ecstatic geographies
clubbing, crowds & playful vitality

- by -

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Abstract

This thesis is about the motivations for, the socio-spatio-temporal and bodily-emotional practices constituting, the cultures, spacings and mediations influencing, and the vitality that may be engendered through, the experiences of ‘clubbing’ in contemporary central London. More specifically, the thesis sets out to answer three broad questions: how is clubbing constituted through the practices, imaginations and emotions of the clubbers themselves; how does music and dancing so powerfully affect our experiencing of spaces, of ourselves and of others; and, how is clubbing, as a form of ‘play’, so important to the wider identities and identifications of the clubbers, and in what ways can it engender vitality through its playful practices?

The clubbing experiences of eighteen clubbers are used in progressing three interrelated literatures - on ‘youth cultures’ and being young, on consumption and consuming, and on identity and identifications - through the development of four broad but connected themes. First I am interested in processes of identification and the construction of notions of ‘cool’. Second, I highlight the constitution, practices and spacings of musical and dancing crowds as central to clubbing. Third, I examine the ‘moments of ecstasy’ that can characterise clubbing - and especially dancing - experiences. Finally, I problematise existing understandings of both ‘play’ and ‘resistance’ in elaborating a notion of ‘playful vitality’, but I then also question often over-romanticised and idealistic visions of the dance floor as constituting ‘melting pot’ communality and facilitating the ‘gathering of the tribes’.

I conclude by focusing upon the immediate post-clubbing experiences of the clubbers. Re-engaging with my original three sets of debates and literatures, I present clubbing as a temporary and alternate world, partly of the clubbers’ own constructions and imaginations, in which the everyday is disrupted, the mundane is forgotten, and the ecstatic becomes possible.
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Now, about that early night I promised myself ...

London and Manchester, July 1998
To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - such are a few of the pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.

(Baudelaire, 1964: 9)
Part One - Beginnings

1 Three Episodes

... everyone gets everything he wants;
I wanted a mission and for my sins they gave me one ...

(opening sequences of the film Apocalypse Now)

He began by being an observer of life, and only later set himself the
task of acquiring the means of expressing it.

(Baudelaire, 1964: 15)

episode one - Bournemouth seafront, a balmy evening, summer 1986

Summer in England - the sound of willow upon leather? Not quite. Instead, the sound
of maple wood and polyurethane wheels upon tarmac, and to us, it's magic. I'm
spending another weekend in Bournemouth, skateboarding with three friends along the
beautifully smooth tarmac promenade that fronts onto the beach. We are in our
element, but we - us four - feel different from our friends, because they are into football
and Atari games consoles and even (!) girls, and we're into videos about skateboarding
on Venice Beach, New York 7-11's at night, West Coast USA surf culture,
mountainbiking in Marin County and skate thrash music from LA. We identify with
different times and spaces than our friends. We enjoy being, or at least feeling,
different. Others certainly treat us differently.

Later, much later, we will meet again - albeit wearing very thick rose-tinted spectacles -
and we'll talk about what made that time such fun and how we relished the special
spaces and times of the other towns we visited, and where we met strangers who
became friends over the space of an afternoon and a conversation about a parking lot
in California. We got plenty of satisfaction and pleasure out of skating, yes, but the
way in which we gained pleasure defies description - not only is it beyond the simplicity
of words, it was more than just the fact that we were skateboarders that, to us at least,
defined us. It was also the ways in which we were skateboarders, the details of our
dislocated lives, the minuscule elements of style we fussed about, and the imported
clothing we wore and, more often, admired in magazines, also imported.

Skateboarding was not a 'silly' hobby or a pastime - those were for the 'others': the
footballers, the Duke of Edinburgh crowd, the boffins, the talented musicians. Of
course, these groups undoubtedly felt the same as we did about them, and I suppose
we were all secretly jealous of each other. Yet to us, skateboarding was the way we
spent our lives, a channel through which we communicated with others and between ourselves, and at least one set of coordinates through which we located ourselves and others in a world outside our foursome and ultimately beyond our control and conception. Why was skating so important to us?

**episode two - Waterloo station, London, twilight, October 1995**

I’m on my way to my favourite bar just over the River, where I will meet a friend. Later, we will go to a large well-known club and dance, but not much, preferring to talk and catch up with each other, watching people around us as we chat and joke together.

I reach the sky-walk that connects the main Waterloo station to the smelly Shell Centre, and ultimately to the South Bank and London beyond. It’s a rare but spectacular London dusk that envelops me and the station in an ice cold, crystal clear atmosphere - I can even see the stars. My ever-present Walkman cocoons me with my emotions within a sound bubble, the hum of London excluded. I feel invisible, powerful, somehow different.

I should quickly say that nothing actually happens to make this episode memorable. In fact, it is barely an ‘episode’ at all. Rather, I experience a strange sensation and a sequence of emotions - a sequence that has since been triggered on hearing parts of the same Beatles track to which I was listening, although by no means every time I listen to it. And a sequence that other completely different musics can provoke with equal resonance but in different contexts. The dirty bridge, Big Issue vendors at both ends, is lit fluorescently at ankle-level, with the passers-by - mostly coming from the West End, Westminster, the Strand, and mostly what I’d call ‘suits’ - lit from below, their faces ghoul-like and haunting. They are in a rush, surging rudely over the walkway into Waterloo in an effort to both catch their trains and not catch an Issue vendor’s eye, for eye contact makes purchase more tricky to evade.

But I’m walking the other way, towards the emptying city and its noise, towards a quite different London to that from which the suits are fleeing. I glance slowly to my left, down the glistening reptilian-form of the Eurostar terminal which snakes out, cutting deep into the Lambeth skyline almost to where I live. Then, as part of the same fluid movement with my head, I quickly glance ahead, to the Shell Centre and the humming city beyond. The music in my ears so perfectly captures my emotions and that experience - that moment and time - that, just for a flickering instant of a moment, it becomes my emotions. The music becomes me.
I can’t explain exactly why or how but, as the opening bars to ‘Here Comes The Sun’ feed directly into my mind, I am suddenly aware of an effervescence, a sense of strength, a feeling that things are actually okay, welling up within me. I feel right, and my surroundings feel cool, despite the many things that should bother me. The music has invigorated me and changed my relationship to this place and the people around me - I walk confidently ahead, against the tide, energised. How can music do this?

**episode three - The Tunnel Club**¹, Saturday Night, August 1996

**7.15pm - Thoughts**

I’m leaving in a minute. My flatmates are settling down for an evening of **Blind Date** and **Match of the Day**, but I’m off to ‘work’. They think I’m mad, their envy having disappeared months ago, watching me self-destruct.

**8pm - Oxford Circus tube station**

It was balmy and still light, and very very busy.² There he was, Seb², wearing velvet trousers and a very bright velvet shirt, as he had promised. I was wearing all black. We shook hands. I was excited, he was excited, but he was tense about the evening, I could really tell. He said I looked good - phew! He mentioned how odd it was to be going out with me, a complete stranger, and I said the feeling was mutual and that kind of let us both relax a bit. We were both strangers to each other. I had good vibes though. We went round the corner into Kingly Street to **Brasserie Breton** and grabbed a few beers, chatting, taking up where we’d left off ten days previously when we’d met in a bar at Euston. The whole thing was nervous to begin with - he’s a great story teller and I suppose nerves and beer combined mean that once you start talking you just carry on.

