speaking, these perceived fears can be understood through the work of Stanley Cohen. In the early 1970s, responding to some of the violence associated with British Mods and Rockers, Cohen theorised and modelled the manner in which moral panics operate. Key to his thinking, and particularly helpful when discussing Spiral Tribe, is his observation that, when faced with a visible youth subculture, mainstream social systems tend to respond with binary thinking. Cohen writes that in ‘the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be’ (Cohen [1972] 2011, p. 2). The free festival attendees, with their rave uniform and unruly social codes, pose such a reminder. Writing some decades later, Shane Blackman describes a Britain in which ‘subculture is defined [...] as a social evil according to a range of social issues including alcoholism, criminality, and unemployment’ (Blackman 2014, p. 499). For both of these writers, the central and most generative conceptual term is ‘deviance’. At the centre of every moral panic, Cohen explains, is ‘the labelling by society or certain powerful groups in society of certain behavior as deviant or problematic’ (Cohen [1972] 2011, p. 6). In this instance, as in so many other panics, the ‘powerful groups’ are constituted in no small part by the print and broadcast media. Their fixation on associating the ravers with filth, invasion and crime speaks to a tradition in British culture that, as Blackman argues, contends that ‘young people who formed a subculture were defined as suffering from psychological problems within a deprived culture’ (Blackman 2014, p. 499).

For the Malvern residents, such deviance, and the mediated amplification of it, is evident in what they say to the media. The locals are quoted at length and speak of the ‘invasion’ in terms of disgust and abjection. Ivan Randall, a farmer, tells reporters that ‘they defecated and urinated in our gardens, they tore down our fences, and they burnt down young trees and saplings. They staggered around night and day full of drugs and cider and they left their children running about in rags with the dogs while they slept off their binges.’ Widow Irene Weaver, speaking from her cottage, adds that ‘the drug boys were big and tough. They were selling the stuff openly in baskets, they had big flash cars and dogs.’ Filth, degradation and wanton hedonism, alongside an aversion to the nouveau riche, are at the core of the complaints. An unnamed and scatologically alert ‘drug squad’ officer explains that ‘one of the first effects of Ecstasy is a sudden loosening of the bowels, the ravers don’t care where they are when they have to go. The place stank to high heaven within hours.’ Distinctions between the ravers and their animals are rendered blurry. Packs of dogs, ‘hundreds of them’, roam the common land like figures from campsite horror stories. They are ‘mostly mongrels of all breeds, and they run in packs’. In this statement, the overlapping concerns of invasion, impurity, fear of the other, and disgust coalesce. We are even told of rumours that ‘a group of ravers cooked and ate a horse that had been injured.’ Comparisons with Trump and his campaign of fear against immigrant communities are clear. The language of fear and rage haunts itself and operates on a loop.

A similar tone is evident in an ITV news report from May 1992 (uploaded to YouTube by the revealingly monikered ‘OldSkool Raver’ in 2014) (Oldskool Raver 2011). The inflammatory language, however, is made stranger by the attempts at broadcast balance and impartiality. Watching this on YouTube now is also strange. The production values

and levels of hair spray may differ but the formula that goes into a rolling news event has hardly altered. Sombre announcements in the studio are followed by a pre-recorded report that ramps up the language of fear to post-apocalyptic levels. The dance music festival is described as a 'shanty town', a 'ramshackle convoy', a 'motley array', an 'invasion of the common', a community 'under siege' with no choice but to 'board up local shops'. The language has multiple reference points. It speaks to images from cinema while evoking the binaries of colonialism. It pits established community against ad hoc chaos, stability against flux, and permanence against the temporary. As with the *Times* report, images of slain livestock are used to foreground the satanic deviance of the travelling ravers. The footage flashes between blood-soaked sheep and wild dogs unleashed. A vox pop of local residents leaning on fences outside thatched cottages and shuttered local businesses reveals that this is now a 'no go area'. It's time to 'get the army' to nullify the 'invasion'. This is truly a civilisational struggle; the good shepherds of the Malverns versus an unwashed techno evil. England's pastoral normalcy is at stake.

