



Club Culture: Whence and Whither?

Lukasz Glowa, Masza Romaczyk, Maciek Sekerdej, Marcin Stawowiak,
Jagiellonian University
Krakow, Poland

Abstract

The present paper is concerned with the phenomenon, which during the last decade has had a notable impact on lifestyles of a great many young people in Poland, namely, the club culture. This trend, although very popular and omnipresent, so far has not had a clear definition; more than that, its complexity and diversity seem to suggest that it will never have one. The authors are approaching club culture from a functional point of view. The main issues are to research what individual needs are met by engagement in some particular area of clubbing (defined broadly in terms of music: reggae, drum-and-bass and house) as well as to analyse the problem who are the designers and leaders (public and/or hidden) of the club culture – is it an intrinsic action, connected with a certain sort of ideology or just a product of big industrial enterprises? In the process of the research the authors employ both an external (journal publications) and internal (interviews with clubbers) perspective.

Introduction

The notions “clubbing” and “club culture” have existed in Poland for couple of years. At the first sight, they are concerned, to put it broadly, with a certain sorts of entertainment or the possible ways of spending leisure time, typical for the younger part of the society. Moreover, they seem to be also connected with a particular kind(s) of music, specific characters of clubs or the way people dress. However, clubbing means something more: this “form of entertainment” has its own turbulent history, specialist journals and appears to shape the taste or preferences of a great number of young people all over the world. There is also a profound impact of generally understood club culture on the lifestyles of people who perceive themselves as clubbers.

Until now, there have been published a good many articles on club culture, either in daily press or specialist journals (cf. eg. Borthwick, 1998; Cieslik, 2004; Critcher, 2000; Ksiezuk, 2002; Szlendak, 1997). Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases those articles are dealing with genesis, history and social reception of club culture, or constitute polemical commentaries on this phenomenon. Furthermore, in the Polish academic literature so far there has been no reliable and, what is even more important, an up-to-date monograph on the native (Polish) club culture. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to fill that gap. The main purpose of the authors is to describe principal manifestations of the social phenomenon, which is, undoubtedly, club culture, and identify its main functions, considering both its participants and designers.

Aims & Hypotheses

It is assumed that the term “club culture” is related to the actually existing social phenomenon, which is likely to describe both by means of particular features, which distinguish it from other related phenomena, and specific functions that it seems to fulfil. The authors will try to verify these assumptions through the careful analysis of the observations that were made and through description of current manifestations of club culture in the context of its history and genesis.

In the process of research the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1: Club culture, as a social phenomenon and form of entertainment, answers certain needs of people who use its products.

Hypothesis 2: Functions that club culture fulfils can be examined by means of analysis its music, design, the ways clubs work and analysis of life styles of people involved in it.

Hypothesis 3: People involved in club culture try to maintain its peculiarity, individuality and exclusive character.

Hypothesis 4: Club culture is a phenomenon created to the same extent by its animators (DJs, designers etc.) and by big companies, which use its symbols in order to advertise and sell their commodities.

Methodology

In the process of collecting empirical data various methods were employed: participant observation, interviews (taped or/and filmed), questionnaires, filming on club parties, press and library research.

The Phenomenon of Club Culture

Brief history

The club culture (CC) based on electronic dance music has had its beginnings in the phenomenon called *rave*. Rave subculture commenced at the turn of the 80s and the 90s in the USA and UK. The term subculture is fully justified because *rave* was the source of a sort of socio-cultural revolution. It was an alternative movement; *rave*-party were usually organised in isolated places such as abandoned factories or empty storehouses. Thus, *rave* was a kind of **underground**, rebellion, anarchy or an escape from commonly accepted and controlled forms of activity (including an entertainment).

Rave was attractive because of its spontaneity, cybernetic aesthetics and electronic music, which often put dancers into a trance. Combination of music, visual effects and drugs let people disconnect from reality and immerse into their own, internal sensations. Hence, the next important element of *rave* movement were drugs, especially ecstasy pills (Cricher, 2000). They helped sharpen the senses and gave energy for long dance marathons. One can say that *rave* played a similar role to shamanistic rituals that enabled people to lose their individual identities and dissolve into feeling of universal community.

In Krakow, the first dance-parties took place in **Krzysztofory**, a cult site related beforehand to an artistic and theatre activity. Since 1993 *rave* events have started to appear more and more frequently, always in a sort of alternative locations, which more often than not dealt with art promotion (eg. **Teatr Buckleina**) or they were just abandoned and not used any more (eg. **Kino Zwiakowiec**). *Techno* music became the avant-garde; participants of *techno* parties usually knew each other and all that movement had an air of exclusivity.