On our way to the club ... I was beginning to feel comfortable, like I was with a ‘proper’ friend, when Seb turned to me and said (I remember this vividly) “Ben, the difference between this and an ordinary night is that if you don’t like it, it’s tough! You’ll have to rough it out, whereas if I was with a clubber mate, then I’d leave if he wasn’t enjoying it. But tonight is **MY** night!” Back to work ...

¹ In this thesis all clubber names, club names and club nights are pseudonyms.
² The remainder of the night is told retrospectively, from notes made during the night and immediately afterwards. The notes were fleshed out in detail on the morning following the club visit.
³ Brief biographical sketches of all the clubber-interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.
11pm - The Tunnel club, queuing outside
What a feeling. We started queuing at 10.30 and were about fifty back from the front. By the time 11 came we were relatively near the front of a large queue of about 200 clubbers. There was a definite nervousness to the atmosphere. We met Seb’s friends in the queue and they were cool. Suddenly this guy came out from the club, the ‘club host’ I think it was, and shouted something resembling the following:

“Okay kids, as you know, we operate a really strict door policy at The Tunnel. We know the kind of party people that we want - the guys are all Elvis and the girls are all Marilyn. So I don’t want you to get too down if we don’t let you in - we’ve got a lot of experience of knowing what party people are like. If, when you get to the front of the queue we ask you to sing a little Elvis song or something like that, then show us what a party person you really are, okay? Great.”

I was horribly worried that I wouldn’t get in at this stage. Meanwhile, two six-foot transvestites were walking up and down the queue, and occasionally one would use a kid’s chopper bike - they were talking and flirting with the clubbers. To be honest, I think more people were worried about actually getting in than whether the people inside were ‘party people’ - the whole thing seemed designed to create an aura of exclusivity. Well, we got to the front and Seb actually started chatting and joking with the host guy. Needless to say we got in without difficulty after that - my version of In the Ghetto would have to wait.

midnight - in the club
Seb said that he wanted to show me as normal a night as possible, although I knew this would not be possible. So we set off to meet the staff, which was the first thing that he always did when he arrived at clubs to which he went regularly. I felt like Ray Liotta’s girlfriend in Goodfellas - everyone we met it was “I’d like you to meet my friend Ben”, “This is a good friend of mine, Ben” and so on. We went to the loo and there was even a guy in there, specifically stationed next to the sink to put soap on your hands for you and wipe your hands afterwards. There were a selection of dozens of aftershaves and face creams which you could use if you felt the need. How weird. But these introductions were a really excellent thing for Seb to do - everyone seemed to know him, everyone remembered him - and I felt safe and lucky to be out with him. Really lucky.

Inside, the club was slick. Three floors: a basement playing funk, hip hop and kind of easy stuff. Also a cloakroom, loos and a sweet shop down there. The middle floor had
a grand foyer and huge staircase, permanently covered with people sitting, chatting, smoking, looking. There was a big dance floor with a balcony all around (effectively the third floor). The DJ booth was behind a kind of elevated altar-like mixing desk. The balcony had big leather sofas and another bar. The whole club was dark, very dimly lit, though there were plenty of U-V lights. No strobes. Tiny bit of smoke. About 500 people, 90% white, mostly aged between 18 and 26 I guess. The constitution of the clubbing crowd seemed relatively uniform, to the extent that many of the clubbers actually seemed to be wearing a uniform: everyone was very dressed up - nearly all the guys had shirts and trousers on, jeans and trainers were not allowed at all. Most of the women wore very little - short skirts, vests, bikini tops, tans, gurning grins ...

later that night
Seb and his friends - a guy and a couple of girls - had taken their first pill at about 11.30 and by 12.30 a few of them had taken their second. They weren't happy. The theory that reluctantly was beginning to gain credence was that the pills were duds. The placebo effect had lifted them all for a while but they were certainly no beginners and soon knew that nothing was happening. Seb rushed off to get some more pills and came back about 30 seconds later - no problem. By 12.30 the club was full and the music seemed to be getting progressively louder.

The music downstairs was more to my liking. The highlight of my hour or so alone down there - I tried to leave Seb and his friends to 'come up' on their pills alone, so they didn't feel too much like lab rats - was a long version of Massive Attack's Unfinished Sympathy, which sounds sensational on a large sound system. I fleetingly felt very at home. Without music dancing is nothing, it's not possible - in this respect the music is the experience, yet clubbing isn't about listening, it's about doing. Is music then purely bodily? I had another beer.

2am - in the vicinity of the main dance floor
The pulsating music was achingly loud by this stage. Everyone was dancing - on the balcony, on the little stages that projected out on to the dance floor like catwalks (look at me!), in the bar, behind the bar, on the bar. I really enjoyed dancing. I felt myself slipping in and out of submission to the music. No sooner had I forgotten what I was doing, and my dancing had become automatic, than I was suddenly aware of myself again, suddenly conscious of moving my feet, looking at what my arms were doing. I looked at people dancing and I felt I didn't stand out doing this as everyone was looking at everyone else. I don't just mean glancing either - I mean really looking at someone, as though that was completely normal. I could feel myself being scanned. The clubbers seemed to want the music to take them over, to become them in some
way. Okay, they stamped their individuality upon it in their own little way - a neat little step here, an arm movement there, but the clubbers were essentially doing the same thing as each other, and in the same place. Certain tracks (clearly club favourites) were greeted rapturously by the clubbers. No sense of overt embarrassment - every man Tony Manero from *Saturday Night Fever*, every woman Lydia from *Fame*, and then me - the only one there for different reasons? Impossible to tell, and actually, it didn’t matter.

I really enjoyed watching people having a good time. Again and again that look of incredible satisfaction lifted me and when I felt tired I suddenly became aware of what I was doing there, what I was really up to. That made me dance that much harder, made me want to smile, made me smile. Seb interacted with the other people in a much more bodily way than me, not just trading glances as I was. He would catch someone’s eye and then work on them, really try and get some kind of bodily conversation going with them. He called this ‘dance tracking’ and it usually involved a pair of people who would start emulating what the other did, always smiling, never speaking - it was too loud for any of that anyway. Didn’t matter whether they were guys or girls.

*4am - total focus, total chaos*

Wow. There came a point when I was just taken aback by what I was witnessing, what I was actually partly constitutive of, what we were. Some form of extraordinary empathy seemed at work in that crowd, particularly when, at the kind of extended climax of the evening, the music and lighting effects combined so powerfully. This must surely significantly change the ways that people interact. I mean, people are just so close to each other, proximately and emotionally. The clubbers were sharing something precious, something personal, some enriching. The intense social nature of it all struck me.

Yet how can words - simple linear words - evoke this? Again and again I arrive at this point in *Nights Out* and I simply cannot describe it any further. How can I convey the deep thundering bass, felt more than heard? The mass of bobbing bodies, blurred, colourful, dimly-outlined yet unceasingly in motion? The space itself, which fleetingly feels as though it has no edges, no end, yet at the same time only stretches as far as you can see into the lights, the black walls, the heaving dancing masses?

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4 Seb later told me, during our second interview, that he was actually trying to single out the women, and ‘dance-tracked’ with the men in order to appear non-predatory, and non-threatening, given that some of them were obviously the partners of the women he was targeting.
4.30am - home to ... carry on?

