

So, why Tartu?: Reflections on semiotics, praxis and international student (night)life

Original Study

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Received: 21 July 2024; Accepted: 6 September 2024

Abstract: Tartu holds a special place in the history and education of semiotics and draws students from around the world. Semiotics is a learnt way of thinking and being, and so an induction into the field for international graduate students in Tartu is inseparable from its lived experience. This paper describes an account of living semiotics as a foreigner in Tartu, through its application to a personal field of interest, i.e. local underground nightlife and electronic dance music cultures. Besides offering strands of an analytical conception of nightlife and dance music cultures, this paper also reflects on students' extracurricular commitments in this field to a cultural and artistic practice of applied semiotics.

Keywords: nightlife, club culture, applied semiotics, semiotics of culture, memoir

1. INTRODUCTION – WHY TARTU?

The question posed in the title is one that will be familiar to all international students who find themselves in Tartu. The answer is well rehearsed among students of semiotics and usually refers to Estonia's significance in the global tradition of semiotics, the University of Tartu's unique role in the field's multi-level and holistic education, and so on. Such an answer is made in casual sociability, but the question opens space for personal reflection— on personal trajectories, careers and lives, and also how semiotics itself has become part of a way of thinking and living. This paper is written as a long-form response to this otherwise passing question.

Semiotics is not just a taught discipline or school of thought, but is embodied by students who live and breathe it everyday. The question of 'Why Tartu?' brings to mind the experience of possibly transformative years

of personal upheaval, an immersion in a new culture and learning of a new field. An appreciation of semiotics as a way of seeing the world is learnt in-situ. That is to say, the first place to apply semiotics has naturally been the experience of life in the city of Tartu itself. For myself, an immersion into the field coincided with a move to Europe and an extracurricular interest in Tartu's nightlife with attention to local electronic dance music subcultures. And so learning and embodying semiotics has inspired an ongoing semiotic conception of nightlife and dance music culture. Strands of such a semiotic thinking are offered in this paper, alongside an outsider's sketch of Tartu's dance music 'scene'¹ as a particular object of its study. This paper does not include a comprehensive model and integrated case study, instead its purpose is to provoke discussion and further research towards a semiotics of club cultures and nightlife within the urban creative

¹ In this paper, the term 'scene' is used to describe both the social network of creative labour, artists, organisers, etc. involved in nightlife culture and metonymically for the particular dance music culture as a whole.

and cultural milieu. Thus within this particular personal field of interest, this paper offers threads of a personal semiotics of Tartu.

A good starting point for an expanded answer to the question of 'Why Tartu?' may be an introduction. To describe an international student of semiotics in Tartu is to describe something of an adventurer. The prospect of semiotics in Tartu is polarising, as it means committing to multiple years of specialisation, and immigrating to a place that is geographically, climatically and culturally distant for many who make their way here. After all, the question 'Why Tartu?' is asked with incredulity, usually in implicit reference to the city's remoteness and the addressee's strangeness. The foreign student here is portrayed as something of an extreme tourist who, despite inhospitable and alien conditions, seeks the thrill of immersion into the exotic.

Semioticians are also often epistemological exiles who are unsatisfied with ordinary and incomplete analyses and tools. Semiotics crosses fields of thought, concepts and objects in its study where other disciplines may hesitate or claim the inquiry to be extraneous or extramural. It is this transdisciplinarity that allows for semiotics to maintain its critical edge, by resisting institutionalisation via a centralised scientific paradigm, research object or methodology. As Daniele Monticelli puts it:

Our attempts as semioticians should therefore not be directed to the (re)constitution of the dispersed pieces of semiotics into a unified and unifying discipline, but to the elaboration and cultivation of practices of semiotic research which would keep semiotics open to the ongoing fluidity of disciplinary boundaries within the humanities and social sciences. (Monticelli 2008:10)

The universality and global orientation of its object means that in the present disjuncture of globalisation in the Anthropocene, the study and practice of semiotics demands sociopolitical application. It is in this spirit that the notion of 'semioethics' (Petrilli 2009) assumes significance as a guiding principle for a critical semiotics that is attuned to 'care', 'listening' and 'responsibility' to the Other(s) in dialogic relationships. Semiotics' ethical function invokes its praxis as applied to the world. For me, this has meant considering the role of oneself as a student of semiotics, a foreigner in Tartu, and an artist and participant in local culture. Thus this paper also offers reflection on a personal praxis of semiotics, i.e. how our extracurricular interventions have served to apply semiotics *for* Tartu, culminating in an audiovisual electronic music event series in 2023.

First, we can locate the role and social position of international students of semiotics in Tartu, of whom I am one among many, beginning with our shared special inheritance of such an eclectic field as semiotics.

2. AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN THE WOODS (SEMIOTICS IN TARTU)

Tartu holds a special place in the global scholarly tradition of semiotics. The establishment of the Tartu Moscow School in the 1960's and 1970's in Soviet-occupied Estonia (Grishakova and Salupere 2015) laid the epistemological foundations for an expansive, dynamic and globally-oriented tradition of semiotics. Their legacies along with those of leading figures of semiotics in Tartu of Juri Lotman and Jakob von Uexkull continue to be advanced and contextualised today. More than a quarter of a century ago as semiotics in Tartu was posed to enter the 21st century, Peeter Torop (1998) noted that rather than a canonisation and mythologisation of the disciplinary coordinates of Lotman the TMS, semiotics in Tartu should retain its tradition of openness, dynamism and co-operation with international semiotics. Indeed, the semiotics taught in Tartu is a result of a blend of cultures— at a given moment, an international student may find themselves reading semiotic theory by a Russian-Estonian (Lotman), in a library dedicated to a Hungarian-American (Sebeok), for a class on French structuralism. Today, the continued success of the institution of semiotics in Tartu and Estonia (Kull et al. 2011) is contingent on its fruitful dialogue across borders. International conferences, summer schools and guest lectures continue Tartu's tradition as a point for meeting and international collaboration. Even outside of academic halls, Tartu is one of the few places in the world where semiotics is part of the city's fabric— if elsewhere it would need some introduction, in Tartu semiotics can be seamlessly brought up in conversations with passing strangers met in local bars.