After a couple of years a *drum'n'base* music appeared in Krakow. Clubs became more and more popular and began being advertised and the owners started actively looking for

customers. The year 2002 was really crucial for a local CC. Along with the beginning of academic year, the number of clubs increased dramatically. Moreover, their interior design changed notably. In a few words one can say that clubs ceased to be alternative places and turned into comfortable ones (mild lights, sofas etc.).

Club Culture in Krakow

What are the main features of Krakow clubs, which allow to categorise them as typical places of CC? How could one distinguish them from other places of public entertainment as bars, discos or pubs? What are the basic conditions the “real” club is supposed to meet? One can single out at least three such elements: music, design and DJ parties at weekends.

Music usually constitutes the content of a particular club and is one of its basic characteristics. By and large, club music is a dance music, electronic – composed and performed by means of computers, synthesisers, percussion automates and other instruments that enable digital sampling. At weekend parties, the music is the most frequently played from vinyl (although occasionally one can meet DJs who work with CD discs).

It has to be notice that the DJ’s role does not consist in playing the recorded pieces one after another. He or she mixes them, combining different styles and types in order to create another composition. Thus, music played from discs constitutes only raw material and has to be processed to obtain a typical club sound. Moreover, occasionally particular pieces are blended with sounds played live (eg. drum, trumpet, bass) or/and with vocalisations.

House – currently the most popular kind of club music in Krakow. In the scope of *house* one can distinguish various subcategories from nice and lively *latino-house*, *funky-house* or *disco-house* through *deep-house*, *electro-house* to more alternative *progressive-*

house, *hard-house* and *minimal-house*. *House* is based on regular, strong beat and can be mixed actually with all kinds of music, especially with jazz, disco and soul.

House is relatively less demanding considering its reception, in comparison to, for example *drum'n'base* or *techno*. In *techno* rhythm is faster, less melodic and usually without any vocals. Every person is dancing alone, listening intently to the beat that hardly changes during the whole party. People do not pay attention to each others, falling into a kind of trance. The rhythm of *house* in turn is also clear, however, not so aggressive. Music is considerably softer, particular pieces are easily distinguishable and much more melodic. All this features cause that *house* parties are more social; people may dance together, they are also able to talk as the volume of the music is usually lower.

Drum'n'bass – the music that came into being in the first half of 90s in England. Its source can be traced in *house*, *hip-hop*, *techno* and *reggae* – created by Jamaican emigrants. Direct ancestors of *drum'n'bass* were *breakbeat* and *jungle*. Generally, what characterises these kinds of music is a very fast rhythm (over 160 beats per minute), a deep, heavy bass with occasional vocal interludes.

Drum'n'bass is much more progressive than *techno*, let alone *house*. The beat is extremely rapid, irregular, which forces dancers to a constant concentration. Therefore *drum'n'bass* dance is also asocial and trance-like. While *house* dancers rock and writhe in same rhythm, in case of *drum'n'bass* everyone has to find his or her own way of dancing and interpreting the music. It is assumed that these distinctions are essential as for describing and analysing CC phenomenon and peoples attitudes towards it.

Clubs. The central part of each club is compounded of a dance-floor with a specially separated place for DJ. As for design, the most popular style nowadays is *lounge*. It is a peculiar mixture of *pop-art*, kitsch, plastic, vivid colours and cheap trinkets. Interiors, according to decorators and “tradition”, should engender associations with hedonistic life

style and perception of “collective happiness”.

From a functional point of view, the space in a club can be divided in two parts: place for dancing and place for talking. Some clubs additionally offer a place for lying (chill-out rooms). The bar should be located in the centre, usually somewhere in-between dance floor and chill-out room(s). Such positioning facilitates establishing contacts and separates dance floor from a calmer area. In Krakow clubs the role of the bar is not so clear, however, in most cases it takes somehow isolated position (with the exception of, for example, **NoBar**, where there are a few bars, including one straight by the dance floor).

Chill-out room, first of all, must be comfortable, separated from dance floor and devoid of gaudy elements to allow resting after a long dance. Also the music is to some extent different: usually lower and calmer. A typical example of lounge style is a décor of Californian Zam Zam Room, with round shaped bar made of black wood and red coloured sofas. As for Krakow, it seems that the only one place that deserves the name lounge is **fshut**. Nevertheless, characteristic lounge elements limited themselves to red and relatively comfortable armchairs, because the music (dependent to some degree to the hour) has nothing to do with lounge.

