

Evaluate the account of club culture offered by Thornton.

Sarah Thornton's account of club culture was written in 1995 during the final stages of the peak of the 'Acid house' cultural movement in the UK. The 'madchester' scene of raves and parties especially at the famous Hacienda nightclub were all but finished and the seminal new wave of drug influenced bands such as the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays were beginning to feel the toll of their expressive lifestyles. The rave scene was becoming mainstream and the moral panics associated with ecstasy were becoming 'old news' for the newspapers to report on.

I want to in this writing look at exactly what Sarah Thornton was trying to express in her writing on club culture, the theories and findings it expressed and then attempt to evaluate them, and assess an opinion on its findings and whether they are conclusive or if the study is now dated. To evaluate the study I will identify what I feel the key points are in my view and analyze them, either agreeing or disagreeing with her view, today this I will be using my own experiences to some extent, and writings by other people on club culture.

Many of the texts available on the topic of dance and club culture tend to focus on the moral panics created by the scene and especially the use of intoxicants such as ecstasy. Sarah Thornton's account of club culture however looks more so at the topic of subcultures, and specifically the topic of subculture capital, and how the status of the youth within the club scene was affected by the possession of this capital. This is the aspect of her theory, which I am going to be looking at in this evaluation. To help me evaluate her writing I will use two texts in particular, the first is *'Making popular music, by Jason Toynbee'*. This book will help me to assess Thornton's accounts on the music scene experienced by club culture and whether it is shared by the music industry. To look at the cultural statements of Thornton I will be using *'Rave Off by Steve Redhead'* which talks about the rise of the rave culture and offers insights into its cultural make up, and so will be useful to critique Thornton's writing.

Thornton begins by stating that 'club culture' is the colloquial expression given to the British youth cultures for whom dance clubs and their offshoot, raves, are the symbolic gatherings and social networks within which they feel at home and can express themselves (Thornton 1995). A rave is a dance party, where the music has its origins in acid house from Chicago, techno from Detroit and garage from New York, which themselves had evolved from dance musical styles that were played mainly in (black) gay clubs, especially The Warehouse in Chicago and Paradise Garage in New York (Redhead 1995).

Redhead (1995) also acknowledges the social hub found in the dance scene, with dress types 'do what you like dress code', and appearances often generating stereotypes of the scene. By all dressing similar and participating in this lively dance environment I feel Thornton has opened her writing well by defining exactly what she is trying to express as the youth culture which is under discussion in her account of club culture. Toynbee (2000) states that like earlier music based youth subcultures – psychedelic rock and punk most notably dance music has proclaimed itself as a transformational social movement, and its only demand was its right to party. This too I feel backs up Thornton's first description as a new wave of social movement for the youth scene.

Stating that club culture is not singular but it is in fact a cluster of sub cultures, and that club cultures are taste cultures. By taking part in these cultures she states that participants are able to build a knowledge and belief in the norms of the crowd who partake in these gatherings. Stating that club cultures are faddish, fragmented and are heavily dependent on people being in the now, the 'hipness' is everything to club cultures. This opening section of the account is looking at the topic of 'hipness' as subculture capital. Toynbee (2000) acknowledges these fads in the club scene when he talks about the volatility and changes in taste in the music industry and how these are a problem for the record producers. His comments made here also help to cement Thornton's claims of 'Hipness' being subculture capital as if the music was being mass produced and not 'faddish' then it would become mainstream and non club goers would become affiliated with the culture, and so bringing it from its sub culture level to a more popular culture level or 'mass culture'. Redhead (1995) again also appears to be inline with Thornton on the account of club culture not being singular. He writes 'the raver was seen to enter the world of consumerism, in order to keep ahead of the recuperation of its own secret signs. In this way youth subcultures seem to develop like eternal cycles of resistance, recuperation and a new resistance'. He doesn't account for the mass of cultures which make up club culture but he is saying that the regeneration of clubbers dress codes will leave some trailing behind who in turn would account for these not so 'hip' clubbers who make up the different taste cultures of the club scene. In my experience this make up of different club goers with different beliefs has come

about through age and especially the maturity of music tastes. They move on from certain scenes such as 'Happy Hardcore', frequented by often underage clubbers, and the older more experienced 'ravers' move into more advanced musical surroundings such as Drum and Bass, both are still clubbers, or ravers but they carry different tastes about the culture of the music they now aspire to.