That semiotics is hospitable as a discipline means that people from diverse backgrounds among the international students can always find something here that appeals to them. But as newcomers, students remain more or less exotic with backgrounds in art, anthropology, advertising, biology, etc. and bring new ideas to semiotics in Tartu. Engagement with internationals within semiotic schools is a repository of intellectual dynamism and continual theoretical upheaval. And, as discussed later, this productive role of internationals as outsiders extends beyond scientific productivity into the level of the situated cultural and creative dynamics of the city of Tartu.

However, the social position of the international student is marginal in Tartu. Indeed, the question of 'Why Tartu?' is asked in English, and it is asked to a foreigner. The foreigner in Tartu is out-of-place to begin with, and an uncanny thing that invites second looks. The international presence in Tartu is small, and also dwindling as confirmed by a cursory look at the current statistics on student demographics (excluding non-University students, non-students, working professionals, tourists, etc.)². As elaborated on later, few internationals are going out to places where they can meaningfully

2 In a city of around 100,000 people, Tartu had a total student population of 14,778 in 2019, of which 1614 were foreigners. Since

interact with local Estonians, and there are even fewer internationals who reside in Tartu for a long enough period for their presence to be felt and have an impact on local culture.

Despite the marginalisation of internationals in Tartu, the city is, as of writing this paper, a European Capital of Culture in 2024. A year of events, conferences, and exhibitions puts Tartu on the map as “a culturally minded international city” (as on the Tartu 2024 website). The city will undoubtedly benefit, but the role of the creative community of foreign nationals in making real on this investment should not be understated. As discussed below, the international community, although marginal in Tartu, can still contribute to potentially radical and disruptive culture. It is in this (self-)conception of participation in a cross-cultural productive urban dialogue that semiotics offers some direction.

3. A CREATIVE CULTURAL CITY (SEMIOTICS OF TARTU)

An alumnus of semiotics in Tartu, in praise of the programme, once mentioned to me that semiotics once learnt becomes a worldview. Two years of immersion into this field means the world becomes legible in certain patterns and structures, and notions that were earlier self-evident become the sites of epistemological and pragmatic contestation. ‘Meaning’ becomes contextually achieved and interrelated— in a linguistic sense achieved within a system of differences. ‘Creativity’ is not sourced in an individual— but through dialogue, collaboration and agonistic competition. ‘Culture’ itself takes on a new shape— as generator of and generated by transformative contact between systems and actors. The legacy of Lotman and the Tartu Moscow School is in approaching two fundamental (and crucially, inter-related) aspects of culture— the relationship between static or ‘old’ and the dynamic or new cultural formations, and a spatial distinction of a cultural ‘inside’ and a non-cultural extrasystemic ‘outside’ (Monticelli 2019). Such a ‘semiospheric’ way of thinking about creativity and culture— i.e., in terms of ‘borders’, ‘translation’, and ‘dialogue’— already dovetails nicely with currents in the idea of the ‘creative city’.

3.1 THINKING CREATIVE CULTURE IN THE CITY OF TARTU

The notion in semiotics that it is a minimum mutual non-exhaustive difference that creates cultural dynamism is an idea echoed by Scott (2014) who points out that in the creative city, some cognitive distance between actors in creative ‘transactions’, i.e. in translation, is required to make real innovation. Creativity is socially driven, and the work of managing the ‘social and physical infrastructures’ of a ‘creative field’ which spans across the urban milieu is “a major factor in moulding locally distinctive patterns of ingenuity and imagination” (Scott 2014, 569). Such management is towards achieving a caricature of a creative city, described as encompassing:

...an employment base comprising successful new-economy industries, a vibrant pool of talented and qualified labour, high levels of environmental quality, a dynamic cultural milieu including artists, bohemians and gays, a glamorous nightlife, recurrent festivals and spectacles, iconic architecture, and a unifying symbolic identity in the guise of a striking global brand. (Scott 2014, 566)

That creativity in cities is achieved through the organisation of productive clusters of actors is also recognised in John Hartley’s semiotic approach to creative cities and urban semiosis (2015). Hartley describes the city’s creative industries as arising from a productive clash of systems, and offers Lotman’s semiosphere as a model to analyse the creative city. Crucially, “Lotman’s systems-semiotics of culture is social” (Hartley 2015, 83), and it is through the productive difference between social groups that cultural productivity is achieved. “Difference, dialogue, turn-taking, conflict, etc. are not evidence of mutual incompatibility or antagonism, as critical theory has tended to assume, but rather are part of a global process of cultural productivity” (ibid., 84). Thinking of creativity means thinking at an intersection of textual and social systems. The creative city, in Lotmanian terms, becomes a site “where ‘destruction’, ‘explosion’, risk and chance are structural components of generative productivity among overlapping but non-exclusive groups” (ibid., 83). Mutual differences and productive ‘clashes’ at the level of groups, populations and texts generates co-creative innovation. At the level of the creative city, this is when systems of ‘cultural economy’ (formally trained artists;