Suddenly, it’s over. They were leaving to go and calm down a bit somewhere, drink Absolut and smoke a few spliffs. They had also been increasingly ‘out-of-touch’ as far as I was concerned for a good few hours, and while dancing with them was cool, I knew that they would be more ‘fragile’ when chatting. Seb and friends accosted a cab outside and he tried to persuade me to go with them again but I was out on my feet, and stumbled toward Trafalgar Square which was, as usual, completely heaving. I was certain that there were more people in the Square then than there are at 4pm. My ears were ringing horrendously - I felt like a television that had been left on after closedown.

The night bus was the same as always. Overcrowded, full of mostly young people nattering like idiots and not looking at all healthy. I remember slumping back under the flickering fluorescent lights of the bus, my sodden shirt suddenly clinging to my back - I felt bloody dirty. Dirty, tired and cold. Ears still ringing. Chest pains from smoking.

5am - Vauxhall bridge

At Vauxhall Bridge I reluctantly heaved myself off the bus. It was an eerily silent scene, empty apart from a couple spilling out of the Dungeon club, laughing and messing about, talking smuttily about sex toys. At this time the night’s really over yet there’s an hour or so until Sunday properly starts. I couldn’t believe it was getting light already, though the street lamps were still on. The chocolate-brown Thames snaked silently beneath my feet, the pedimented grandeur of Pimlico behind me, the demented mess that is Vauxhall ahead. In between days in in-between places.

An occasional black cab rumbled past. The planes had just started and London looked wonderful as it awoke. The sky was brilliantly blue, with streaks of yellow just beginning to show themselves behind the MI6 building as I passed it to my left. It was so quiet - I could hear individually each of the four engines on the jet going overhead, which seemed to be flying too slowly to stay aloft. I craned my neck to gawp. That was the only noise - jet planes in the sky and the diesel engines of the taxis. And my weary steps. I thought about Seb and wondered what he was thinking.

* * * *
2 The Night Ahead

This thesis is about clubbing. More specifically, this thesis is concerned with motivations for, the socio-spatio-temporal and bodily-emotional practices constituting, the cultures, spacings and mediations influencing, and the vitality that may be engendered through, the experiences of ‘clubbing’ in contemporary central London. The thesis sets out to answer three distinct but closely related questions: how is clubbing constituted through the practices, imaginations and emotions of the clubbers themselves; how does music and dancing so powerfully affect our experiencing of spaces, of ourselves and of others; and, how is clubbing, as a form of ‘play’, so important to the wider identities and identifications of the clubbers, and in what ways can it engender vitality through its playful practices?

The thesis is split into three main parts. The main body of the thesis comprises a relatively complex schematic move through some of the multifarious times and spacings of clubbing and is presented along the broad lines of a ‘Night Out’, beginning with club entry and finishing at the end of the Night. Before the Night Out starts, however, the remaining sections of these ‘Beginnings’ each perform an important role in contextualising the Night Out to come, as well as providing some insight into the reasoning behind my particular approaches to understanding clubbing.

The remainder of this first part of the thesis - Part One, the ‘Beginnings’ - outlines in brief where, how, and why the Night is going ahead, from where it begins and to where it might take us, and it explains how the Night fell together through both accident and design. First, I present the contextual background for the project in the form of a brief review of the state, scope and scale of clubbing in late-1990s Britain. I then set out in some detail the three major academic starting points for the Night Out: geographies of young people at play, geographies of consuming, and geographies of sociality and performativity. These starting points, when fused with the episodes I have just recounted, lead logically into a final section of the ‘Beginnings’ in which I critically evaluate the reasoning behind the process and presentation of the research. This is achieved through a discussion of the logics and logistics of researching clubbing as they worked out in this thesis.

After these ‘Beginnings’, the Night Out that I mentioned above constitutes the main part (Part Two) of the thesis. Each of the four Chapters of the Night Out comprise a cumulative spotlighting of what I understand to be the key thematic elements that comprise an understanding of clubbing. Each chapter builds upon the last in
introducing a further level of understanding, an added slice of complexity. I turn first, in **Chapter One** of the Night, to issues around ‘belongings’ and notions of identification. Some of the reasoning behind clubbers’ desires to go clubbing are discussed, and I develop this through a brief conceptualisation of ‘coolness’ and ‘style’ and an examination of the importance that negotiating entry to the club itself can play in the establishment of these belongings. In **Chapter Two**, I progress this interest in belongings by looking in detail at the importance of music and dancing in constituting clubbing crowds. I draw out for special attention the clubbers’ fluctuations between experiences of self and of the crowd, and the timings and spacings of their practices. These clubbing crowds of motion and emotion can provide the context for moments of extraordinary euphoria and notions of freedom. Thus, in **Chapter Three**, I address the experiences of what have conventionally been referred to as ‘altered states’ but which I attempt to refine in describing as ‘oceanic’ and ‘ecstatic’ experiences. The latter are explicitly attained partially though the use of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA), and I examine in some detail the use of ecstasy (MDMA) in the clubbing experience. I complete the Night Out by building upon these conceptions of alterity in **Chapter Four**, as I introduce the notion of playful vitality. This is a sensation of inner strength, which, I argue, is constituted through the practices of ‘play’, and especially through the ‘flow’ achievable through dancing. Playful vitality can be conceptualised as an alternative approach to understanding the nature of and relationships between notions of power and resistance.

The third and final part of the thesis are the ‘**Reflections**’ (Part Three). In one respect the Night Out ends abruptly as the clubbers leave the club. Yet there are important post-clubbing processes of reflection and attempts at understanding that many clubbers go through, even if they are alone. In addition to tracing a variety of differing routes for the clubbers through these ‘Reflections’, then, I also reflect upon the Night Out that has just occurred. Re-visiting the three starting points which I shortly set out in these ‘Beginnings’ (below), I draw out a number of key themes which emerge from returning to these starting points through the lens of the Night Out. Clubbing offers a myriad of insights into our conceptualisations of a whole range of social interactions, notions of communality and play, and of being young. Yet, I argue, our understandings clubbing and its practices have only just begun.

* * * *
3 Clubbing Contexts

Clubbing is a hugely significant phenomenon, although perhaps not quite "the most extraordinary of all contemporary social movements", as Ward (1997: 4) suggests. Clubbing is notable primarily because of the sheer scale of its appeal. Yet it is also notable because of its "systematic demonisation" within the media and the introduction of new legislation inhibiting clubbing - the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) for example - and the widely-publicised, although somewhat over-hyped, involvement of illegal practices in particularly the case of drug-use in clubbing (Ward, 1997).

Clubbing is an overwhelmingly urban form of leisure and is now a major cultural industry (Lovatt, 1996; Mintel, 1996; Thornton, 1995; O'Connor & Lovatt, 1995; O'Connor & Wynne, 1994). Few towns or cities are without at least one club, with many such as Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Liverpool, Sheffield and London having well-developed and multi-layered clubbing industries which contribute substantially to the local city economies (Halfacree & Kitchin, 1996; O'Connor & Wynne, 1995).

Indeed, many city authorities have actively pursued programmes of inner city regeneration premised partially upon the economy of the night and the attraction of thousands of clubbers with relatively high disposable incomes into these areas (Lovatt, 1996; O'Connor & Lovatt, 1995; O'Connor & Wynne, 1994).