The idea of sub cultural capital is evident throughout the writing, which draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his book *Distinction* (1984). In his research, Bourdieu focuses on two types of capital. The first is cultural capital, or the knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education, which generates social status. The second form of capital is, economic capital, or levels of income, and commodity ownership. Pierre Boudieu also mentions a third type of capital, social capital, which is capital gained from the people you know and the people who know you.

Thornton takes these perspectives and brings in 'hipness' as the currency of sub cultural capital. She describes hipness as cool haircuts, the latest clothes and the cool persona experienced by clubbers, all of which are an important capital within the club scene. Thornton states that the club scene combines the three capitals to enable those who do not have the cultural and economic capital opportunities to be able to experience a feeling of classlessness, in other words, the key to fitting into the club scene is to not try too hard to look the part or the sub capital gained through 'natural hipness' or being 'cool' will be lost (Thornton 1995). The use of Pierre Bourdieu's work to help define the topic of subculture capital is also used by Redhead (1995) he uses his work to signify the that the 'consumption of 'high' art displays 'ease', which is freedom allowed by surplus of money'. Here Redhead is using the quote to say that the dress sense used by ravers is not one of conscious choice, but practical and affordable, and wasn't chosen to pose a threatening image. This comment on the subculture capital gained from the dress code of 'hip' contradicts Thornton. Thornton was saying that ravers wanted to dress a certain way, in order to be hip. Redhead is saying they dress this way due to practicality and cost. I feel that both sides of the argument are correct. Thornton's case is but forward by the fact 'if you try to hard to impress you are not cool' so the slack dress code of baggy clothes are worn. This is true as the stereotypical image, given by Redhead (1995) states those baggy clothes and bright colors are the appearance of a raver. But he argues the case that this is the case due to practicality as 'Not only the lack of finance, but also the intensive dancing and the use of the drug ecstasy determined the style. It makes a person sweat so baggy cotton clothing is the most comfortable to wear'. The idea of Thornton's lack class structures is backed up Toynbee (2000) he argues that dance music has its own form of social organization, with a flat subculture network. He also uses a quote from Phillip Tag, saying that the flattening of hierarchies within dance music so it contains plenty of small figures. Stating as Thornton acknowledges that within the club scene the level of differences in class are marginal, except for the DJ who has an abundance of subculture capital and so is deemed to be a class above the club goers, and to some extent is worshipped.

She classes the club, or the venue of the club night as being the refuge for the club goers, were there rules of the subculture are upheld and respected by other club goers. The norms and accepted behavior are experienced within the club and the feeling of classlessness is projected onto the crowd due to the flat hierarchies of class associated with the scene, unlike in other genres, such as rock where democracy is evident (Toynbee 2000). McKay (1996) Talks of the scene of the rave as being presented as the libertarian utopian space, packed with trans formative space. This notion of liberal, utopian space is what Thornton argues is the freedom to be hip and to present ones self as a raver without prejudices within the location as long as the norms of the scene are maintained to a certain level.

The DJ is said to be the master of the night and collectiveness on this equal level can be seen as Thornton points out, the clubbers do not dance facing one another, but rather they dance facing the DJ. Many clubbers get so into the music that they close their eyes while they dance or they look like they are in their own world, possessed by the DJ and the music as their spiritual guide, due to the amount of subculture capital they possess. Not only do these DJs possess the sub cultural capital, but as with Pierre Bourdieu's economic capital DJS possess this too. As their 'Hipness' is able to bring financial rewards, getting paid to perform, not only this economic capital is gained but also deep respect from club goers due to the high levels of sub cultural capital they posses but also because of their role in defining and creating it.