2019 (the year before the disruptive Covid-19 pandemic) the total student population has risen consistently year on year, while the population of foreign students has remained mostly the same (down by 46 students since 2019). In 2022-2023, total admissions went up by 7% while international student admission reduced by 30% in the same period. In fact, in 2023 there were 206 less foreign students in the University than in the previous year. Further, the population of internationals is dominated by Erasmus or other visiting students. The number of visiting international students (at present dominated by German, Ukrainian and French nationals) has stayed mostly consistent (around 600 students) since 2019— these are usually limited to the number of visiting graduate or undergraduate students who visit through Erasmus or other institutional network programmes. The disparity between foreign and Estonian students is reflected in the Department of Philosophy and Semiotics. Although total students in the unit has remained stable (201 students in 2019 to 208 students in 2023), the foreign student population has reduced from 78 students to 64 students (18%) in the same period. Total admissions to the unit in 2023 was 66 students and has only slightly reduced from 75 students in 2019, while international admissions have dropped alarmingly from 28 to 16 (43%) in the same period. Although this data combines statistics for both the Departments of Philosophy and Semiotics, we may infer that this reduction of international students is applicable more or less equally to both sides of the hallway. (Statistics accessed in May 2024, provided by the University of Tartu website available at: <https://statistika.ut.ee>)

public institutions of art, history and culture) clash with 'creative industries' (entrepreneurial, 'entertainment'-led networked 'scenes' closely linked to nightlife). Hartley contributes here with the notion of the 'creative citizen' (ibid.:91-92) as part of the formula of creative cities that includes businesses (cultural enterprises), artists (labour market) and processes (industrialised media). In the creative city, the artist and creative consumer (a distinction that often blurs) engage in decentralised 'participatory networks'; user-created content and computer-enabled social networks enable a productive clash between artists, audiences and the cultural industries and economies.

In this understanding, the creative city is imagined as a site for social and cultural learning as a result of networked, distributed, informal and imitative dialogue. For our present interest, Hartley already notes the close link between creativity in the clash of urban systems, the participation of youth and students, and vibrant nightlife culture:

Students are global mixers, early adopters, have relatively high disposable income (spare cash for novelties), are mobile, experimental, flock to special events, festivals, and colonise neglected quarters with low rents, frequently reviving them in the process. Thus they perform a social learning function for cities. This is not a job for higher education and schools as institutions; it is conducted informally in the 'clash of systems' that people experience as part of urban life. In fact, people need to cluster, both physically and online, just as much as producers do. The strong appeal of informal urban attractions as social learning platforms is demonstrated by negation – many universities are planned as isolated medieval monastic campuses, but those that are most thoroughly integrated with a city are more popular among students, and the city ranks higher for 'buzz' and nightlife. (Hartley 2015, 95)

Tartu has historically been a border city, a meeting point between cultures, and a crucible for new ideas and explosively productive dialogue— it is the 'city of good thoughts', but also a city of bridges. However, its creative network of artists, organisers, institutions and citizens is implicit, decentralised and disorganised. This is firstly because the small size and intimacy of the scene means resources are accessed through informal networks of accumulated social capital rather than available via transparent forums or platforms. Secondly, as Tartu is often only a temporary stop in transit in people's personal careers before continuing to other cities in Estonia or abroad, creatives and artists rarely stay in Tartu long enough to put down roots and become productive and central members of the scene. This fluid and transitory nature of the creative network is not only problematic for the local scene but limits the mixing with and involvement of already alienated groups like foreigners in Tartu. International graduate students hardly get a couple of years to immerse into Tartu before they matriculate. Seen within the larger context of a global capitalist academic

system, the student's role becomes a differential 'product' and simultaneous 'consumer' (see Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). For visiting students such as those from Erasmus networks, Tartu represents a semester abroad, and the local industries of leisure, hospitality, and nightlife are happy to oblige their hedonism while maintaining a cultural distance from them as mere tourists. Further, the internationals for the most part are restricted to the university dorms or are otherwise spread out across the city, thus denying any chance of embedding local communities.

But it is despite and in conflict with these systemic constraints that the foreign creative citizen offers their contribution. Borders that divide also connect, and the role of the international in Tartu is still potentially of a 'creative citizen' in a participatory network. The role of regularly shared spaces is crucial here for intercultural mingling and eventual creative collaboration and social cohesion. In Tartu, each space has its own particular identity and social atmosphere, playing different roles in the dialogic situation between populations in Tartu. To name just a few key spaces— there is the University library, the creative cultural centre Aparaaditehas, the several public riverside steps, Pirogovi Park at the foot of Toome Hill, and a whole host of cafes, restaurants, bars and nightlife venues each with varying amounts of foreign patrons. On the one hand, there are spaces where foreigners rarely venture, like the local market hall, while on the other hand spaces like the bar Barlova in the Karlova neighbourhood have maintained a strong international character and atmosphere. It is in such shared social spaces where people from different backgrounds can be brought into productive dialogue, that new collaborative ideas, discussions and worldview-changing explosive moments can be forged. Tartu appears thus as a potential 'minefield' of unexploded creativity.

Nightlife is crucial here to the creative culture in a city not just as an 'indicator' of social vibrance but also as a catalyst for productive dialogue between different social groups and cultural systems. A sector such as nightlife, generally associated with entertainment rather than formal institutions of culture, becomes thus "a productive resource in its own right" (Hartley 2015, 95) in the creative city. In this context, formations of nightlife cultural 'scenes' contribute to the generation of, rather than being secondary to, social and economic growth. It is with this new appreciation of the productive role of the creative citizen in a local network of social, economic and cultural systems, that I have renewed a personal interest in nightlife culture— honed first in Tartu with an immersion into the local underground electronic dance music scene.