Clubbing is also an increasingly international leisure pastime, and it is not uncommon for clubbers living and clubbing in the UK to spend their annual holidays clubbing in another usually warmer and often cheaper part of the world. The explosion in clubbing cultures over the last five to ten years has thus been accompanied by - and undoubtedly further fuelled through - the ever-widening horizons of some of the clubbers themselves (Williamson, 1997). This thesis, however, is restricted to spotlighting the clubbing experiences of eighteen clubbers in central London.

5 Andy Lovatt (1996) sets out the links between urban cultural policies and the rise and promotion of a “night-time economy” in many UK cities. See also O’Connor & Wynne (1994) for their case study of Manchester.

6 Williamson (1997) suggests that the “top eight destinations for British clubbers” are: Ibiza (Majorca), Goa (India), Guadeloupe, Cape Town, Tokyo (Japan), Ko Pha-Ngan (Thailand), Singapore and Sydney (Australia). Many of these locations have historically been popular with the ‘alternative’ traveller, but in recent years they have increasingly been appropriated by clubbing holidaymakers. See Melechi (1993) for a brief examination of the sudden explosion of a club culture in Ibiza in the summer of 1987. Alex Garland’s instant-cult novel (1996) The Beach, while not specifically about clubbing cultures, does reflect many of the motivations and sentiments of those involved in travelling thousands of miles to do what they do every weekend in any case.
The many facets of clubbing in London are changing dramatically (Kossoff, 1995), as they always have done (Thornton, 1995). On a typical Saturday Night in 1986, a flick through the pages of the London listings magazine *Time Out* might have revealed a choice of twenty clubs (Collin, 1996). Twelve years later this choice has grown to in excess of fifty clubs and this total excludes ‘student’ and ‘gay’ clubs, each of which now have their own sections within the listings. Also excluded from this total are late-night bars with dance floors, the numbers of which are growing rapidly, unlisted nights of which there are surprisingly many, and clubs much beyond London Transport travel zone 3, beyond which *Time Out* takes little interest. With all these taken into account, there may be anything between 400 and 500 club nights on offer every week in Greater London, with the highest number available at Bank Holidays when the Sunday effectively becomes an additional Saturday - the busiest night of the week.

There are no London-specific studies covering the growth of and recent developments within the clubbing industry. However, despite tending towards generalisations at times, recent marketing intelligence studies by the market research company Mintel provide a valuable and large-scale overview of the “nightclub and discotheque industry” (hereafter the ‘clubbing industry’) in the UK (Mintel, 1994; 1996). In particular, these studies provide detailed figures concerning both the continued explosive growth and also the changing structure of the clubbing industry in the UK. Neatly paralleling and complementing the Mintel studies, a recent Release survey (1997) interviewed 520 clubbers for a study of the relationships between clubbing and the use of drugs.

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8 Mintel (1996) interviewed a “nationally representative sample” of 1,087 adults during late April and early May 1996.
9 It should be stressed that Mintel do not distinguish between nightclubs and discotheques when calculating market size and commenting upon the industry as a whole. They define both nightclubs and discotheques as “establishments which offer music, drinks, food (where there is a legal requirement to do so), dancing and lounging under one roof” (Mintel, 1996: 1). Thus, Mintel's analysis encompasses nightclubs and discotheques of all sizes and natures, from huge chains of franchised clubs run by companies such as Rank Leisure, Scottish & Courage plc and Granada to the tiny independent and single-site clubs which make up the majority of clubbing establishments in the UK. The facts and figures provided by Mintel - some of which I refer to below - are thus concerned with the nightclubbing industry as a whole. My interest is much more with the central-London located *Time Out*-style clubs (see below). That said, the statistics and trends provided by Mintel are indicative of the very large scale of the clubbing industry as a whole and are thus useful in sketching this broad overview of the nature of clubbing.
10 Release conducted face-to-face interviews with clubbers “at eighteen venues throughout London and the South-East between March and November 1996” (1996: 2) using a blend of structured questionnaires and further interviews. Release's respondents were selected on “an anonymous randomised basis with confidentiality guaranteed” (ibid). Both the Release and the Mintel (1996) studies were coincidentally carried out within the same period as my main interview series and clubbing visits were completed (December 1995 - December 1996), although the process of my research both preceded and continued subsequent to this period.
In crudely financial terms, revenue generated by the clubbing industry was forecast to have broken through the £2bn per annum barrier for the first time in 1996, a 6% increase over 1991 revenue levels, although still 14% less in real terms due to the impact of the recession in the early-1990s (Mintel, 1996). A total of 42% of the general population now visit clubs (or discotheques) at least once a year, compared to 34% in 1991, and 43% of 15-24 year-olds visit a club once a month or more often (Mintel, 1996: 5). The trend over recent years has been for more people to visit clubs but less frequently, with the average spend per visit being £11.60 per head, still considerably lower than the 1991 average of £13.77 (Mintel, 1994; 1996). This reduction in average spend is partly explained by a growth in the significance of midweek clubbing - Monday through to Thursday inclusive - which attracts a lower spend per head due to discounted alcohol and admission charges and higher student numbers attending.

Structurally, Mintel suggest that the clubbing industry has been badly affected by the early-1990s recession, with the trend towards weekday admissions and discounted admission prices partly reflecting this. A reduction in the total number of clubs from 4200 in 1994 to 4100 in 1996 not only reflects the impact of the recession but also - given the overall increase in admissions over this period - the general trend toward larger club capacities, and an increasing concentration of clubs within the portfolios of large leisure organisations (Mintel, 1996).

It is not immediately apparent that many clubs are owned and run by large national chains - for example, Rank Leisure and Granada - because few clubs share nationally-known brand names, usually very little is made of the network of which a club might be just one venue, and accordingly marketing is usually carried out on a local basis (Mintel, 1996; Thornton, 1995). However, increasing numbers of club operators are turning to direct mail in order to target clubbers more aggressively (Mintel, 1996).

Release found that most (85%) of those sampled at what they called “dance events” were under 30 years old, while most fell into the 20-24 age range, a figure which supports the Mintel survey results.11 Mintel (1996) suggest that a growing number of 25-34 year-olds are clubbers, although the frequency of clubbing visits and the total number of clubbers falls away dramatically with increasing age, with the mid-20s appearing to be a watershed.

Most (78%) of Release’s 520 clubbers started clubbing during their teenage years, with just 8% starting to go clubbing after the age of 24. As far as motivations were

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11 In a slightly more dated survey of clubbing in Sheffield, Christophorou et al (1996) propose that a majority (70%) of clubbers were aged between 19 and 24.
concerned, while music (45%), socialising (37%), the atmosphere (35%) and dancing (27%) were the top four in the Release survey, these were very closely followed by drug use (22%). Release suggest it is interesting to note that only 6% of clubber respondents suggest “meeting prospective sexual partners” to be important. Men were more likely to say that they enjoyed clubbing for the drug-use while women were more likely than men to suggest “socialising” as important. Socialising also appeared to be more important for the older clubber. While 28% of 15-19 year-olds mentioned socialising, this rose to 45% for those aged over 30 years (Release, 1997). In contrast to Release however, Mintel propose that single consumers were six times more likely to go clubbing than those who were married, with 19% of singles agreeing that clubs were a good place to meet a prospective boyfriend or girlfriend. This divergence between Mintel and Release over the significance of clubbing as a forum for meeting sexual partners can be partially explained by the breadth of the Mintel survey. The Release survey was restricted to what might be called ‘dance clubs’ - as is this thesis. However, the Mintel survey, by its very nature, encompassed all types of nightclub and discotheque establishment, from the ‘dance clubs’ of Release, where drug use appears to result in a what might be labelled ‘a slight muffling of the libido’ (see the Night Out, below, for further details) to the Ritzy discotheques which constitute a very different form of clubbing experience (see Thornton [1995] for further discussion of the Ritzy disco).