The dance floors in Krakow club are relatively very small. Each of them, certainly, includes a DJ's stage, however, in contrary to, for instance, clubs in Warsaw, DJ's stage is located not in the centre but somehow in the background, on the special platform.

As for the fashion, one can notice also certain characteristic tendencies. Generally, designers claim putting emphasis on individual style and inspiration by a street style. Nonetheless, in reality, it turns out that most of the clubbers wear actually the same clothes of currently trendy brands. And this is actually another important element of CC – **the logo**. Brands that are in vogue in a certain period of time can be easily found in journals devoted to CC (eg. Fluid, Aktivist etc.). Oddly enough, big concern as Benetton, H&M or Puma that sell their good on a mass scale, at the same time, are putting an accent on individuality and

originality in their commercials. This constitutes a very transparent contradiction in terms, however, still works.

It is worth mentioning that marketing policy of large companies not only **use** symbols of CC in promoting their commodities. It seems that they even **create** CC in order to build a particular kind of needs, which can be easily fulfilled by buying and using their products. CC is usually associated with youth, high life, creativity, originality, which, incidentally, may be purchased in every brand store.

In Krakow CC the cult of trademark is clearly visible. Logos of the famous textile companies constitute emblems of belonging to a particular group. They also even denote possessing certain features and traits that are especially desirable in current season. And, as mentioned before, most of these symbols and meanings were designed not by CC animators but by marketing specialists working for a fashion industry. Moreover, what is particularly interesting, big companies do not limit themselves to television or magazine advertisements for various cloths and gadgets, they also more and more frequently **organise** dance/club parties what, in fact, signify that they fully participate in shaping CC.

Everything mentioned above is reflected in club publications. In Poland there are a few titles (e.g. Activist, Activist Exclusive, Laif, Fluid) and usually each of them has its own local edition in every big city. More often than not, they are something cross between tabloids, cartoons and shop catalogues. Most of the space is devoted to new trends in fashion or design; each issue contains in addition one or two short articles (that, however, occupy usually a few pages, because of the pictures) with, customarily, the logo of a factual sponsor on every page.

Nevertheless, clubbing seems to be still fresh and trendy. Club music available on CDs occupies frequently new-sound shelves in the record stores. Clothes that allude to club-style are perceived as the most fashionable and up-to-date. Thus, one can draw a conclusion that CC is continuously attractive to young people. However, to be on the top they have to attend

right places at right time with right people. Likewise, clubbers have to have an appropriate look and know how to behave.

Bearing in mind an appropriate (high) level of entertainment, in a few clubs in Krakow a door selection was introduced (e.g. in **Prozak, NoBar, Ministerstwo, Cien, Fusion, Illusion, Frantic**) By admitting only “suitable” clients, the club owners try to enhance the prestige of the place and make the audience feel exceptional. Hence, one may put forward a hypothesis that clubbing attempts to maintain elitist quality at any expense, irrespective of its popularity and mass character.

One can distinguish two basic mechanisms of door selection. In the first case evaluation conducted by bouncers who usually look at the shoes (sic!) people, who want to enter wear. As a rule, client wearing sports sorts of shoes are not admitted. Sports blazers are rather unwelcome as well. It has to do with the presupposition that this kind of people may be aggressive or generally do not constitute sophisticated clientele.

In the second instance, the owner of the club employ special selectioners (mostly young women) who decide who is going to enter the club or not. In this case the criteria are notably less clear. By and large, people who are about to be allowed to come in have to be sufficiently rich and “up to scratch”. If, according to the selectioner, the above conditions are not met, the persons are asked to produce club-cards (which usually do not exist) or are informed that the party is closed to the public. Occasionally, the number of people in the club has an impact on rigidity of selection.

Clubbers. One of the most salient criteria that delineate the member of club society is his or her attitude to the electronic dance music. These are those people for whom the first clubs in Krakow were established. At its beginnings CC in Krakow was truly meagre and every party with DJ was a real event. Hence, the question appears: what was so attractive in this form of partying when there were a great many pubs offering dance music and similar “additions”?

Certainly, the most important thing was a good entertainment (an ideology came later). So, what the uniqueness of this form of entertainment consisted in?

One of the answers to that question is that electronic music requires relatively different forms of activity. Certainly, it is more demanding than music played in discos (there are, of course, differences between particular kinds, as it has been mentioned above). Likewise, it is, so to speak, more introverted what means that dancers are less dependent on each other and, in fact, every person can dance completely separately. Moreover, clubbers are interested in music itself; they listen frequently to this kind of music and collect CDs.