3.2 TOWARDS A SEMIOTICS OF NIGHTLIFE CLUB CULTURES

The related fields of electronic dance music cultures, club cultures and nightlife have been widely studied in

different forms for more than thirty years³. A semiotic approach to modelling nightlife cultures should begin first with an understanding of its object. It is undeniable that there are certain mythological centres of electronic dance music traditions in general, but today the phenomenon has become global. When deriving a generalisable model it is important to look at particular and local contexts, however, it is feasible to first look for a holistic view to those cities where developed electronic dance music scenes are embedded in urban nightlife and the city's culture as a whole. Lukas Drevenstedt (2020), the former Director of Clubcommission Berlin, uses Berlin as an object to describe the 'elements' and 'dimensions of club culture'. Each club culture as includes three categories of elements:

- 'space', i.e. a "semipublic venue that suggests exclusivity and intimacy while still being permeable to the outside world" (Drevenstedt 2020, 12). Admittance to the space is managed by a semipermeable 'membrane' that usually manifests as door policy at a club, or social mechanisms like secret locations.
- 'scene', i.e. the groups of 'club-goers': the organisers, the artists and the audience. Regular 'core audiences' connect in (participatory) networks to form a 'scene'. The scene self-organises spaces and programs and also manages the entry of newcomers and their education of the 'values' of a specific scene. Barriers to entry for the ignorant and the uncultured— 'tourists', 'techno fans', and other 'undesirables'— form seductive myths of exclusivity and eliteness around specific subcultural scenes.
- 'program', i.e. the linear planned or improvised series of musical and non-musical events and performances in the club. Programming a club implies the diachronic arrangement of events for the night, month or year. Crucially, a club's program "expresses an artistic attitude. It can be regarded as a statement within the context of a discourse" (ibid., 14). This discursive attitude or voice impacts how the audience perceives and participates in the club, as well as its societal and cultural significance outside of the program.

Such a structural approach is clearly reconcilable within a Lotmanian semiotics of culture, which would similarly imagine the club as a 'cultural text' whose 'plot structures' can be modelled spatially (Lotman 1975). In

this sense, a particular cultural event, venue, club, etc. can be analysed as a *text*, with its own borders, actors, and static and dynamic structures. For example, Bakhtin's notions of chronotope (Bemong et al. 2010), or literally the 'space-time' of a text or culture can be systematised to include its story-world, characters and conceptual integration (Torop 2019, 2020), is particularly applicable to the above systematisation of elements of club culture.⁴ The advantage of a Lotmanian semiotics of culture is that it accounts for an isomorphism between the levels of language-text-culture-semiosphere (Tamm and Torop 2022, 7). In this sense, semiotic analysis offers access to models that can be applied to different levels of cultural formation, from a single night to a national scene.

But we are interested not just in the architectonic construction of a club as a textual whole, but also in the dynamic way club culture plays a role in culture through the generation of new meaning. Drevenstedt's model (2020) here again is instructive in examining the 'dimensions' of club cultures, i.e. the economic, the social and the aesthetic, through which club culture becomes significant and meaningful for club-goers and society as a whole.

In the economic dimension, there is firstly the role of the entrepreneurial impetus from artists, organisers, and collectives. These self-organisers access a socially implicit 'scene economy' through which to procure resources for the event. In club cultures, "the production of a club event is a collaborative process of creating value" (Drevenstedt 2020, 15). In practice, clubs make little to no profits for themselves, but other sectors like tourism, retail, transport, etc. benefit immensely from a vibrant nightlife scene. Clubs are a space for creative thinking, but the pressure for profits and the commercialisation by brands stifle creativity. In this sense, a dominant economic system is seen to be in productive conflict with and also inseparable from the emergence of cultural formations like nightlife scenes.

In the aesthetic dimension, Drevenstedt points to five major areas of creative practice of forms, styles and traditions nurtured in the club— music, the visual arts, fashion and design, architecture, and performance. As Drevenstedt points out, innovation and creativity are possible in clubs because they are spaces where different people can come together and meaningfully collaborate— "[t]he great importance of clubs as an arena for differing

³ See Jóri & Robin (2024) for a recent retrospective of dance music cultures and surrounding academic discourses, with a focus on the present situation of nightlife recovering after the Covid-19 lockdown, exemplified in the particular contexts of France and Germany.

⁴ Peeter Torop (2019) has described a model for chronotopic analysis which is extendable to culture in general - "chronotopical approach enriches both textual research and research into culture" (Torop 2019, 30) and helps us "in understanding culture and text as time-spatial or chronotopical systems" (ibid., 31). Torop (2019) distinguishes three levels of chronotopic analysis. The level of topographical reality i.e. the 'ground' is attributed to the story-world in which the various characters exist. This includes the 'real' spatial and temporal concrete forms represented in the text— in the case of a club night, this is the actual organised physical 'space' or venue. Next, the level of psychological reality is reflected by characters and their subjective and personal relations. This is evidently equivalent to the notion of the 'scene' as a network of participatory club-goers. The third level of the metaphysical reality is the conceptual integration of the levels of chronotope i.e. dialogue between characters, diegetic events and the storyworld, constructed according to an authorial perspective. This authorial intent here is equivalent to the artists' and clubs' discourse and artistic attitude represented through the program.

personalities, gender identities, and sexual orientations make them an important space for experimentation” (Drevenstedt 2020, 17).

