

CRITIQUING CULTURE

from the author

I wrote this piece for my Writing course junior year. For the project, we were to work in groups and conduct separate research projects addressing different aspects of the same topic. Since I was planning to travel to New York City for Spring Break and I knew that I would be going to a couple of clubs with my friends, I decided to look at the issues surrounding clubbing and the distinct differences developing between the different club cultures, primarily between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Reflecting back, I do not necessarily agree with everything that I wrote or some of the conclusions that I drew, but I feel that this topic serves as a point of entry to a larger discussion concerning the boundaries that continue to exist between what can generally be termed gay and straight lifestyles. I would say that for a paper such as mine that attempts to confront contemporary issues, personal experience with the subject is necessary.

It is not enough only to conduct research in a library or regurgitate or reprocess what others have previously written. Rather, experiencing the issue and attempting to view it from a non-biased position is important. While this approach has many inherent difficulties depending on the subject matter, as it is truly impossible to be neutral on an issue since we see and understand things within the social constructs in which we have been acculturated, it is still necessary to try.

from the professor

Ian's "Last Night..." evolved from a group project, in WRT 195, focused on a single topic from which each student then chose a sub-topic to research. The individual researchers had to use a wide variety of sources including library and web site based documents along with on-site visits, artifacts, and interviews when possible and appropriate. Ian's group chose Dance/Night Clubs, and he chose to research the history, evolution, and function of gay dance clubs in New York City. His extensive and exhaustive research led him to the unexpected conclusion that the clubs he researched, unlike many heterosexual clubs, did not offer opportunities for establishing lasting friendships and relationships. Rather, they reinforced and even exploited negative gay stereotypes, further isolating gay culture from mainstream America. - Jane Oberg

Last Night the DJ Saved My Life: Sex, Dance, and the Commercialization of Queer Club Culture

In conducting research for an analysis paper, first hand experiences and personal investigation of primary sources are as equally important and beneficial as can be seen in this insider's look at queer club culture

by Ian Cochran

The dance club is no longer an exclusive venue drawing together people with similar musical interests. Instead, it has become the commercialized superclub, where profit rather than music is the bottom line. As a space traditionally influenced by homosexuals becomes a major business opportunity, this commercialization has led to the inclusion of gay subcultures within mainstream American society. However, this process has served to reinforce social stigma and stereotypes. The advertising and club environment designed to “sell” the experience to the gay customer is founded on the overtly sexual club culture of the 1970s and early 80s. On the dance floor the constructed image of the club combines with the inherent sexual and mind-altering nature of the dance experience to create a space filled with the language of desire. However, the seeming break from the hetero-centric world sold to homosexuals through the club experience does not offer actual escape. The superclubs foster an environment where physical connection between two men is seemingly encouraged while mental and emotional engagement is suppressed.

Drugs, Rock and Roll, Badass, Vegas Hoes, Late Nights, Booty Calls, Shiny Disco Balls

As these lyrics by Subliminal Sessions, whispered in a hissing, syllabic voice, poured out of the speakers at 6:32 am, I realized this was a fitting description of clubland nightlife. The venue that night was Aria, an after-hours superclub located on St. Catherine Street in Montreal, however, the throbbing beat accompanying the words could have been found in any club from Moscow to New York City. Electronica, ambient, garage, hard-house and other forms of dance music are now mainstream. Gone are the days of disco where small groups of devotees clustered in exclusive dives like the Paradise Garage in New York City listening to the resident DJs such as Larry Levan pioneer a new sound. In many clubs, the underground days of clubbing past have been replaced with the homogenized superclubs of the present: gigantic, multi-floored venues attracting thousands to listen to the music-makers spin. Gone too are the days of exclusivity. As club culture has been mainstreamed, entrepreneurs have found the “new sound” not only

the it. factor

When asked what the most difficult part of writing this paper was, Ian explained, “The first sentence, even after I have created my outline and have developed the general form of my argument, it’s the first few words that I always find problematic.”

revolutionary, but also profitable. Promoters and planners such as gay-circuit guru John Blair offer free membership cards and litter the streets with flyers offering discounts when shown at the door. In the world of the superclub, capitalism and profits shape dance culture.