Nonetheless, as CC became increasingly popular, club parties started to be attended also by people who were not interested in electronic music. These people usually choose less “invasive” places – for example – they rather prefer *house* clubs than *drum’n’base* ones. They just enjoy the club atmosphere and comfortable interior design (sofas!). Therefore, along with the expansion of CC in Krakow, *house* clubs become more and more numerous and trendy. Typical Krakow *house* clubs are: **Prozak**, **fshut** and **NoBar**.

Another important issue is the nature of relationship among clubbers. Do they attend parties to meet new people? Why do they want to meet each other – do they feel a sort of community spirit or it is just a weekend acquaintanceship?

Visits in clubs are inseparably connected with spending time with other people. As a general rule clubs are very crowded so it forces people to constant interactions (if they like it or not). Other factors that facilitate contacts are alcohol and drugs (in particular marijuana and ecstasy pills). The role of music is diverse, as it has been mentioned before. The kind of music the most conducive to establishing contacts is certainly *house*. In turn, the volume and intensity of *drum’n’base* allow only to very short exchanges of words that usually express approval or disapproval of the party.

What the typical club partying look like? As a general rule, at the beginning clubbers meet each other at the so-called **before party**. It takes place usually in one of the participant’s

house, however, it may be as well some pub in the city. **Before party** enables all participants to gather, drink some alcohol and prepare for going out for the actual event.

Clubbers usually party in small groups. It is more comfortable than going out for example in pairs, because people feel less dependent on each other and, in the same time, if they need company they can stay with the persons they know.

Relations among clubbers are more often than not very superficial. It happens quite often that they meet only on weekends and do not see each other for all week long. These regular Friday or Saturday's encounters are aimed usually at fulfilling hedonistic and social needs without feeling obliged to keep on new acquaintanceship. Certainly, it is worth mentioning once again, the relations in clubs are diverse, depending on the atmosphere, kind of music and dance.

Conclusion

It is argued that club culture constitute a concrete phenomenon that has its genesis and history. Manifestations of club culture can be traced in the process of analysis its specific music, design and values. Moreover, it is argued that club culture have a profound impact on many aspects of life styles of people, who associate themselves with that phenomenon, such as the ways they dress, make acquaintances or spend their leisure time.

Trying to answer the question what motivates a particular group of people to get involved in club culture, its four elements have been analysed: the music, the clubs, the style and the clubbers themselves.

By and large, music is to provide a background for a party and it is dependent on what kind of entertainment people prefer. They may, for example, want to relax themselves, to relieve stress or monotony or they search for strong sensations, occasionally reinforced by drugs. As it has been mentioned before, the kinds of music may be analysed in the context of

functions they fulfil. Thus, at one end of the spectrum one can distinguish, say, the music for solitary people who want/prefer to dance/spend time on their own; such people are mainly focused on the music itself (*techno, drum'n'bass, jungle* etc.). Then, there are various kinds of *house* – music usually recedes into the background, people dance together, make acquaintances and flirt. Besides, club music includes also many other styles, which have not been mentioned here, as for instance, *reggae* (and its derivatives) – according to its dialectics – the listeners constitute sort of “collective society” sharing positive emotions etc. etc.

Clubs, in turn, are to compose the place conducive to particular kinds of entertainment mentioned above. Their interior design and space arrangement is especially adjusted to providing optimal conditions for partying. Additionally, a special emphasis is put on originality and elitist character. These goals are achieved by avant-garde décor and door selection.

Regarding the club-style, it can be observed in club journals, interior décors of the clubs, club fashion etc. It is argued that club style constitutes a peculiar mixture of elements, which seemingly are mutually exclusive. So, on the one hand, there is an accent on individuality, originality, exclusivity, being *trendy* and *cool*, but on the other hand, one can perceive something like a club subculture (with its own rules, norms etc.) and a logo cult – created actually by big concerns that produce clothes, gadgets etc. on a mass scale.

As for clubbers, it seems that they are aimed mainly at partying itself. It appears to be difficult to single out any concrete ideology; occasionally it may be connected with a kind of music. Therefore, weekend parties constitute a sort of regular and customary rituals and opportunities to meet other people or/and, what seems to be the most important, to show off. Oddly enough, some people recognise themselves as clubbers while others, who are involved to the same extent in club-activity, do not, although they also admit that the phenomenon really exists.

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