Toynbee (2000) acknowledges this point that the DJ is the leader of the night, but also states that 'dance music does not involve expression. Rather the DJ works off the crowd by picking up dynamics in collective gesture and effect, and then amplifying them'. Thornton acknowledges this collective gesture, but to some extent fails to appreciate the role the audience plays in not only playing the role of the audience but also to some extent the conductor of the DJ's performance. This point highlights the issue of whether her point of

the DJ creating and defining subculture capital or whether it is a collective effort by club goers who express their collective view of hipness onto the DJ who in turn takes advantage of this. Redhead (1995) argues the case that a certain DJ had to change his appearance in order to fit in with the crowd he was performing to. This casts into doubt the statement by Thornton of DJs having, creating and defining what is 'hip' and therefore their position of leaders of the club is also thrown into doubt, as they have to conform to the crowd's beliefs as they are unable to change the collective if the collective is unwilling to be influenced (Redhead 1995). McKay (1996) makes the assumption that the DJs control the music and take the dancers on a journey through the night. This point aligns with Thornton's account of the DJ being the highest-ranking subculture capital owner and thus is able to lead the crowd.

The last point I want to look at before I conclude this evaluation is that Thornton outlines a key difference between Bourdieu's cultural capital and subculture capital as the fact that the media play an active role in the latter, as it not only acts as a marker of distinction but also is a crucial network for the distribution and definition of cultural knowledge. Being in the now, with subculture capital depends, and correlates with the extent of the media coverage given to the scene, and the topics of what's hip and what's not.

This idea of media coverage can be said to have been the key implementation, which brought rave culture into the mainstream. But the media coverage offered is not all good as can be seen with the moral panics surrounding the rise of the use of ecstasy and the deaths from its use (Redhead 1995). McKay (1996) states rave culture as the latest instance in the long line of youth resistance through popular music. If this music becomes over exposed by the media then it will become mainstream, Toynbee (2000) writes that the cost to a DJ of achieving a dance floor hit is relatively low. The disadvantage is that when it becomes big beyond the club market the amount of cultural capital expended is considerable. This mainstream element is exactly what Thornton has been highlighting in the account of club culture that ravers place themselves in opposition to it, as it stands for the masses, and the problem of gushing up to the mainstream rather than the trickle down which is dreaded by the 'high art' world. The subculture used the media to the best of its ability, through flyers, fanzines, listings, Internet and pirate radio to gather and assure the prosperity of the underground group. At the same time, if the information was taken to the public arena, it needed to not only be cryptic, but negative to maintain the group's autonomy and keep it underground McKay (1996).

In conclusion I have only looked at some of the key aspects that Thornton talked about in her writing on club culture, and more specifically her work on the social logic of subcultural capital. I have compared the ideas and findings, which she discovered against other publications on the subject, and have found a mixed response in their affiliation and co-ordination with her findings.

The key point which I have come to notice about Thornton's account of club culture is that it is often critical, and negative towards the club scene. She takes an elitist stand point, looking at the club seen as merely a fad which involves people leering after the subcultural capital in order to fit into the rave scene. She denotes them as being classless and oppositional to the mainstream using dress codes and behaviors to shock as well as using the drug element to purposely create a moral panic.

This was especially evident in her distinction that the club scene had no distinct class structure or hierarchy, which may not have been the case when the study was written but in today's club scene, as discussed by both McKay (1996) and Redhead (1995) class structures are evident in the club scene, mainly through mainstream elements.

In a culture where many of the club goers and organizers are most likely disenchanted with their place in the mainstream the subculture of underground dance clubs is a place to forget their standing in life, a place to excel on the subculture terms, unfettered by traditional values. The maintenance of the culture is only possible with the barriers discussed. Thornton illustrates that the underground dance club scene subculture has an extremely exclusive nature supported by three distinct types of barriers, Physical, informational, and socioeconomic.