With the popularizing of club culture has come an equal mainstreaming of its components. As Fiona Buckland discusses in her book *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World Making*, “the music of today’s clubs such as garage, hard-house and Hi-NRG imply a historical continuity with gay parties of the 1970s with deep roots in disco” (2002, p. 67). Gay and black influences were a basic part of disco music, explored in Bernard Weinraub’s article “Here’s to Disco, It Never Could Say Goodbye.” The heritage that once put the music at odds with the more “straight-white-male” sensibility of the contemporary rock music of the era (Weinraub, 2002) is today a basic piece of the dance scene for straight and gay audiences alike. Now that club culture has become a commodity in the superclub, bought and sold by promoters and club owners, the methods that likely-heterosexual owners employ to market a queer space to a traditionally marginalized population reinforces social stigmas.

Addictions

The marketing and large-scale commercialization of traditional gay club culture reveals a mantra inherent since its genesis: sex sells. Through my own experience with the club scene, it is apparent that sex sells the venue, the drinks, and even the clientele. Within straight clubs, the sexual energy is more subdued, the emphasis often placed on the dance as a spiritual experience as researched and analyzed by Scott R. Hutson in “The Rave: Spiritual Healing In Modern Western Subcultures” (2000). Conversely, sexual overtones are ever-present in gay dance clubs, a phenomena rooted in the history of the culture. The late 1970s were marked with messages of both hope and hatred for the gay community. Nightclubs where gay men could gather free from persecution were established across the country and the first National March on Washington, D.C. took place on October 14, 1979. However, the decade also saw the birth of the religious right and Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign, an organized opposition to gay rights that spread across the nation (Clendinen, 1999). During the days of disco when the dance floor was one of the few available locations for gay men to meet, the environment led to the mindless throwing together of bodies and casual sex that often defines the era. The over-saturation of sexual energy and desire was not simply a product of over-active hormones, but rather a result of a hetero-centric society that traditionally demonized and persecuted homosexual relationships. In a time when there were few public spaces for homosexuals to congregate, legally or socially, the development of a meaningful relationship was difficult. In turn, the dance club created a setting for the physical outlet of socially unacceptable desires. While almost thirty years have passed since the genesis of the dance scene, the culture of sexual desire continues to permeate gay clubs. Commercialization has further reinforced the role of sex through its ability to sell and turn a profit.

A prime example of the modern superclub is ESTATE, a new name for a venue with a long history. In 1983, the predominately gay nightclub Limelight opened in the 1896 gothic-style Church of the Holy Communion on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 20th Street in New York City (Lee, 2003). The venue has had a tumultuous life marked by drug raids, debt, embezzlement and sexual debauchery. Closed after the downfall of Peter Gatien and the collapse of his nightlife empire, the space was recently purchased by the Flatiron Group. The group was composed of the widely-liked gay-party promoter John Blair, the real-estate tycoon Ben Ashkenzi,



the it. factor

When constructing research papers, often times it is helpful to use sections or subheadings. Ian effectively and creatively organized his paper in this manner. For this piece he chose to use track names as section titles from the album “John Blair Party, Volume 5: D.J. Monty Q”. As you read on you will notice this is a very effective and engaging tool.

and less-than-reputable operator David Marvisi (Owen, 2003). \$1.1 million in legal fees and \$4.5 million in refurbishing costs later, the “pictures on the walls of guys and their erections” (Buckland, 2002, p. 111) were taken down, the stained glass windows were reinforced and a state-of-the-art light and music system installed. As the club’s “Grand Opening Party” invitation states: “New Renovation/New Sound/ New Lights/ New Owners/ New Club.” The space was reopened as ESTATE@Limelight on November 24, 2002 with everything it needed to be categorized as a modern superclub. Everything, except for one thing: customers. Stillborn at birth due to low attendance, the venue is a casualty of oversupply; too many clubs, not enough clubbers. Currently, ESTATE is only open Sunday nights when Sundays@Limelight is held, a lucrative queer event reminiscent of its earlier incarnations.