These oppositions drive the live segment of the report too. ITV reporter Ken Goodwin appears on screen flanked by three young crusties on his right and three middle-aged women on his left. The balance of the shot is superbly composed. Ken is the moral arbiter and protector of the truth. His smart suit and confident mic stance tell the viewer that there is no need for concern. He is in charge and he will set the correct tone. He stands tall in the foreground as the rave inferno rages behind him. He raises his voice over the persistent thumps of bass and kick drum. He is there to protect us and to bear witness. He interviews the three women and the first of them reveals that she has 'sent her child away for safety'. She has suspicions about rampant 'drug pushing' and she has evidence. She shows the camera a small transparent plastic bag that appears to contain a Bic lighter and a piece of metal. Which drug this is used for and how the paraphernalia is employed remains unsaid. Next, a 'Malvern Hills Conservator' tells Ken that 'we'll need a month of rain to wash away all of the dirt and muck'. This biblical suggestion is followed by the third local who discusses the 'influx' and reveals that she is 'afraid to sleep'. In these interactions, Ken is sympathetic. He nods kindly to reassure the residents that all will be well and that decency will prevail. He will protect the gentle ladies of rural England with his patrician authority. Now he turns to the three ravers. All sport dreads in their hair, wear combat boots and look a little frazzled. One man in particular hides his eyes behind mirror shades and sways gently in the May breeze. They try to tell Ken about their communication with the council and the clean-up operation but are interrupted as Ken demands 'what about the drugs?' and 'when are you leaving?'. The whole sequence is bizarre. The uneven tone of the interviews, the pearl-clutching little Englanders and the mashed-up ravers are such clichés that it's hard to believe that any of this is actually real.

It's not just the conservative media and their outrage that get involved with the narrative though. A year later, BBC 2's attempt at capturing the rave zeitgeist, *Dance Energy*¹⁸, has a go too. Watching this footage (posted by (Lodge 2006)) opens up a Proustian rabbit hole for me. I was too young and too scared of my dad to go raving, so television like *Dance Energy* (and its late-night sibling *BPM*¹⁹) was the closest I got to experiencing all of these illicit thrills. I used to record the shows and watch them with my friends as we tried to speak with some kind of authority about topics that we had no direct experience of. Now I watch them at the other end of my raving life. I did eventually make it to clubs and festivals and now I'm too old and tired to do so. My own youth and its cultural complexities shape my reading of the footage. I wince at the visual style that *Dance Energy* attempts. Its blurry shots and rapid edits hint at ecstasy use but, given the 6.30 pm slot, these are never fully realised. The fonts used in captions are yellow and seem to vibrate and bounce on the screen over the familiar scenes of strobing industrial space, frenetic movement, flashing

police lights and superimposed media headlines. The captions briefly explain the recent 'rave explosion'. They explain that Spiral Tribe comprises '23 hardcore members' but add that 'anyone can join' although 'it helps if you wear black and shave your head'. These most definitely 'aren't weekend ravers'. We meet three of them—Seb, Mark and Debbie—in a Rotterdam squat'. The tone in this report offers a mythic presence to Spiral Tribe that is very different to the horror, fear and disgust in the Castlemorton news coverage. The tribe members are treated with a type of reverence that suggests they are lesser spotted rave deities condescending to an interview. They lean against a wall festooned with graffiti. The lighting is limited and the place looks cold and intimidating. This is the sort of staging that, in the early 1990s, looked edgy and counter-cultural but reminds the twenty-first-century viewer more of satire and pastiche²⁰. Mark explains his opposition to 'commercial clubbing' and his advocacy for free festivals. This is now a year on from Castlemorton and these ideas have lost a little of their radical edge. His term 'techno terrorist', however, carries greater weight. It signifies an adversarial animosity that marks this ideology as distinct from the more earth-bound and free-love-centred concepts found elsewhere in the travelling rave community. As always with the BBC, there are attempts at balance. And so we meet 'Miss Pod', a representative of *Pod Magazine* (in what way is not made clear but the name is a hint I imagine). She explains that, in her experience, Spiral Tribe's lack of care for the landscapes they use makes life difficult for other more considerate (but less conspicuous) sound systems. She also takes issue with the term 'Techno terrorist'. For her it is little more than a meaningless slogan and has no practical value. 'Show me how', she demands. The report ends with Mark rejecting 'the past' and claiming that his future-facing ideology is somehow resistant to nostalgia or history. This is disingenuous for two reasons. Firstly, the travelling festival community that Spiral Tribe have joined and benefited from has a relationship with the past. It's an ahistorical one rooted in myth and pastoral idealism but this is still a conscious effort to look backwards. To ignore this is to ignore the culture that has made Spiral Tribe's notoriety possible in the first place.

