

Is Dance Music a Subculture or Has it Now Become a Culture in its Own Right?

Classically subcultures define themselves as *'other'* and *'subordinate'* to *'the dominant'* culture. Many cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige have been chiefly concerned with the ways in which subcultures subvert and pose a resistance to the *'established order'* through their expressive dress codes and rituals. Dance music seems to depart from these theories of youth culture, since it has not established its own identifiable dress code nor consciously set itself apart from the wider culture.

Today dance music is primarily focussed around clubs, where people meet together and dance to electronically engineered music. It could take place in a derelict warehouse, a bar, a beach, a field, an aircraft hangar or a sports arena. Some may be free, and others may charge an entrance fee. Each venue seems to have its own discourse. A beach may signify the escapism of a holiday; a warehouse may signify the decline of industrialisation; and a sports arena may signify commercial profiteering. The sort of people that go to any particular one will vary according to the place where it is held, the way in which it is advertised, and the price of the ticket. For example, the London Jungle scene is predominantly black-led and attracts a racially diverse section of urban youth; the location of these raves is communicated by the pirate radio stations and those 'in the know'. Conversely, a rave held at Cream sells tickets at £25, advertises on commercial radio and in 'Mixmag' and targets a wealthier, predominantly white middle class section of society. In 1991, as Hillegonda Rietveld notes, the first 'Gay Only Raves' were organised in the north-west. So it seems that whilst Dance Music does not necessarily create a melting pot for people from different cultural backgrounds, it does not exclude any section of youth on the grounds of race, gender, class, or sexuality. *"There are no barriers within Dance" (H. Rietveld, 1991).*

As it appears that Dance music embraces a wide variety of cultures and lifestyles, the diversity within the genre itself starts to reflect this. Various sub-genres such as Happy House, which is uplifting and upbeat, Techno which is ambiguously futuristic, Ambient is calming, and Darkside (which was an aspect of 'drum and bass' which developed into Jungle) could be said to express a Dystopian mood. Mark Fisher, in his article *"Hello darkness, our new friend"* has written about Dark-side. Darkside borrows its ontology from horror and science fiction, and layers it over an extremely fast and manic beat. The sounds it borrows suggest casual homicide, ultra-violence, and survivalist individualism. This music sounds as if it comes from the near-future worlds of cyber-punk writers such as William Gibson. Darkside and Jungle are largely popular amongst the black communities, and through this, the genre is broken down yet again into Carnival and Drum and Bass.

Dance can essentially be seen as collage, on many levels, and Collage is nothing new to youth culture. Dick Hebdige in his classic text "Subculture and

the Meaning of Style", drew attention to the breakdown of image and referents presented to us by punk, but instead of collage he used the anthropological term 'Bricolage'. 'Bricolage' is roughly be translated as artisan -like inventiveness. Hebridge likened Bricolage to early surrealist experiments with collage and spontaneity. *"It is conventional to call 'monster' any blending of dissonant elements... .I call 'monster every or iginal inexhaustible beauty."* (Hebridge)

Hebridge describes these acts of Bricolage as '*subversive practices*'. He also argues that the 'subculture punk bricolages together bits and pieces of previous subcultural worlds to *'disrupt and reorganise meaning'* and it is this activity which makes punk subversive, for example the use of rips and safety pins in punk dress codes which were put together with school uniforms. But his analysis of the subversive activity of Bricolage is confined to visual signifiers. In Dance music, the concept of 'Bricolage' could be applied to the techniques of collage/sampling. Dance music effectively destabilises the listener's values and common sense perceptions, and establishes the basic premise of surrealism so much so that a new surreally would emerge through the subversion of common sense. I think these oppositions are to some extent broken down in a Dance, as the music, the lights and the atmosphere conspire to take the Raver out of the restraints of body and fixed identity to a new, altered state. The experiences of virtual reality and raves have close connections with dreaming, in that they are like giving in to the sublime flux of the unconscious.

To this end Dance music has created its own subculture, commonly known as 'Clubculture' mainly through hairstyles, clothing, attitudes and vices with many sociologists linking this primarily to the Gay scene. It is noticeable within Clubculture that the distinction between male and female is more blurred than in the 'normal 'disco-club' environment. Men do 'not pick up girls, nor do girls passively' stand waiting to be approached (both of which can still be observed in any' club on a Saturday' night in Britain). The social organisation within Clubculture is much more egalitarian: people dance alone or among a group, and interactions with strangers are commonplace. People do not watch one another's appearance or how they' are dancing. Appearance does not matter in raves, as everyone is too busy 'enjoying themselves. This may' be part of a larger trend in a post-aids society where we avoid and perhaps even fear physical intimacy with strangers, but it is also specific to Clubculture itself. Dance music is 'not structured around heterosexual goals of climax as is traditional pop, and therefore offers the clubber a space freed from conventional sexual expectations and obligations. It is then perhaps ironic that female sexuality can appear to be quite explicit at raves, with girls opting to wear bikini tops, hotpants, rubber and lycra, but at the same time it is unobtainable, and therefore safe.

Jon Savage has suggested that in the field of popular culture " *to ambitious musicians, the past is a memory bank from which the future can be constructed*". It is by endlessly and seamlessly sampling from historical and international sources that Dance music creates a sublime atmosphere of an ever-lasting present. Through this bastardisation it transcends the realms of

sub-culture and becomes a parent culture, spawning off various subcultures of its own from Techno to House. Dance music encompasses both the underground and the mainstream facets of society through its multidirectional subgenera. What started life as an underground subculture from the USA in the late 1970s transcended through the mainstream of the mid 1990s to create its own unique culture in the early 21st Century. Whilst dance music itself is still very much part of the general popular culture of Britain, however its underlying Club Culture remains the choice of the minority rather than the majority, and is, as most subcultures are generally feared rather than fully understood.