While the club owners have seen better days, ESTATE@Limelight is still known among city residents and tourists as the best gay party on Sunday night. However, as my own experience has shown me, a night at the club is not cheap: \$25 cover (\$15 if you have a JBlair membership card or a flyer), \$3 plus tip for coat check and \$6 for a Bud Light or a drink from the well; anything better will cost anywhere from \$8-\$10 not including tip. With a night out costing upwards of \$75, what keeps this place packed Sunday after Sunday? The promoter’s ability to sell sex. Beyond image or act, the clubowners are able to commodify desire on and off the dance floor, creating an environment where sexual energy latent in the gay club scene is made tangible. While times have changed, and mainstream culture is more accepting of homosexuality, en-large, hetero-centric society continues to disallow expression of queer love, forcing homosexuals to often hide their emotions, desires, and relationships. The dance floor is still one of the few public places where gay men are able to feel completely comfortable within their sexuality.

While the nightclub continues to be a space shaped by gay culture where men can show affection and meet other men, relationships formed within this sexually charged environment are usually limited because they are only allowable within the context of the club. When the sun rises, the partygoers must return to their alternate, socially-acceptable lives that often do not accommodate homosexual ties. In part, the club becomes a way to escape the real world, to lose oneself in the dance and act upon often denied desires. Because connections are brief, opportunities for contact are sporadic and the nature of the club environment, the relationships formed are usually sexual, acts of often repressed lust that overwhelm the need for emotional connection. While more meaningful relationships are possible of gay men, the continued use of sexual energy by club owners to turn a profit makes the club experience less than what it seems. The male body becomes an object of desire within the dance, a chance to touch and feel the forbidden before the day breaks and the “magic” ends. This environment keeps the customers coming back for more. Keeping this feeling in the club keeps the money pouring in.

Sounds So Good

Almost all superclubs, gay or straight, use flyers to advertise their events. The experienced promoter begins to build the event’s energy, sexual or otherwise, long before the partygoer reaches the club. The composition of pictures and text embody the style of the club, promoting a shared ideal or image tooled to attract the desired audience. As I walked down the streets of New York City and picked up flyers, it was apparent that the methods and techniques used by promoters to attract straight and gay audiences are very different.

Straight dance clubs are partially rooted in the rave culture, as all-night dance parties have blended into the regular nightclub scene (Hutson, 2000, p. 35). Therefore, advertising

the **it.** factor

Figure 1.



for these clubs often reflects the themes and symbols of the rave culture. Flyers from club Alegria and club “arc” illustrate a distinct focus on the development of a sense of the “primitive community,” a theme discussed by Hutson common to the all-night dance scene (2000, p. 41). In the ad for club Alegria (Figure 1), the promoter expresses the concept of the primitive through use of the word “tribal” and the stereotypical iconography: mastodon-like tusks integrated into a chiseled circle, inscribed with pictographs reminiscent of early writing. The advertisement for club “arc” (Figure 2) incorporates the tribal through association. The name of the club does not appear on the front of the flyer. Instead, the event name, “TRIBALISM” is shown, indicating a strong connection between the club, the event, and the term. The flyer integrates a second theme common to the rave culture, the idea of “futuristica” also discussed by Hutson (2000, p. 41). The outline form of an object on the top half of the advertisement is perhaps an artist’s conception of a modern “tribal” device, it bridges the gap between the primitive and the futuristic. The seemingly technical nature of the object brings to mind images of the needle on the DJ’s turntable, or the tattoo artist’s pen, both references to modern forms of tribalism and the culture inherent to the event.

Conspicuously absent from the advertisements for straight clubs is explicit sexual tension and eroticism, integral parts of gay club flyers. Figures 3 and 4 show two examples of flyers I picked up in New York City’s Chelsea neighborhood. Instead of expressing the thematic and symbolic climate of the club, flyers for gay events often advertise the general “type” of gay men that attend. Figure 3 advertises Kurfew, an event for the 18 and up crowd hosted by a different club every Friday night. The images of men in their late-teens and early-twenties advertise the population that usually goes to this party. Depiction of the clientele implicitly informs the consumer about the age range, body type, race, and gender of the ideal attendees. As an under-age club, multiple “ideals” are presented. Advertising the inclusive nature of the party and the presented “ideals” invite all under-age homosexuals to partake. However, most ads appear to cater mostly to white, gay men. The sexual allure of the carefully selected images let the clubber know who you might “meet” and what you might “do” if you attended the event.