5. Spiral Narratives

The second reason becomes clear as I watch material that seeks to narrativize and document this cultural moment from a few years hence. As the new century ticks over, the speed with which electronic music culture moves renders Spiral Tribe's activities in the UK as very much the past tense. They are associated with the early 1990s in the same ways that the Poll Tax Riots and the collapse of Thatcherism are. They are moments that are pulled out of time and examined as objects with demarcated edges. They are placed in glass cases and presented for viewership. Core members of Spiral Tribe, including the same three figures that provide ideology and a future-facing manifesto for the BBC, reappear across YouTube. They participate in the nostalgic processes and narratives of the past that they spend earlier years eschewing. Debbie Griffith (AKA Feenix 13), Mark Harrison, Simone Feeney (AKA Sim Simmer) and Sebastien 'Seb' Vaughan control and shape the manner in which history and myth are generated. Their version of events is evident in interviews, short films²¹, festival appearances and, in the case of Harrison, that most traditional of technologies, a book (Harrison 2025). The temporal complexity that I experience in my own recollections takes a slightly different form here. A group of individuals that became famous for their version of punk spirit and a desire to resist the materialities of their own recent pasts are now visible participants in their own memorialisation. Of course, this is common across initially radical subcultures but to witness it in this instance cannot help but be a little jarring. Future-facing utopianism, it seems, ultimately ends up in narratives that try to capture dissipating memory in tones of wistful loss. Damien Raclot and Kristof Giller's *23 Minute Warning* was made in 1994 (Damien Raclot-Dauliac Aka DAAULIAC 2013). This

is only two years after the events at Castlemorton²² but its upload to YouTube is in 2013 and I am watching it in 2026. This temporal plurality is in keeping with the viewing experiences already detailed here but now these are at least various iterations of something that has already happened. This is past tense and is narrativized as such. The familiar images of strobing interiors, frenetic ravers and fractal projections are soundtracked by particularly weighty bass. The footage segues into violent skirmishes between police and the travelling rave community. The number 23 flashes inside a Spiral Tribe designed star. It is all very on brand and in line with the careful self-image that the collective has developed. Interviews are interspersed. Seb is in a record shop, Debbie is in a field, Simone is in a back garden, and Mark has chosen Brighton Pier as his backdrop. This is a historiography of ideas and of events. The year 1989 is ground zero as rave throws off the shackles of the decade. As Seb explains, 'all them years of repression, oppression, Thatcher. The 80s in England were shit'. The stories of early raves are shared as are reminiscences about 'hiring amps and PAs', 'big rigs' and a demographic that included 'people of all ages and all races'. Alongside these straightforward memories sits the conceptual discourse and utopian language. Acid house is a 'a programmed voyage for the mind' and a 'new wave of psychedelic'. The music and the landscape are intertwined in the 'Spiral philosophy'. Members of the Tribe are described variously as 'mushroom adept' and on a 'mad cosmic spiral trip'. Seb tells the viewer that 'we were very utopian' and believed that they could 'change the world'. It is as if a point of no return has been breached as the tribe agree that 'we would not return to the lives we were living the day before'. The interviewees appear to be reverse engineering a coherent manifesto of sorts. Now that the events have happened, there is more clarity about what they mean and what they meant. Temporal elasticity and revisionism make useful companions.

Most revealing are the reflections on image and branding. These comments stand out from the quasi-mystical discourse in their practicality and familiarity. Simone talks about how hard the team worked 'sticker London'. There is talk of their 'strong graphic' and 'backdrops'. Footage of the sort of temporary walls you see around a large-scale building site is shown. The walls are covered in neat patterns of the same image. This, it seems, is a guerilla marketing campaign before such a thing was ubiquitous. In the twenty-first century, releases by electronic artists such as Aphex Twin²³ are often announced via logos appearing in urban spaces or projected onto provocatively chosen public buildings. Again, the temporal complexity of watching this footage now is fascinating. The branding tactics feel contemporary, but we are reminded by Mark that the spiral images (taken from a diagram of an ammonite fossil) were experimented with via the zoom function of an office photocopier. They move 'in and out and into infinity' until Mark feels a 'very strange revelation or epiphany about this image and what it means'. The blending and blurring of the material work needed to advertise Spiral Tribe events with the vague language of mystical prehistory offer a salient example of how early 1990s discourse often shaped itself. The quasi-mysticism is countered by the hardware. As Mark speaks, flashes of an ammonite fossil and a pulsing bassline do the same. The ancient and the futuristic meld in a way that potentially felt new and optimistic in the early 1990s but now feels like a relic as anachronistic as the ammonite fossil.