It is the social dimension of club cultures which is of first interest to a semiotic approach, which would recognise that meaningful dialogue between different networked creative groups, actors and citizens is exactly what generates cultural innovation that includes economic and aesthetic dimensions.

As Drevenstedt points out (*ibid.*), when clubs offer protected, intimate ‘safe spaces’ for marginalised groups, both artists and audience benefit. For the former, clubs offer spaces for artistic experimentation, while for the latter, clubs offer spaces for social interaction that would not otherwise be permissible or appropriate in public. This self-definition as an ‘other’ or ‘alternate’ space of refuge in contrast and opposition to the everyday reality of social convention is central to club cultures. From as early as Sara Thornton’s (2013[1995]) seminal work, it is widely accepted that club cultures define themselves according to ‘cultural hierarchies’, which determine the ‘authenticity’ of a certain exclusive ‘underground’ culture as opposed to the ‘phoney’, mediated and commercialised, mainstream outside. Such a countercultural mode of identity is reflected at every level of dance music subculture. Graham St. John has described the self-discourse that evaluates the club as opposed to the external everyday as a countercultural ‘mode of responsibility and identification’ “in response to identifiable circumstances (from ennui to tyranny and injustice)” (St John 2009, 103). The expression of these aesthetic codes of self-discourse become formative of the ‘vibe’ of a particular scene. This countercultural ‘vibe’ is not always necessarily polemic or political, but can also be merely a hedonistic, orgiastic escape into the passions, “where the rational self, the modern subject, is compelled to surrender to the body-driving, self-effacing rhythms predominating” (*ibid.*, 104). In any case, “whether redressive or simply fun, the party [...] is always potent with possibility – and as such is always more than just a party” (St John 2015, 256-257).

While the club is an escape from social identity, it is also a place to find community and a shared sense of belonging. Cultural values of convivial inclusivity have been widely discussed in the academic and critical literature on dance music cultures. Luis Manuel García-Mispirota (2023) describes how radical intimacy and sociability between strangers is enabled by anonymity and a strategic vagueness about who belongs and why, instead relying on ambiguous shared points of reference like musical taste or ‘good vibes’. Vagueness allows for the inclusive co-existence of multiple otherwise contradictory worldviews and interpretations of the ‘vibe’, which would be incompatible if the social categories and codes that bind and differentiate the group would become explicit. While dance music cultures have always championed inclusivity, there is a need to curate the audience in order to ensure the unity of a vibe and the smoothness of

social interactions within the space. Thus to create an internal space of minimum relative sameness, rave culture is necessarily exclusive, and relies on:

...a process of recognition, selection, and ordering that both places limits on acceptable difference and produces a “safe” space of encounter with alterity. In so doing, they exclude those forms of difference that are judged to be incompatible with the [...] dominant microcultural paradigm within the local music scene. (García-Mispirota 2023, 215).

Further, the club’s ‘ideal’ social function of community, safe refuge and escape requires a constant practice of education, awareness-building and mutual care according to a ‘mentor principle’ which “facilitates exchange with the outside environment, rejuvenation of scenes, and the socialization of newcomers” (Drevenstedt 2020, 16). In Lotmanian terms, this would refer to a practice of imparting tacit or implicit cultural memory. Such a need for inculcation of ethical, social and political values – such as mutual care and personal etiquette – becomes all the more critical today as a new networked generation enters the club in the context of recovering economies, cultures and subjectivities since the Covid-19 lockdown. Thus although dance music cultures are subcultures centred on inclusivity, they must necessarily practise a balanced exclusivity in order to function as learned alternative sites. As Luis Manuel García-Mispirota puts it, “dancefloors are places where both inclusion and exclusion happen” (2023, 1).

Semiotics is well posed to adapt to this understanding. We may identify two ‘metasystemic’ movements – of inclusivity and exclusivity. The inclusionary practice is related to the formation of a shared identity within the culture, through auto-communication by the club through its artistic discourse and the education of cultural memory to newcomers. The exclusionary practice is one that ensures the stability and internal homogeneity of the space, in order to both prevent the dilution of values and to preserve a discernible external Other against which to distinguish the subcultural space. But a scene that becomes too exclusive and with rigid borders becomes static and closed. Instead, cultural development is dependent on continual dialogue with and exchange with the outside – i.e. through an integration of new generations of club-goers. Such newcomers into the periphery of the scene bring new ideas, styles, etc., as is their nature of coming from diverse and new contexts. This is how, for example, scenes adopt and generate new particular aesthetic styles, or how new social etiquettes are incorporated through the expansion to new audiences. Of course, in the dynamics of culture there is always the ‘tension’ between the ‘core’ (of scene veterans and those with access to implicit economic, social and subcultural capital) which seeks to preserve the memory of the culture, and the ‘periphery’ (including all those newcomers, strangers, or suspected tourists who have been permitted entry) which seeks to upset the unity of the whole and the position of the

core by introducing new values that may be regressive or progressive. Sometimes, the periphery assumes the position of the core, becoming the new privileged position to control social codes and cultural memory. This is visible, for example, in how some scenes become dominated by new musical genres and the collectives and organisers affiliated with them. Changes provoked by internal and external dialogue in culture may be 'gradual' or 'explosive', depending on the significance of the newcomers' alterity and the conditions of dialogue. In any case, decisions on whom to allow entry into the scene shape its present and future cultural dynamics. Thus what is crucial to the ongoing preservation and growth of a scene is its ability to properly manage a 'border' of permeable membranes practised in its door policies, secret locations, implicit and explicit social codes, etc. This conception of the dance music (sub)culture as a bordered formation extends from the level of the club itself to the social networks of artist collectives, organisers, etc. that make up a scene.