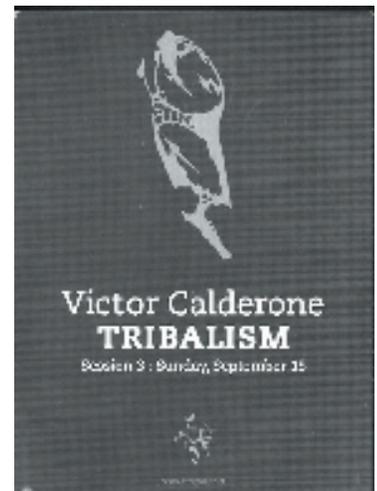
The flyers for the well-known club Roxy also utilize sex to sell the party (Figure 4). Clubbers of legal drinking age have more options, many clubs cater to certain body types and sexual preferences. As a result, flyers for over-21 clubs often use a single image to represent the clientele, advertising for a specific crowd. The man on this flyer is an example of the stereotypical muscle-bound “Chelsea Boy” or “Gym Bunny,” the ideal attendee to the event. Through careful placement of text, the advertisement leaves the question of the model’s dress ambiguous, even though the direction of his gaze is sexually suggestive. The skate tucked under his arm associates skating with an erotic symbol; however its appearance as an accessory rather than a functional item indicates that the night may be less about skating and more about the apparent focus of the model’s attention. The billboard-esque font of the text and the disco globe links the club’s image to the skate/dance clubs of the late 70s and early 80s, tying the modern event to the gay dance culture of the past. The advertisements use sex on multiple levels to simultaneously draw customers as well as advertise the ideal clientele.

Caught Up

John Blair and the Flatiron Group are masters of creating the profitable gay dance scene. My experience at ESTATE@Limelight began with flyers I received from a friend before heading out for that night (Figures 5, 6 and 7). Advertisements for the club almost exclusively consist of

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Figure 2.



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Figure 3.



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Figure 4.

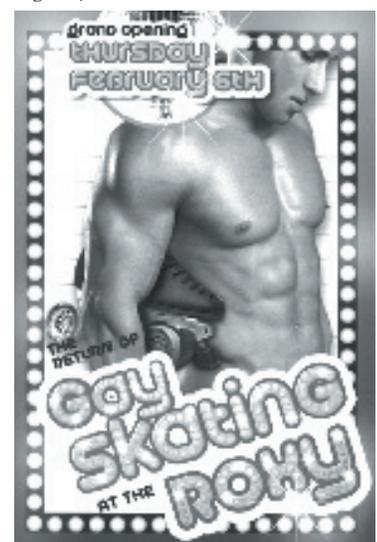


Figure 5.



Figure 6.



a single, well-muscled man in his mid-twenties shown against a monochromatic background. Compositionally, the muscular bodies are the focus, putting the model's physique on display. The men, virtual copies of Adonis, are portrayed similar to Stuart Ewen's description of a model in a home gym equipment advertisement in "Hard Bodies." Side illumination accentuates the definition of their muscles, the surface of their bodies "upon which each muscle, each muscle group, appears segmented and distinct" (2002, p. 236). The model's face is usually partially obscured, showing a strong profile while keeping most of the facial features hidden. As Ewen notes about the gym model, the identity of these "ideal" men is located below the neck.

The image of ESTATE's ideal clientele is more about the body than about the individual. The men are treated as erotic objects, glowing (literally) with an aura of sexual power. Positioned next to eye-drawing foci such as buttocks, abdominal muscles and crotch, the text relies on the sexual desire surrounding the model; contrasting strongly with the background, the writing glows with borrowed energy. Associating the word "Sunday" with the sexual nature of the event itself, the figure of the word is overlapped multiple times in a chaotic pattern, creating the background on which the sexual object is displayed. Beyond its use to lure attendees to the event, the flyer has purpose within the experience. The erotically posed muscular men on the flyers created a preconception of what the club's clientele "will" supposedly look like.

