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Soundtracks

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Rave Culture: A Tale of Two Scenes

Though I tried my best to go to my first rave with relatively little expectations, unfortunately I was unable to remain truly unbiased. After having interviewed a few of my older friends about their experiences at raves in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I went into this experience with the expectation for it to essentially echo the stories I was told of the all-night dance parties that characterized the raves that were described to me. The overall result was that I was left very disappointed- almost yearning for the long lost underground culture over ten years removed. Though I was not present at the time of the late-1990s rave scene, the degree to which they were described to me gave me more of a nostalgic standpoint to analyze current raves that ultimately led me to bias and expectation. While this did impact my overall enjoyment level during this time, this does not go to say that it did not provide me with a good tool for comparison and analysis of how both of these scenes constructed themselves, and subsequently removed themselves, from the different social, cultural and political environments that characterized the time period in which they were born. It is through this comparison that we can see how these two temporally separated scenes not only construct themselves within their respective environments, but also how they shape the experience of their participants.

The first iteration of the rave scene provided a community for DJs and participants alike to go make music, and its subsequent experience, that subverted the

traditional corporate controlled music distribution of record companies. Here, the “hard” infrastructure of the scene (the venues themselves) combined with the “soft” infrastructure (the connection between performer and participant) to form the “symbiotic relationship,” as Stahl notes, from which came the cultural production of music within the scene- that which transgresses both corporate influence and profit driven performer-listener business models (55). The effects of the first rave iteration also impacted the latter on the part of promotion and organization of raves themselves in the early 2000s scene. A friend of mine who was a frequent participant in this rave scene told me stories of promotional tactics, such as DJs or promoters hooking up speakers under bridges to announce the location and time of a rave. Well before the advent of social media, they were able to draw in crowds of hundreds through simple word-of-mouth. The so-called “gate” of corporate control over promotion was not opened- it was demolished. Once again, the interactions between the participants demonstrate the power of the soft infrastructure within this scene in determining how the hard infrastructure would both organize and produce the music the scene was centered upon.

One main characteristic of today’s rave scene that diverged greatly from its predecessor was the overall absence of the symbiotic relationship of the hard and soft infrastructures. Ravers were not part of the experience, they rather were mere spectators- affectively distanced, and subsequently removed, from the show and therefore the entire scene itself. For instance, apart from friends of the DJs performing, many who attended the rave were often found talking amongst their own friend circles, “prowling,” as I call it, for sexual conquest, and crowding around the bar as if it were a watering hole in the middle of the Savanna. Instead of being there to become part of the experience of the

rave itself, the environment created by this scene's soft infrastructure was more reminiscent of that of a nightclub than that of the traditional rave scene. The rave scene today also starkly contrasts the social construction of grassroots, DIY organization of events from rave's first iteration. In fact, I found the very corporatism and capitalist infrastructure that the original rave scene worked around to be the main characteristic of the rave experience today. This is best exemplified by the organization of promotion and venue selection of the rave I attended. Instead of being set up by a series of promoters and DJs relying on telephone chains and word-of-mouth organization as mentioned in regard to the early rave scene, this event was promoted and organized by a profit-driven venue, using modern marketing tools, such as Facebook, to promote and spread the word about the event. Even the process of buying my ticket was very much under the control of corporatism as I was directed to the link of an online ticketing service to obtain admission to the venue. Elements of the profit-driven business model for music were also heavily present within this scene as DJs sold albums and merchandise- strategically placed at the entrance to the venue- in order to generate revenue for themselves. Rather than providing a place for the two elements of the soft infrastructure of this scene (the participants and the DJs) to come together and share an experience, the DJs fostered an environment that was more for their personal financial benefit than anything else.

Another distinguishing characteristic of today's rave scene from that of the late 90s is found in the cultural experience of the participants throughout their formative years. Similarly to the construction of the Anglophone indie music scene operating around the cultural and economic state of Montreal (both of which establish within the participants a need for their place to produce and image of cultural productivity), the rave