As far as generalisations about social class and geographical variation are concerned - and are worth - Mintel (1994; 1996) suggest that frequent visitors to clubs are drawn predominantly from the “middle income C and D socio-economic groups”, and that those living in the northern regions of the UK, especially within the large Northern cities, go clubbing, on average, slightly more often than their Southern counterparts.

As for clubbing genre, ‘gay’ clubbing is marketed to a quite specific fraction of the clubbing population - although many non-gay clubbers enjoy the atmosphere they find at gay clubs - and receives a separate listings space in most listings magazines. After a division along the lines of sexuality, clubs are most often distinguished along the lines of musical types and night of the week. A comprehensive survey of the changing and continual fracturing of the musical genre that constitute clubbing is beyond the scope of this project, particularly given that it would be obsolete almost immediately. However, it should be noted that musical genres continue to fragment, and despite the continuing prevalence of clubs playing techno, house and jungle (or drum’n’bass) none of these are currently particularly in the ascendency. This is a notable development from, say, even five years ago, when most clubs played either house or techno music. As Collin suggests,
... [o]nce there was simply house. Now genres like jungle, techno, ambient and trance have developed so far from their origins that they are barely traceable to their source [...] there is no overall blueprint, no masterplan, just an endlessly shifting set of possibilities, fracturing scenes and fracturing ideologies.

(Collin, 1996b: 112)

Clubs are currently far more likely to offer an eclectic blend of musics within a single club night than just one choice. Some rooms may be set aside to play house or techno music, while others play jazz or drum’n’bass, or perhaps more soothing 'loungecore' (or easy listening). In short, genre-lisations about the musical trends within the cultures of clubbing are impossible to make - the scenery changes too quickly\(^{12}\). What is certain is that only twenty years after Disco’s popularity went into orbit in the wake of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and only ten years after the ‘acid house’ revolution of Summer 1988, clubbing is now big business, extraordinarily popular, and increasingly fragmented in form.

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\(^{12}\) I discuss the role of genre and differing forms of clubbing as they affected my recruitment of clubbers for the research in much more detail below, where I elaborate upon the logics and logistics of my approach to understanding clubbing.
4 Three Starting Points

There are three main points of departure for this thesis in academic terms - three thematic ‘starting points’ which bubble up throughout the thesis, but never quite break the surface explicitly in the Night Out to come. In one sense, these concerns are obvious, for, like clubbing itself, they are what the thesis is ‘about’, they are the thesis. However, for this very reason, and also because they above all provide ways in to the more detailed and broader engagement between theory and experience that I attempt to stage in the thesis, I precede the Night Out with a short discussion of each.

My particular interest in clubbing is related to a set of debates, literatures and sub-disciplines which are concerned with the changing geographies of young people’s leisure and lifestyles and the consuming activities through which these lifestyles are constituted, both materially but crucially also experientially and imaginatively. Thus, the first two starting points are the geographies of young people at play and the wider but related geographies of consuming. I am especially interested in the relationships between processes and practices of consuming and notions of identity and identification formation and amendment. Therefore, a third starting point which spins off these first two are the geographies of sociality and performativity.

starting point one:
geographies of young people and clubbing

Did ye not hear it? - No; ‘twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o’er the stony street;
On with the dance! let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing hours with flying feet.
(Byron [1816] Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, III: xxii)

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13 I do engage with debates spinning off these points throughout the Night. Thus, what is presented in these ‘starting points’ is just that - a set of starting or departure points to which - at least in the form presented here - I do not return explicitly. As I indicated earlier, in Part Three of the thesis - Reflections - I obliquely re-visit these starting points in the light of the Night Out which forms Part Two.
To understand the behavior of someone who is a member of ... a group it is necessary to understand that way of life.

(Becker, 1983: 79)

The man bought her Campari and, fascinated, she watched the ice lumps in her glass leap into brilliance, their veins outlined in dazzling blue, then die. The music went bang-bang-bang-bang; it filled her cranium, as if the whole city was gathering itself up into a concerted heart and thumping in her head, bang-bang-bang-bang ...

'I like', she said.

(Raban, 1974: 239)

Young people[^14], their languages, practices, spaces and cultures, are poorly understood and in certain cases ignored by the social sciences and to a lesser extent the media. This is particularly so as far as young people at play are concerned, for play is frequently overlooked as an irrelevant aspect of people's social worlds, however old they might be. Through this first starting point I briefly address the birth of 'youth' as a category of academic study and interest. I note how the growing popularity of studying 'youth' was closely associated with the rapid expansion of a mainly urban popular culture in the post-1945 period, and I briefly summarise the development of understandings of young people up to the present. Secondly, I turn explicitly to the research literatures on dance cultures and clubbing. I highlight both the recent profusion in work on clubbing but also the generally modest impact of this work in aiding our understandings of the practices and spatialities, or geographies, of clubbing. Third, in the light of this brief survey of clubbing literatures, I highlight a number of key deficiencies in our understandings of young people as clubbers. These deficiencies have evolved in parallel with the growth in popularity of this form of consuming. In particular, I look at the notion of 'resistance', suggesting that it must be revisited and revised in the light of our changing understandings of young people and their contemporary social worlds.

[^14]: Where possible, I use the term 'young people' throughout the thesis in preference to the term 'youth', with the exception of where it is necessary (i.e. in discussions of the 'youth subcultures' literatures). For me, the term 'youth' resonates with a slightly unsettling de-humanising and ascribed quality.
young people and the category of ‘youth’

There have always been young people but there has not always been a time in people’s early lives known as their ‘youth’ - a descriptive term which denotes a period of ‘inbetweeness’ for young people. Part-child, part-adult, but falling neatly into neither group in society, youth as a category in its sociological form emerges in the 1920s, although Aries (1962) traces what he calls this quarantine period in the lives of the young back to the early eighteenth-century (Skelton & Valentine, 1998). The emergence of ‘youth’ as a category of academic interest is largely credited to be the work of the American tradition of ethnographic research and especially the work of the Chicago School on deviancy (see below)(Hebdige, 1983). Before these early sociological studies of the cultures of youth, young people were taken to be literally that - just younger versions of people who were in the process of becoming adults. Once people had ‘come of age’ they were regarded as full adults in society. The period of ‘youth’ was thus one of ‘maturation’, during which a young person would learn how to be young, how to behave as a person, and as an adult with responsibilities (Boethius, 1995).