Widely discussed in dance music culture is its supposed function of utopianism. Crucially, it is exactly the managed image of social solidarity, however 'fragile', that drives the utopian myth of dance music culture— "Inasmuch as dancefloors can serve as spaces for experimentation with ways of living together that are better, more just, more caring, more fulfilling, or simply less harmful, they also function as sites of utopianism" (García-Mispireta 2023, 7). It is important to note here that the function of the club in curating a vibe of social cohesion, through balanced management of admittance and exclusion, is inseparable from the realisation of this utopian spirit. That is to say, the curated feeling of solidarity on the dancefloor creates the conditions necessary for utopian practice both in and outside of the club. One should not assume that utopianism and the transformation of the social and the self are pre-given or immanent to the 'text' of the club or the scene. For example, the related anthropological notions of 'liminality' and 'communitas' have been widely discussed in dance music literature (see St. John 2009, 2015) as a normative state of self-transformation and spontaneous social togetherness that is achievable within rave cultures. However, transformation through liminality is not a pre-given resource or process, but instead emerges contingently from dialogic contact with a radically different Other. This may be at the level of the personal subjective experience, for example when a first-time club-goer attends a rave, or at a social level when people who otherwise would never interact in public form affective relationships on the dancefloor. In semiotic terms, contact with 'untranslatable' alterity forces the Self into unpredictable and previously unthinkable interpretations. But the included Other has to be both acceptably legible for the exchange to be smooth while being sufficiently different or 'exotic' for dialogue to be transformative. Thus liminal conditions are achieved through the border dynamics of managing the experience of radical social alterity on the dancefloor:

The experience of liminality – capable of generating new meanings, contributing to the generation of new narrations, projecting the subject into future scenarios – lies precisely in an ongoing, dynamic and contextual tension of oscillatory processes of configuration of semiotic borders [...] when the border becomes too rigid, we observe forms of repetition of the same narration, a saturation of sense-making processes and a sclerotization of relations based on opposition systems. Similarly, when the border is excessively blurred and fragile, it is impossible to realize a process of signification because it is impossible to define differences and diversity. (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017, 541-542)

Utopianism, liminality and radical imagination, both political or personal, is contingent and contextual and is produced through cultural dynamics and dialogic interaction between the club-goers, the space and the program. This is why "the psychedelic rave should not be regarded as a [constitutionally] "transcendental," "transformational," or "liminal" event, as is often the case in the rave literature" (Kyriakopoulos 2021, 15). Thus a semiotic understanding of social cohesion in dancefloor cultures assumes firstly that it is a transformational social dialogue between club-goers that is generative of actual practised 'communitas'.

Thus a semiotics of nightlife club cultures would extend from the social and textual worlds of particular microcultural spaces and scenes to the level of the city as an integrated whole in which nightlife plays a role in the dynamics of productive translation among creative populations. What is crucial to be understood and practised in nightlife scenes is the management and configuration of the rigidity and porosity of subcultural, subjective and semiotic borders.

3.3 UNDERGROUND NIGHTLIFE IN TARTU

Any attempts towards a meta-systemic understanding, i.e. achieving generalisable models, must take into account the particularities of the local scene being studied. The learnings from one era and context may not transmit well to others. Indeed, even concepts like 'subculture' itself have long come under scrutiny due to their non-applicability in modern diffused, fragmented and consumptive cultures (see Muggleton 2000). Although academic literature on the history and development of club subcultures in Estonia are rare, Airi-Alina Allaste (2015) has made a revealing foray into the field by positioning Estonian club culture in a global periphery influenced by Western-led cultures, while emphasising the relevance of a post-subcultural approach in understanding identities as heterogenous, networked and fluid. Allaste has already noted that "most of the youth cultural trends in Estonia are adopted from outside" (2015, 125). As a foreign import, it is difficult to interpret subcultural trends as a countercultural "social reaction to local circumstances" (ibid.), instead, these practices should be viewed as attempts to integrate into a larger global youth culture and an alignment with 'Western' urbanised culture. Tartu's nightlife culture reflects this

status— as a whole its culture is undoubtedly influenced by foreign centres of techno culture, and it remains in a dialogic relationship with the capital Tallinn and other cities in national and international networks of subcultural capital, aesthetic styles, resources, and club-goers and organisers. The literature on Tartu's specific scene and its relation to the internal cultural dynamics of the national scene is scarce, save for a host of blogs, news articles and social media posts that reveal glimpses of Tartu's nightlife⁵. What follows is not a case study of the semiotics of nightlife subcultures in Tartu, but a short sketch based on my outsider perspective as a visiting foreigner.

Following our adapted model of club cultures from Drevenstedt (2020), we can first look at the particular 'spaces', 'scenes' and 'programs' in Tartu's club cultures. Tartu's nightlife has changed dramatically in the past 10 years, although venues like Genialistide Klubi, Aarhiv (now Kultuuriklubi Salong), Kivi, and spaces in Aparaaditehas like Gutenberg Klubi remain institutions today. Other iconic spaces like Krox, 160 Ruutu, Naiiv have closed, while new ones have opened. But the distinction between a 'mainstream' and subcultural 'underground' is still practised. Representing the former are a host of nightlife spaces, like Shooters, Level, Seik Baar, Space Bar, Maasikas nightclub and a host of other clubs located near the centre. What may be described as Tartu's 'underground' electronic dance music subcultures are hosted by a few but vibrant spaces— regularly by such as Kivi and Genialistide Klubi, while there also have existed temporary spaces such as Kreat Space organised by the crew Kreat Minds.