6. Conclusions

Mark Fisher writes that 'in conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost' (Fisher 2014, p. 35). It's true that the digital conveniences in our pockets and at our fingertips have flattened time. The archive is in a state of permanent and easy availability. Superficially, this might suggest that the past and the things that happened there are recalled with minimum fuss and maximum illumination. When I started the research for this article, my list of

YouTube sources organised itself almost instantaneously. My playlist for writing it did too. This particular topic requires a multidimensional flexibility when thinking about and experiencing time. Spiral Tribe's values and aesthetic are avowedly future-facing. Technology is emancipatory and a force for creative resistance. At the same time though, their ideas are shaped by fuzzy yet evocative ideas from a shared mythic and mystical past. English folklore²⁴, the histories of common land, bits and pieces from global indigenous cultures, and even prehistoric symbolism permeate and generate contexts for their acid house. They provide potential meaning for acid house beyond (but not instead of) hedonism and sonic pleasure. The shock of Castlemorton pitted an England rooted in conservatism against one committed to radical change and this is a binary evident across British history and now one employed at the centre of the seemingly endless (and increasingly absurd) culture war. So, the events, the language, the discourse, the experience of remembering and reliving—all of these things are haunted and are capable of haunting. The layers of lived experience, memory, and mediated narratives do not neatly arrange themselves. The gaps and uncanny shadows are spectral and ghostly. Hauntology provides a discourse for self-conscious and subjective analysis that celebrates the incomplete, the plural and the contradictory.

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Notes

- ¹ This is the most common estimate found in media sources. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hereford-worcester-39960232> and <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/aug/10/ravers-having-it-large-at-castlemorton-1992-alan-lodges-best-photograph> for examples. (accessed on 7 April 2026).
- ² Once dubbed the 'King of Acid House', Colston Hayter organised the infamous Sunrise raves in the Home Counties in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recently, he was the subject of criminal proceedings related to a 'mailbox fraud machine'. Full details: https://www.lbc.co.uk/article/ex-rave-organiser-the-acid-house-king-whose-home-built-fraud-machine-stole-500k-DWzRTw_2/. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (DeWolfe 2023).
- ³ Most notably, the 1985 'Battle of the Beanfield' in Wiltshire in 1985. A convoy of travellers on their way to Stonehenge were subject to alleged police brutality. Calls for an official enquiry continue. More details: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c780ve9nde0o>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (Jewers and Parker 2025).
- ⁴ Full details of the legislation: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/section/63>. (accessed on 7 April 2026).
- ⁵ A techno collective formed in Detroit in the 1980s. Led by DJs Jeff Mills and 'Mad' Mike Banks, they are noted for their uncompromising politics and confrontational aesthetic. For more, see Schaub (2009).
- ⁶ Such self-fashioning can, of course be analysed through Hebdige's foundational work on subcultures and fashion. His claim, as paraphrased by Sklar et al., that membership of a niche subculture is signified by fashion that is 'highly visible, instantly recognizable, and often deemed to have a stylistic unity' (Sklar et al. 2022, p. 715) is evident and relevant to the short-lived media ubiquity of Spiral Tribe in the early 1990s.
- ⁷ Alongside colleagues and postgraduate research students, I am a founding member of the *Music, Memory and Narrative Research Group*. We explore music and memory through a range of interdisciplinary approaches and outputs. More information: <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/research/music-memory-and-narrative/>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (York St John University 2026).
- ⁸ Susan Luckman identifies a particular issue with reductive appropriations evident at Australian 'bush doofs' (large outdoor raves) in which 'Aboriginal iconography, peoples, and their relationships with the land, are evoked by a group of people of overwhelmingly European racial origin' (Luckman 2003, p. 315).
- ⁹ Large scale legal raves that specialised in hardcore and used outdoor venue spaces such as Sanctuary Sound in Milton Keynes. Their commercial nature and 'weekender' clientele were much mocked by more serious ravers.
- ¹⁰ Rhyming cockney slang for 'raver' that foregrounds the commercial aspect of the culture as it developed in the early 1990s. See Reynolds (2013) for more on this term.