The Sociology department which was set up at the University of Chicago around the turn of the century based their investigations on qualitative empirical research (Gelder & Thornton, 1997). The micro-sociological interest of the School and an interest in the city more generally spurred members of the department into studying taxi dance halls, waitresses, hobos, juvenile delinquents and thieves. Social interaction was always at the very centre of concerns, though very much social interaction in the context of what were seen as the social problems of the day. The city was thus given special prominence in the changing and complex social structures of society\(^\text{15}\). The present study is not the place for an in-depth history of the rise, stigmatisation and more recent collapse of the category of youth; my interest is more in the direction of the emergent geographies of contemporary young people in respect of their clubbing practices. However, three interrelated aspects of the emergent sociology of youth of which the Chicago School formed an early part persist to the present and resonate through constructions of contemporary clubbing - youth as predominantly urban, as somehow deviant, and as in, or the cause of, trouble. The explosion in opportunities to consume, in consumption choices, and especially in cultural influences from the United States,

\(^{15}\) Robert Park, the Chicago School’s Head, conceptualised the city as a series of distinct areas, each possessing and characterised by a set of traditions, customs and habits into which his students immersed themselves (Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Jackson, 1989; Kurtz, 1984; Park, 1916).
augmented a general post-war optimism and fuelled an unprecedented rise in young people’s interests in style and the practices of distinction (see below) (Hebdige, 1988). Yet, the flipside of being young - youth-as-trouble - was never far below this stylistic surface, even if it was often momentarily obscured in the hype and hyperbole.

These twin notions - of youth as stylish and as somehow deviant - constituted the main concerns of those at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) during the 1970s and early-1980s. Based at the University of Birmingham and established in 1964 the CCCS also played a critical role in the establishment of ‘youth’, young people and teenagers as valid objects of academic study in Britain. Despite significant qualification and subsequent refinements of the theoretical tenets that emerged from the Centre, in many cases by the original Centre members themselves, many of whom have since moved on to new areas of interest, the work carried out by members of the CCCS continues to endure in many aspects of both theoretical and methodological approaches to young people.

For the members of the CCCS in the 1970s ‘youth’ became the central interest, and particularly the styles of youth, which were seen as somehow signifying class and ‘subculture’. Aspects of British Marxist theory - the work of Thompson, Hoggart and Williams - were blended with Continental influences in social theory - Gramsci, Althusser, Barthes - in creating a multi-disciplinary structuralist approach in which class and culture were central strands (Gelder, 1997a). Notions of ‘subcultures’ and the ‘spectacular’, and the relationships between ideology and form - reified in ‘styles’ - were spliced with attempts to locate the subcultures in relationship to the broader cultural categories of the ‘parent culture’ (in the case of the CCCS, inevitably the working class), and the ‘dominant culture’ (mainstream youth more generally). Youth was constructed as a period of transition between the parent culture within the working class, and a mass culture of increasing opportunities in leisure and entertainment. This mass culture was seen as a world of commercially-driven concerns where one’s class roots seemed progressively less important (Gelder, 1997a). By far the most significant methodological approaches to these studies of young people were those premised

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16 See Hebdige (1988) and Chambers (1985; 1986) for explorations of youth styles, processes of stylisation, and the associated new modes of consuming in the post-war period. Chambers and Hebdige (see, in addition to the above, 1979; 1983) are also particularly useful in their detailed sketchings of the rise and cultures of the teenager in the 1950s and 1960s. There is a specific focus in these texts upon the urban crystallisations of young people’s cultures during these decades.

17 Perhaps the epitomy of this transition to an image of trouble-as-fun, fun-as-trouble (Hebdige, 1983: 401) were the clashes between Mods and Rockers in Brighton and Margate in the early-1960s.

18 In addition, the early studies of young people and ‘resistance’ of the CCCS provided the foundations of the fledgling discipline of Cultural Studies in Britain.
upon semiotics and, to a lesser extent, ethnographies (see Clarke et al, 1975; Willis, 1977).

However, as the 1970s merged into the 1980s the confetti of critique was beginning to impact upon both popular and academic understandings of young people, including those produced by the CCCS. In particular, Dick Hebdige’s (1979) book *Subculture: The meaning of style* was the first text about young people and their styles to really exploit the academia / pop critic cross-over. Hebdige’s book received a wide audience, stimulating debate around youth, style and music on an unprecedented scale (Kureishi & Savage, 1995). Questions were posed which had never been asked before, even during the heyday of subcultural theory in the late-1970s. For instance, who was doing what? Where did this ‘style’ come from? Where was it purchased, and who was selling it to whom? More abstractly, what were the social relations which informed the production of the subculture (McRobbie, 1994b)?

By the early 1980s, theorists were suggesting that the way forward for subcultural analysis lay in a revival of interest in the very ordinary nature of most subcultural lives and the practices involved in their constitution. In the introduction to the second edition of an earlier text, Cohen (1980 [1972b]) savages many of the approaches of the early-CCCS, but he picks out the emphasis on spectacularity at the expense of the everyday for extra attention. Cohen proposes that this emphasis obscures occasions where styles might be conservative or conformative. In cases where there did seem to be a conservative impetus to the stylistic elements on display, the notion of *bricolage* was all too often used merely to re-read the apparently conservative meanings as really hiding just the opposite (Cohen, 1980).

Furthermore, uniformity of subcultural adherence was attacked, and particularly the notion that the subcultures somehow evolved spontaneously without any input from the media or from other cultural traditions, although Hebdige exempts himself from this charge (Cohen, 1980; Thornton, 1994). What was beginning to emerge as an obvious disjuncture between the closely homological theses of the CCCS theorists and the much messier and more complex sets of meanings and values of the members of the subcultures themselves was put down to an over-emphasis upon semiotics and certain strands of structuralism (Cohen, 1980).

By the mid- to late-1980s, a number of individuals researching the cultures of young people - both at work or school, and at play - had revised earlier conceptualisations and set off in new directions. Most of all these revisions had been prompted by the continued dramatic and far-reaching developments in the social lives of the young over
the previous 10-15 years. McRobbie (1994b) suggests that the turning point
represented by Punk, and the shockwaves which spread throughout the youth cultural
worlds of consuming thereafter, especially those of fashion and music, meant that
never again could youth cultures be simply seen to occupy a ‘folk devil’ status in
society. Furthermore, a profusion in the total numbers of young people affiliating
themselves with, or being ascribed membership of, youth subcultures has occurred. It
is now increasingly the case that it is difficult to identify any young people who are not
affiliated to some stylistic grouping or other. This has occurred in conjunction - and in
synergy - with a continuing growth in media, film and technological influences upon
young people, the latter particularly in the realms of video and music
production/consumption, and even more recently the IT/internet/multi-media
communications interface. The rapid expansion in print media for the youth market
has also been incredible, even spectacular. “Club cultures” (Redhead, 1997;
Thornton, 1995) or ‘dance cultures’ provide a particularly apposite example of these
social–theoretical dynamics.

from subcultures to clubcultures - understandings of clubbing

The latest and by a long way probably the largest and most influential of recent young
people’s cultures or styles in Britain can be found in club cultures (Thornton, 1995).
British club cultures have their roots in a blend of international musical and cultural
influences which stretch back, at least in easily recognisable form, to 1945 (Wright,
1998); the gay and ‘black’ disco scenes of New York in the mid- to late-1970s were
particularly important (Goldman, 1978; Hughes, 1994; Rietveld, 1998b). These dance
cultures are now highly fractured in constitution and continue to both fragment and
expand extremely rapidly. This growth is both in terms of sheer numbers of
participants but also in terms of the number of genres and sub-genres that are affiliated
to them, and the wide variation in practices of sociality which each of these in turn
demands and continually evolves (Mintel, 1996; Wright, 1998).

Despite their relative invisibility, at least compared to certain previous so-called
‘subcultures’ such as Mods or Punks, club cultures and clubbing - also called ‘raving’,
‘dance culture’ and ‘nightclubbing’ depending upon the age and experiences of the
clubber - are the focus of increasing numbers of research projects and texts.