The present 'scene' network consists of a handful of crews in the countercultural 'underground'. They are usually self-organised multi-skilled collectives of 2 to 5 members playing varying roles of DJ's, organisers, promoters, sound engineers, visual designers, etc. as and when required. Some crews have been around

longer like Amfiib or SÜNK. Some are genre-specific, such as Masta Blasta who focus on UK garage and bass music, or Tartu Massive and Dialective Audio who promote drum and bass music. As mentioned, the network's extension to Tallinn means that several groups move back and forth, organising club nights and major events in both cities— this includes for example groups like Reivkom, Rada7, Inner Space Disco and Maa-Alune, or the organisers behind the regular event series Black Box. Of course, there are also many other organisers and spaces that are not exclusively dedicated to electronic dance music but that play the role of hosts and collaborators (such as alternative cultural space Ajuokse along with other spaces in the Aparaaditehas and TYPÄ complexes); there are also other adjacent club and music scenes like those of metal, rock and punk genres which flourish in Estonia, and that sometimes come together with the electronic music scenes in festivals and events.

The scene in Tartu programs both regular event series and annual festivals throughout the year, particularly in summer time. In the year of writing, many additional events have been organised directly by or have benefited from an affiliation with Tartu 2024. There is also much that can be discussed about the 'discursive' artistic statements of the programs in the events of particular crews and the collaborations among the community. Events range in aesthetic choices, explicit discourse and scale— from curated immersive experiences that re-imagine local histories and spaces⁶ to large conference-festivals with multiple exhibits, workshops and events (an increasingly popular format in Europe) such as Unda Festival 2024 at the Eesti Rahva Muuseum.

In terms of the 'dimensions' of club culture (Drevenstedt 2020) in Tartu, we can clearly note the productivity of the 'aesthetic' artistic community in their self-organised spaces above. In the 'economic' dimension, for reasons explained earlier, the scene has to regularly

⁵ In Estonian, cultural magazines like *Müürileht* are instructive. In English, see, for example, a blog article on Tartu's techno and house scene in 2015, available at: <https://fluon.blogspot.com/2015/05/Tartuestoniatechno-house-scene.html?m=1>

⁶ A memorable example for me was an ambient listening journey curated by Inwards Festival (2023) at Toomemäe park and St John's church.



Fig.1 Kauge Festival at Tartu Kammivabrik in April 2024. Photo credits: Maanus Kullama / Tartu 2024

navigate venue shortages and closures; problems compounded by the transitory nature of the creative population. In the 'social' dimension, Tartu's scene is undergoing a transformation which foregrounds the social, community and cultural impact of club cultures. An exemplary case of such a is Kauge Festival held in April 2024 organised by Tartu 2024 (see Fig. 1), which invited Estonian and international artists to stages curated by some of the major underground Tartu crews at the cultural and artistic complex of Kammivabrik. Notable at Kauge was the official inclusion of a team of Night Fairies (Õöhaldjad), a community for harm reduction, mutual care and safety in nightlife. Such groups who contribute to 'awareness work' that involves "the feminist, activist practice that attends to the crossing of interpersonal boundaries, with an additional focus on harm reduction and safer use" (Raiselis 2024, 125) play a vital role in fostering and growing the culture's utopian and inclusive ethos and values.

The above sketch of the 'elements' of Tartu's underground dance music club culture— the spaces, the scene, the programs— serves as the ground for a vibrant and closely-knit subcultural nightlife in the city. There are internal distinctions within the scene as well as against the 'mainstream' nightclubs, bars and pubs. Still, the openness and small size of the scene means that the 'borders' that protect subcultural identities and spaces are porous in Tartu. There are none of the discriminatory door policies commonly associated with cities like Berlin, perhaps bringing under scrutiny the applicability of concepts that were forged based on those scenes. Instead, as Allaste (2015) has pointed out, the scene operates more as a network of individuals who form contingent subcultural formations based on preferences rather than an explicit 'tribal' sense of belonging.

As mentioned before, a critical issue here is posed by the transitory nature of the city's creative population. The implicitness of economies of resources, creative labour and access to social networks for collaboration means that there is a need to maintain a regular and transparent community platform for sharing access. This would greatly benefit new creatives coming into the city to quickly integrate and access resources and locals seeking new artists and collaborators. At the time of writing, there are already community initiatives self-organising to meet this challenge, exemplified by the recent efforts of local scene leaders in the form of social media groups and regular community meetings and workshops on topics of music production, event organisation, etc.

Here we may locate the role of the foreigner in the international student community as isolated but nonetheless potentially productive 'creative citizens' in the scene. It is in this context and personal position within

Tartu's scene, that my peers and I have participated in an ethical and interventionary praxis of semiotics.

4. A CRUCIBLE FOR PRACTICE (SEMIOTICS FOR TARTU)

As mentioned before, semiotics in the 21st century must be oriented towards an ethical dimension in the context of an application to and productive critique of the conditions and processes of global communication (Petrilli 2009). Semiotics is not isolated from culture, in Tartu or at a global scale, because the humanities, in general, are "tools for interpretation of culture" but also "simultaneously part of the culture" (Torop 2017, 331). Semiotics should never be an armchair semiotics — living and breathing semiotics in Tartu has afforded a special critical and incisive viewpoint, but this skill set should be honed through practice and application. Besides a particular critical mode of theory, such a 'praxis' of semiotics manifests in its application— already there is a range of practical research being done by staff at the Semiotics department in Tartu, alongside initiatives such as the Centre for Semiotic Applications which offers internships and opportunities for students to apply taught concepts to 'real world' projects.