- 11 A short-lived sub-genre in which formulaic hardcore was furnished with samples from 1970s and 1980s children's television. Examples include 'Charley Says' by the Prodigy, 'Sesame's Treet' by the Smart Es, 'Summers Magic' by Mark Summers and 'A Trip to Trumpton' by Urban Hype. For a recent retrospective on the sub-genre see here: <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/what-the-hell-was-the-cartoon-rave-phenomenon/>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (Clayman 2026).
- 12 The Roland 303 bass generator and the 808 and 909 drum machines in particular. These devices were not designed for making dance music but, as Rick Bull explains, were an example of 'the popular appropriation of available technologies [by] groups of experimentalists from Detroit, Chicago and Frankfurt' (Bull 1997, np).
- 13 Jonathan Barnett is a film maker and the Director of the Portobello Film Festival. His work includes the experimental documentary *Third World* (1999) which offers a history of alternative culture in the UK between 1983 and 1993. More details here: <https://dmovies.org/profile/jonathan-barnett/>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (DMovies 2018).
- 14 <https://www.youtube.com/@jonathanbarnett4732>. (accessed on 7 April 2026).
- 15 Approximately 70,000 people gathered in London on 31st March 1990 to protest the new poll tax legislation and its inattention to individual means. The riots became violent and hundreds were arrested and injured. Some analysis suggests that this was one of the events that contributed to the end of Margaret Thatcher's time as the UK Prime Minister (BBC 2019). More here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/31/newsid_2530000/2530763.stm (accessed on 31 August 2026).
- 16 In this context, 'pastoral' refers both to English countryside (common land and its traditions in particular) and a broader historical engagement with the idea of landscape. This might manifest itself through interest in pre-Christian sites, stone circles and saturnalian rituals. It does not, however, refer to agriculture (although farmers had a lot to say about the free festival scene of course).
- 17 The number 23 has a history of numerological and mystical connotations. Spiral Tribe drew on material from the Fortean Times and from Beat writer William Burroughs. For more on the history of this: <https://www.hyfae.com/magazine/spiral-tribe-rave-culture-the-number-23>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (Why 2024).
- 18 Part of BBC2's *DEF II* programming aimed at the youth demographic and produced by journalist Janet Street Porter. *Dance Energy* was presented by Norman 'Normski' Anderson who had been a dancer and DJ and would go on to become an influential photographer covering black British experiences (as well as being married to Street Porter for four years).
- 19 Part of ITV's *Night Network* programming for late-night viewers, *BPM* was produced by Granada and featured presenters Dave Dorrell and Brenda Touhy visiting various clubs and festivals. They interviewed DJs and ravers. These interviews were interspersed with lengthy sections of clubbers being filmed while they danced.
- 20 The BBC mockumentary series *People Just Do Nothing*, about a fictional Brentford pirate radio station, borrows this visual language repeatedly.
- 21 Most notably, Aaron Trinder's *Free Party: A Folk History* (2026). This documentary is behind a streaming paywall (<https://freepartydoc.info/synopsis> (accessed on 7 April 2026)) and so has not been included here. It is, however, a more authoritative account of the scene than those analysed above.
- 22 By this time, Spiral Tribe were mostly operating in Europe as major figures in the *Teknival* scene. Their presence in the UK was sparse as a result.
- 23 In 2018, Aphex Twin took the concept to a global level with the pre-release campaign for the *Collapse* EP. His logo appeared in all manner of urban location. More detail: <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/08/06/aphex-twin-collapse-logo-paul-nicholson-graphics-design/>. (accessed on 7 April 2026) (Yalcinkaya 2018).
- 24 For Jamie Sexton, contemporary fascinations with folklore and folk tradition 'relates to that which is hidden and embodies a search for secret, concealed knowledge' (Sexton 2025, p. 26). This can include the occult and Pagan myth as well as the processes of mediation (especially on television) that attempt to engage with them (folk horror, documentary, travelogues, etc.).

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