19 Young people and their styles now have their own dedicated industries with the growth and
consolidation of a huge and still expanding style media. The continued rise in the number of
publications about dance music cultures and clubbing continued with the late-1997 publication
of a specialist clubbing magazine (Ministry) published by the Ministry of Sound club in South
London and with a predicted settled monthly print run of 140,000 (Campaign, 5 December
1997). It should also be noted that few broadsheet newspapers now lack a ‘clubbing
correspondent’.
Commentators on ‘youth’ and young people are constantly reminding us of the central significance of this emerging social phenomenon. Thus we can read that, “dance culture is [...] in opposition to dominant political and cultural forces” (Wright, 1998: 3), that “[...] these changes in youth culture are at the cutting edge of ‘politics and deviance’” (Redhead, 1993: 5), and, “rave seems to overturn many of the expectations and assumptions we might now have about youth subcultures” (McRobbie, 1994b: 168).

However, few of these accounts go beyond either merely stating that clubbing is significant or -and much worse - simply indulging in painfully uninformative accounts of clubbing as, “[...] the dark side of critical theory’s dystopic moon” (Hemment, 1997: 24), as returning the raver “to a pre-Oedipal stage, where libidinous pleasure is not centred in the genitals, but where sexuality is polymorphous and where sensuality engages the entire body” (Rietveld, 1993: 54) or - and most agonisingly naive - where, “[...] in the loving space of the rave, young people are creating a potential blueprint for the whole of society to follow” (Richard & Kruger, 1998: 173). Crucially, as Gibson & Zagora (1997: 2) note with a blunt brevity, “as with many other youth musical subcultures, the voices and concerns of ravers are rarely heard in academic texts”.

Yet a number of important contributions do stand out. In her detailed discussion of the cultures and differentiations within clubbing Sarah Thornton (1994; 1995) builds upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in presenting a discussion of “subcultural capital” and the distinctions through which this capital operates in the cultures of clubbing. Using and extending Bourdieu’s analysis of “Distinction”, Thornton represents club cultures as “taste cultures” (ibid: 3). She draws a distinction between notions of the “mainstream”, and what she calls the world of “hip” (or ‘cool’), suggesting that the mainstream is “the entity against which the majority of clubbers define themselves” (1995: 5; emphasis in original). Thornton then proceeds to uncover hierarchies working within these taste cultures through in-depth ethnographic analysis of the birth of ‘acid house’ music between the years 1988-1992. This is complemented with an historical account of the “authenticities” of records and recorded events since 1945. Thornton’s contribution is a valuable attempt to rectify the treatment of young people and their cultures as being isolated from other ‘outside’ influences (McRobbbie, 1991).

As Thornton proposes:

(contrary to youth discourses [...] subcultures do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious movements to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media are there and effective from the start.
They are integral to the processes by which, in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘we create groups with words’.

(Thornton, 1994: 176; emphasis in original)

However, despite moving on to address the messy and shifting notions of ‘coolness’ through which young people position themselves - to a greater or lesser extent - in consuming the clubbing (or raving) experience, Thornton nevertheless largely neglects the experience of clubbing itself. Impressive as it is in flagging up the complex stylistic differentiations that operate within many clubbing cultures, Thornton’s work provides few glimpses of, for example, the complex interactional demands of the dance floor in also contributing towards the constitution of ‘cool’ and the development of notions of belonging. In particular, Thornton says very little about the imaginative-emotional constitution of clubbing for - and usually by - the clubbers.

The close connection between the use of recreational drugs such as ecstasy (or MDMA) and speed (or amphetamine) and the practices and spaces of clubbing is stressed in the series of texts edited by Nicholas Saunders (1994; 1995; 1997)\(^\text{20}\). Within Saunders’ texts are contained valuable contributions about the links between drug use and clubbing by Mary Anna Wright. Again, however, and in a somewhat similar way and for similar reasons to Thornton, while Wright (1995) touches upon the nature of the experience, she is primarily concerned with the history of and current musical genres constituting the clubbing experience. Although making incisive points regarding the contention that dance cultures may represent “social movements”, Wright fails to engage in any detail with the sociological and technical aspects of the clubbing experience\(^\text{21}\).

These relatively broad discussions of clubbing, raving and the media treatment of these leisure pursuits are useful in an evolving understanding of the many aspects of clubbing. Yet they provide more of a background to, than an insightful conceptualisation of, the practices and spacings constituting clubbing. They neglect the intricate demands and techniques of clubbing, tending rather to focus upon what Maffesoli (1996a) might call an ‘ocular understanding’ of clubbing - an observed yet distanciated knowledge rather than a tactile understanding premised upon ‘being togetherness’. A handful of papers and PhD theses which deal with more practical and

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\(^{20}\) The crucial role of drug use in many, although by no means all, clubbing experiences is discussed in greater detail during Chapter Three of the Night Out.

\(^{21}\) In her discussion of dance cultures as possessing the characteristics of a social movement, Wright (1998) uses the work of Melucci (1985; 1988; 1989; 1992), Diani (1992) and Touraine (1981; 1985) in looking at how the cultural conflicts between those involved and those not involved in dance cultures lead to political conflicts.
technical facets of clubbing are now being completed and in some cases published\textsuperscript{22}. These are starting to become a critical mass in the process of improving our understandings of clubbing. Yet, when one considers that up to 500,000 young people enjoy the clubbing experience in Britain every week - more than all those who enjoy spectator sports, theatre, live music, comedy and cinema combined (Thornton, 1995) - it is incredible that so little work has been completed. For example, to date little work has been published that discusses the production and construction of the “new ethnicities” (Back, 1996) generated through dance cultures. Additional layers of complexity are weaved through understandings of ‘youth’ when acknowledgment of their gendered, ‘racialized’ and ‘classed’ construction is added, yet current studies barely scratch the surface\textsuperscript{23}. Furthermore, certain texts on the changing social and cultural meanings of contemporary ‘youth’ have started to use the languages of club cultures - occasionally quite literally - in labelling (and thus selling) contributions which are actually only partly about those club cultures. Indeed, a recently published so-called “Clubcultures Reader” (Redhead, 1997) contained only seven contributions from sixteen which actually discuss clubbing or raving, and some of these seven only broach the subject tangentially\textsuperscript{24}. To date there has not been a comprehensive attempt to provide an understanding of clubbing as an experience.

\textsuperscript{22} For example, Gibson & Zagora (1997) and the “Rave Research Collective” with which they are associated (a collective of academics and non-academics, clubbers and musicians) provide an understanding of “rave culture” as it exists in Sydney. They are particularly interested in the social and cultural contexts from which the “spaces of rave” are emerging, and the processes and practices through which diffusion and commodification have diversified and challenged the definitions of the Sydney rave scene (Gibson & Zagora, 1997). Details of the Rave Research Collective and the recently launched (Spring 1998) ‘Youth and Clubbing Discussion List’ can be obtained from Chris Gibson by e-mail (cgibson@mail.usyd.edu.au). For further recent contributions towards understandings of clubbing cultures see also: Wright (1995; 1997; 1998) on the notion of dance cultures as a symbolic social movement and the roles played by gender, class and ethnicity within these dance cultures; Wright (1994) and Gilbert (1997) on the implications of the Criminal Justice Act upon the British dance / rave scenes; Jordan (1995) for a Deleuze & Guattari-inspired theoretically-centred discussion of raving; Chapter 6 of Collin (1997) provides an excellent summary of the growth of the ‘techno traveller’ culture from its earliest beginnings in the free Stonehenge festivals of the Fifties and Sixties; also see Gledhill (1994). Gore (1997); O’Connor (1997) and Pini (1997a; 1997b) on the specific experience of women within raving and clubbing cultures; Merchant & MacDonald (1994) on the diversity and democracy of youth subcultures more generally, including dance cultures; Hemmet (1997) on both philosophical and musical understandings of “ekstasis” and on the role of the DJ in dance cultures; Urqufa (1996) for a sideways swipe at the role of DJ’s at dance events; Saldahna (1998) provides an ethnographic approach to understandings of young urban elites in Bangalore (India) and the socio-cultural tensions brought to the fore by their clubbing practices; and, recently published work by Rietveld (1998a; 1998b) on house music cultures in the United States, Britain and Holland.