The active role of foreign students in both the local and global outlook of semiotics in Tartu is by no means marginal. International alumni who move abroad or bring foreign networks to Estonia can foster new collaborations. Given sufficient resources and guidance, the graduate students have demonstrated that they can more than adequately represent Tartu in international conferences — for example, the large contingent from Tartu to the International Semiotics Summer School in Prague 2023 organised by the International Semiotics Institute⁷ was composed mostly of international MA and PhD students. Crucial here is a genuine engagement with and inspiration of international students, and a provision of tools for their self-organisation and dialogue with local cultures.

Tartu offers a protected, semi-closed space for the incubation of ideas, collaborations and experimental applications especially to artistic and creative culture, because of its small size and close network of cultural institutions and actors that make up different 'scenes'. As such, semioticians-in-training are also 'creative citizens' (Hartley 2015), who have the responsibility for pushing and crossing cultural, linguistic and social boundaries in the creative city for the continual dynamism of local culture.

It is in this context that I and my peers from the international graduate programme of Semiotics participated through an extracurricular 'praxis' of semiotics in club culture. In 2023, our successful proposal for the Aparaa-ditehas Open Cultural Platform secured support from the Tartu City Government to organise a multi-event series titled 'Translate Tartu' (see Fig. 2). The work involved the

⁷ The Summer School in Prague 2023 led to future collaboration between attending students, myself included, with the International Semiotics Institute (ISI). The ISI has played an important role in the international development of semiotic scholarship, and has a history of fruitful collaboration with students of semiotics from Tartu. Details about the Summer School in Prague are accessible at: <https://isisemiotics.upol.cz/summer-school/>

organisation and management of the space, acquiring resources from implicit 'scene economies', networking, event promotion and marketing, etc. In terms of programming, the event offered a live audiovisual performance bringing together visuals and sounds from the city and its culture, followed by DJ sets from artists within our student community. The event showcased a glimpse of the latent talent in the international student community in Tartu, which gets hidden away because of a lack of enough spaces and continued contact with local creative culture.

The event was a learning opportunity for us as students to participate in the local dialogue of creative culture in the city. Producing the event required our engagement with the 'dimensions' of local club culture. At the aesthetic level, the event offered space for collaboration and artistic experimentation using artistically edited footage and photography of the city of Tartu with improvised electronic music. At the economic level, we explored the implicit scene economies by making contact with equipment rental companies and local technicians and engineers. Our secured funding allowed us not only to encourage budding new international artists by providing equipment, but also to give back to the local scene through payments to vendors and for the services of assisting engineers and visual programmers.

At a social level, we may examine our contribution and efforts more critically. On the one hand, we found that engagement with locals was difficult, and our ambition to create a safe space for contact with alterity (García-Mispireta 2023) was near-sighted. A significant problem was that we underestimated the relative remoteness of our chosen venue, Klubi Gutenberg at *Aparaaditehas*, from the city centre where most nightlife is located. The greater distance to travel especially in poor weather conditions, meant that only the most committed of audience members made the journey while others, albeit curious, were not ready to make the trip and experiment with a new event format such as ours. On the other hand, despite a largely homogenous crowd of internationals attending the event itself, our most important contribution was made leading up to and after the event by sparking dialogue with the local scene. Anecdotally through prior and subsequent conversations, we noticed that our event promotion garnered the attention and curiosity of local creative scene leaders, especially those involved in nightlife. Our event may have put international creatives in Tartu 'on the map' of the city's creative urban milieu, but only future enquiry would confirm if such an impression is lasting through increased collaborations between locals and the new generation(s) of foreign creative citizens. In any case, *Translate Tartu* was a small step towards creating more spaces for social learning and productive 'clashes' and collaborations between networked creative clusters in the city (Hartley 2015), especially including those communities that are more fragmented and disparate like the creative population of foreign nationals. Overall, the event was both a valuable learning experience for us while also offering an example



Fig.2 Our audiovisual electronic music event series '*Translate Tartu*' (2023) was supported by the *Aparaaditehas Open Cultural Platform* and the *Tartu City Government*. The event was the result of combined efforts from *Bruno Habran, Elvira Avota, Nick Cavazos, Tatiana Jaramillo Jaramillo, Andrea Barone Renolfi, Raul Telliskivi, and Rahul Murdeshwar*. Special thanks also to *Karmen Otu* and the team of *Klubi Gutenberg*. Photo credits: *Andrea Barone Renolfi and Moe Chao*.

through which foreign students of semiotics in Tartu can be involved in local culture.

5. CONCLUSION / OUTLOOK

The purpose of this paper has been to show how semiotics in Tartu is connected to the city, reflecting and learning from but also contributing to its culture. Based on my own personal experience, the sections above include a memoir from an outsider's perspective, and so inadvertently include a brief 'visitor's guide' to Tartu's nightlife for visiting enthusiasts of electronic dance music cultures. There have also been indications towards the foundation of a semiotics of nightlife club cultures that can take into account the role of nightlife, in which electronic dance music subcultures play a crucial role, in the context of creative culture in the city. However brief and partial, the elementary sketch of Tartu's underground scene serves as material for application and advancement of theoretical concepts and frameworks. Research in the future would draw from these strands of thinking, and will require both a deeper understanding of the analytical literature of dance music subcultures

and a further immersion into the field, as both researcher and practitioner.

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