Once I got in line at the corner of Sixth Avenue and 20th Street, I came face to face with John Blair's second method of commodifying desire: the staff. At the entrance, an attractive young man bundled against the cold in a stylish jacket struck up a pleasant conversation while he checked my ID. At the register inside, sensually dressed, heroin-chic young women worked the till collecting \$15 for the privilege of entry. At the coat check, a group of men in their late 20s engaged me in thinly-veiled sexual banter while checking my coat, hoping their efforts would earn them a tip. Finally, I entered the "chapel," the club's smaller dance floor. It was still early and the club was still slow, I headed for the bar (one of four that I counted in the club).

At the bar, I found John Blair's hiring practices continued to hold true, the sexier the employee the better. The owners had hired a range of men to work the bars, each with a different style and a different look. However they all shared one thing: sexual energy. Throughout the night, I found myself returning to the bartender that fit my type, a twenty-something college kid, while I ignored the Fabio-esque barkeep in the chapel. A staff designed to cater to different tastes is a smart business move as I found myself more likely to buy drinks from and tip the bartender I found attractive. The staff also increased the sexual image of the club. The bartenders were often the only people fully illuminated, further demarcating the space as a congregation of the beautiful. After all, if the staff looks like that, the clientele must look amazing, right? Or at least that is what the owners might like you to think.

Direct Connect

ESTATE's main dance floor is located in the nave of the old church with the vaulted ceiling and wooden truss-work disappearing in shadows. The space is sublime, a seemingly appropriate place to revel in the holy communion of dance. Hanging from the ceiling are an elaborate system of lights, frames and speakers that are raised and lowered with the music. A continuous balcony encircles the dance floor on the second level where clubbers can rest and watch the writhing bodies below. The DJ presides over the crowd, the turntables and mixing equipment located in an open-sided box elevated above the bar. Above it all are the VIP boxes and balconies, exclusive spaces where the owners and their guests watch the floor from behind tinted glass.

The environment contains all of the necessary elements to connect the clubber directly to the soundscape of the music. The combination of a throbbing beat, shifting lights and disjointed music work to produce altered states of consciousness, allowing escape from the restrictive normality of everyday life into a seemingly different existence (Hutson, 2000, p. 38-40). As I watched the dancers around me, the flashing lights and constant movement blurred faces and bodies. The ideal image of the clientele implanted in my mind by the club's advertisements, further reinforced by beautiful bartenders and staff, was projected onto the faces and bodies concealed by shadow. Illuminated in flashes by the twirling lights of the dance floor, the mostly shirtless men took on characteristics of my mental preconceptions. Wherever the true form of the dancer was lost in the chaos of the dance, the holes were filled with parts from this image. The next morning as I flipped through pictures taken at the club, the men who I had thought looked like the club's poster boys turned out to be anything but. Even frogs get lucky when you think they look like princes.

At the heart of the dancer's connection to the space was the pulse beat, an inherent part of the predominantly hard-house music played that evening. The heavy bass tones were not only heard, but felt, as if the music had awakened something deep within my body. Resident DJ Victor Calderone was spinning that night, working with the crowd, reading and responding to our mood and actions as much as we reacted to his beat. Through the music, the DJ is able to move the dancers, bringing the mood up and down as the night progresses. The music makers are able to create a sexually charged atmosphere as Buckland describes when DJ "Vasquez played an overtly sexy track...By the time it was over, the floor had lost a few amorous clusters who had perhaps decided to go home to get a private party going" (2002, p. 76). The DJ creates the music that the dancers translate into a second language, a language of movement and desire.