scene of the early 2000s used cultural conditions- centered more around that of the time period rather than that of the location- to construct their scene in juxtaposition to the cultural environment in which the participants were raised (Stahl 56). As children of baby boomers- whose accomplishments of the civil rights era and other “liberal social policies” and the subsequent social change they were able to make- ravers ultimately found themselves very detached from any sort of accomplishment that would parallel that of their parents’ generation (Anderson, *Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene* 4). Due to the conformist nostalgia of the 1950s permeating cultural values and politics of the Reagan administration (also referred to as “Reaganism”), the descendants of the cultural movement found themselves immersed in a society in which “materialism, corporatism, alienation, equity challenges, parents groups, and War on Drugs policies” dominated social discourse (Anderson, *Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene* 4). This repressive cultural environment ultimately led to a subset of teens in the late 1980s and early 1990s to respond to this “cultural tension” by establishing a place for a new culture, centered on a core ideology, to oppose the cultural environment in which they grew up. The ideology of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect), the cultural environment of empathy, and the emphasis on community all starkly contrasted the detached, materialistic environment of the 1980s. Furthermore, the emphasis on style in the early rave scene also transgressed the conformist nostalgia of 1980s cultural discourse. Ravers of this era frequently dressed outlandishly, employing a certain bricolage aesthetic in their dress that not only semiotically denoted their place within the subculture of the rave, but also fought against the “suit and tie” style of the era of their formative years. In both these aspects, ravers

used the repressive cultural environment in which they were raised to construct their subculture.

The ravers of today's scene- mostly consisting of my personal generation- had a much different experience growing up than those of the earlier scene. This new generation of ravers grew up in a time period of technological boom- mostly characterized by the dot-com boom of the late 90s and early 2000s. Throughout their formative years, nouveaux ravers were raised in a society in which advertising and elements of corporate profit-driven business models permeated existence. The Internet not only became a place for information sharing, it also became a place for advertising and marketing. As the years went by, heavy amounts of advertising in so many aspects of our everyday lives eventually desensitized us to its power; it became a part of our everyday existence. It was through this profit-centered cultural environment that the ravers of today seem to have a hard time grasping the true notion of underground society as "consumption practices" have turned traditional rave culture (especially in regard to style) into "mass-produced objects" (Hebdige 588). This process of cultural commodification is most evident in the heavy presence of rave apparel in commercial stores. For instance, advertisements for rave-inspired apparel (neon shirts and sunglasses most notably) constantly come across my Facebook page in advertisements and promoted pages. Here, a once coveted style by ravers has now become a commodity- the culture now is something to be bought and sold rather than to be experienced.

The last way in which these two scenes distinguish themselves from one another is in the political environments in which they found themselves and the impact these environments have had as they unfolded over time. After reaching its apex in the late

1990s, rave culture was receiving severe backlash from political bodies that regarded these events as a public health issue due to the reports of rampant drug use. The Ecstasy Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act of 2000 played a pivotal role in adding club drugs associated with rave culture to the Drug Enforcement Agency's schedule of controlled substances (Anderson, "Understanding the Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene" 326). Building upon this was the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act of 2003 that made any sort of club promoter or organizer susceptible to felony charges for organizing raves as they were seen as a "space for the purpose of illegal drug use" (Anderson, "Understanding the Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene" 326). Though the rave scene initially remained strong in stark opposition to these political changes, it began to die down, as raves became more of a risk than a reward for promoters. As a result, the scene was ascribed the label, "deviant," by the bodies of power that oversaw mainstream society (Hebdige 588).

Today's rave scene further removes itself from its predecessor as the commodity form it takes on produces an image of the rave as being a part of mainstream society. Corporate takeover and mainstream venue centered experiences, combined with the cultural appropriation of its original subcultural environment, has made today's rave scene more so a part of mainstream culture than its earlier iteration. Political bodies, especially the police, are not cracking down as hard on raves as they are organized and take place at mainstream venues. In fact, I do not recall a single police officer being spotted at any time during the rave. Furthermore, the presence of drugs seemed to be fairly non-existent as the strict rules of the venue had harsh consequences for those who decided to partake. It is through this example that the effects of political opposition to

raves is best seen in today's scene; they no longer are seen as deviant, but rather as a product of mass-produced culture and therefore, in the eyes of political bodies, do not warrant as much concern.

The comparison of these two scenes, removed from over ten years of social, cultural, and political changes, not only sheds light into the effects of these three elements of the experience of those within a specific musical community, but also demonstrates the power of commodification in creating a false context for participants to find themselves. Ultimately, today's rave scene shares relatively little, besides the genre of music produced, with its predecessor; the image of rave culture is more important than the experience. The emphasis put on image and cultural commodification that characterizes today's scene has ultimately led to a misunderstanding of today's participants in regard to their experience as compared its origins. Therefore, the transformation of scenes over time can not only changes their individual environments, but also changes the experience of those within them- sometimes even detrimentally so.

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