Dancing is often described as a vertical expression of a horizontal desire where participants choreograph themselves as objects and subjects of obsession (Buckland, 2002, p. 112). While Fiona Buckland describes much of the sexual nature of the dance, her focus mainly on lesbian clubs and the role of go-go dancers and strippers neglects to fully explore the dialogue that exists between male couples. The men dancing to/through the music speak to each other in a non-verbal language of desire. According to one of Buckland's interviewees, "If someone dances well, I kinda think that they're going to be hot in bed" (2002, p. 120). One shirtless man dancing nearby seemed to have mastered this form of communication. Similar to the men on the club's flyers, he used a baseball cap to shadow his face from the flashing lights that periodically lit up his torso. As he moved to the music, he flexed and stretched his chiseled abs, showing off what he had gone to great lengths to build. His identity on the dance floor was located below the neck, his body rather than his mouth telling the story that he wanted to share. His movements displayed his well-defined muscles developed after hours of grueling labor on the Nautilus machines similarly mentioned by both Ewen (2003, p. 235) and Buckland (2002, p. 118). Perhaps all his work in sculpting his body was for that moment when he became an object of sexual desire within the swirl of the crowd. In most clubs, how you move is not as important as how it makes you look.

In addition to the language of movement is a second form of non-verbal communication. To initiate physical contact without mental or emotional connection, couples on the dance floor communicate through touch, not speech. Verbal communication is rendered nearly impossible by the volume of the music. They speak to the body rather than the mind, inviting a partner (or multiple partners) to dance through a pat on the chest, a squeeze of an arm, or touch on the

the it. factor

Figure 7.



the it. factor

Often time first hand experiences and research can be an extremely valuable tool for a writer. Ian not only uses them to establish his credibility as an author but also vibrantly brings to life the club scene he is discussing.



the it. factor

Selecting a topic to research can be difficult. Ian's advice is to select something in which you have some personal investment or interest. This allows you to bring passion into the argument, take a position and attempt to defend what you are thinking at that moment.

side. Once contact is initiated, partners press their bodies together, grinding pelvis against pelvis, hands freely exploring the other's form. If they are dancing facing each other, eye contact and verbal communication is often avoided through intense kissing. In this shared experience, the two men feel a deeper connection, and for a moment, bliss. The club experience is designed for this single moment when the impressions formed on the club-goers' mind by flyers, bartenders, alcohol and music create an opportunity for pleasure and escape from the world, enveloping the participants in sensual feeling.

At the moment of physical connection, the gay man has exchanged one reality, the world of restriction and misunderstanding, for another constructed completely of tangible pleasure. According to Buckland, "Dancing in a queer club was both a suspension and escape from the normativity of everyday life and yet brought movement from it to construct or rehearse the possibilities for everyday life" (2002, p. 126). However, the possibilities imaged within gay club culture still adhere to the pressures of society, creating temporary relationships based mainly on physical desire rather than mental or emotional connection. As I partook in this culture celebrating a moment of freedom from the bounds placed by the mainstream, I realized that as with everything else within the club, it was based on impressions of freedom rather than actual liberty.

Wake Up

Today's superclubs sell more than drinks. They are selling an image, they are selling sex, and they are selling the gay club culture short. They erase the possibility for dance to be something more than a narcissistic exercise in sex. As Hutson describes, the environment can offer important spiritual experiences (2000, p. 36) as well as physiological freedom and healing as described by some of Buckland's informants (2002, p. 123). Mainstream American culture has become less opposed to homosexuality, however gays and lesbians are still far from being welcomed with open arms. While the media now portrays images of gay men, such as Will and Jack on the popular TV show *Will & Grace*, these men are often shown without love or lasting relationships. Other media representations, such as Showtime's *Queer as Folk* continue to reinforce the stereotype that gay relationships are purely sexual through the characters' self-absorption and promiscuity. These shows appear to say that gay men are okay, as long as they live self-destructive lifestyles. Perhaps underlying all of this is a fear that homosexuals may commit to one another and threaten the mold of the "traditional" American family.

In an era where the club continues to function as one of the few public spaces available to gay men, the over-infusion of venues with sexual energy makes the dance floor become little more than a glorified cruising spot; perhaps a good time, but nothing to show for it the next day, except maybe a lighter wallet and a stranger in your bed. While lasting relationships can develop within the present culture of the superclubs, for most, it only offers an opportunity to share a physical connection and hide from the world until daybreak.

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Ian Thomas Cochran is a senior Public Policy major with minors in Architecture and Anthropology. Ian came to Syracuse University from Missoula, Montana and is currently studying abroad in Florence, Italy. He also enjoys hiking, reading and film.