\textsuperscript{23} To give an example, while the genres constituting the “new Asian dance music” scene have finally started to gain recognition (see Back, 1995; Sharma et al, 1996), the actual practices and spacings of the young people involved in these genres - both in a producing and consuming context - remain largely un-represented. This is a theme noted in Dwyer’s (1998) study of the different ways that young British Muslim women contest and reconstruct their identities on an everyday basis, often with the aid of musical styles such as bhangra, and hip hop (Gilroy, 1993).

\textsuperscript{24} This mis-labelled collection nevertheless contains some excellent contributions: Katie Milestone’s (1997) chapter on “Northern Soul” covers the sites, practices and media relationships of this resurgent clubbing genre, showing evidence of extensive ethnographic research and a detailed historical awareness. However, Milestone provides less insight into the constitutive
shut up and dance: re-thinking resistance

An apposite example of how the paucity of work upon the actual processes and practices of being young can affect our understandings more generally may be found within recent critiques of CCCS studies of ‘youth resistance’. The notion of ‘resistance’ as it was used in the CCCS debates about young people and their cultures was often simplistic and totalising, taking little account of young people’s imaginative and practical construction of their own experiences, and instead privileging only the (macro)political dimensions of so-called ‘resistant’ behaviour. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies envisioned a variety of youth cultures as actively engaging in rituals of resistance (Hall & Jefferson, 1979). These rituals included elements of style, music, and dance, as well as verbal procedures which implied an antagonistic relationship with those in power (Jackson, 1989). This resistant attitude to ‘power’ was seen largely as a response to the apparent powerlessness of the young people, who were starting to take on many of the responsibilities of adult-hood but who apparently had yet to experience many of the privileges. Resistance, then, was understood by the CCCS as the obvious reaction of young people to their social positioning. But were these rituals what the young people actually did, or were they representations of what the young people did as seen through the eyes of social scientists? Questions such as these were left unasked, let alone answered.

Angela McRobbie (1994b; 1994c) makes this point about simplistic notions of resistance in her writings on the cultures of being youthful. Resistance, McRobbie proposes, might be ‘down-sized’ from the mega-political status that it enjoyed during the CCCS years particularly, and instead conceptualised as existing at the “more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices and choices” (McRobbie, 1994b: 162). By doing this it is possible to see how a (sub)cultural identification, or sense of transitory tribal affiliation (Maffesoli, 1988b; 1995), might provide ‘a way of life’ in the most literal and humble meaning of the term (McRobbie, 1994c).

Of course, as McRobbie is quick to add, all youth cultures, inasmuch as they stake out a space, an “investment in society”, are inherently political (McRobbie, 1994b: 156). Yet this does not necessarily mean that all youth cultures are political in a mega-political, ‘anti-authority’ sense, although some do appear to be so. In the British context the most obvious youth-based cultural forms which may indeed have mega-political intentions as at least part of their raison d’être are the travelling cultures documented by Hetherington (1992), Halfacree (1996) and McKay (1996). See also the special issue of New Formations, Spring / Summer, 1997 (vol 31) on “Uncivil Societies”. 

practices of the Northern Soul scene than non-academic biographies (see, for example, McKenna, 1996). In addition, Simon Reynolds (1997) makes some interesting points about the significance of the rave culture and of the practices of rave. 

In the British context the most obvious youth-based cultural forms which may indeed have mega-political intentions as at least part of their raison d’être are the travelling cultures documented by Hetherington (1992), Halfacree (1996) and McKay (1996). See also the special issue of New Formations, Spring / Summer, 1997 (vol 31) on “Uncivil Societies”.

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practices of youth cultures can be as much about expression as about resistance, as much about belonging as excluding, as much about temporarily forgetting who you are as about consolidating an identity, as much as about gaining strength to go on as about showing defiance in the face of subordination, and as much about blurring boundaries between people and cultures as consolidating or affirming those boundaries. The extent of these alternative possibilities has not always been reflected in the literatures and debates. Once again, this lack of texture in understandings of young people partly results from the practices, spacings and timings of the ways in which these young people live their lives - the process of being young - being overlooked.

starting point two: geographies of experiential consuming

As a “central element in the way we all experience the world” (Sack, 1992: 1) consuming undoubtedly represents “one of the focal concerns within the social sciences in the 1990s” (Gregson and Crewe, 1997a: 242). Countless histories and commentaries on both the rise and extent of all manner of consumption activities and consuming practices appear at times to have been themselves submerged beneath the flood of treatises, papers, books, journal articles and arguments through which

26 The Night Out which follows provides an opportunity for an exploration of some of these alternative possibilities, and in Chapter Four - “Clubbing as Playful Vitality” - I turn to these arguments in detail.
27 Where possible, the term ‘consuming’ is used in preference to ‘consumption’. In a similar way to which I have just been stressing the process rather than the state of being young, consuming evokes the process through which all consumption is practiced, while consumption too often suggests merely an act of purchase or a moment of transaction. I deepen this point shortly.
28 See, for example: the neat summary of various approaches and understandings of consumption by Bocock (1993); Clarke’s (1996) chapter questioning the current limits of retail geographies; Craik’s (1994) work on fashion; Fine & Leopold (1993) on “systems of provision” in consumption; Jackson’s (1989) seminal contribution to ‘new cultural’ understandings of consumption and identity; Kowinski (1985) on shopping malls; Lee (1993) on the changing cultural politics of the ‘consumer society’; Lunt & Livingstone (1992) for a more psychological approach to relationships between consumption and identities; McCracken (1988a) for a detailed review of late-1980s understandings of studies in consumption; McRobbie (1994a) for her explicitly youth-orientated ‘take’ on the place of consumption within understandings of popular cultures; Miller (1989) for a more anthropological approach; Mort’s (1989) and Nava’s (1992) more Cultural Studies-style understandings; Sack’s (1992) treatment of the relationships between notions of place and the ways in which we experience - and consume - the world around us; Shields (1992a) on the emergence of “new identifications” through lifestyle and consumption cultures; Tomlinson (1990) on consumption and advertising; and, Wrigley & Lowe (1996) on aspects of retailing and their links to consumption. In addition see also the special issue of Theory, Culture & Society (1983; vol 1 no 3) on “Consumer Culture” which contains, amongst others, valuable contributions by Bauman (1983) on the roots of the consumer society, and by Kellner (1983) on Neo-Marxist theorisations of consumption. Two special issues of Environment and Planning A (1995; vol 27) on “Changing geographies of consumption” splice the “new cultural turn in human geography” with the emergence of a “new retail geography” in attempting to historicise, contextualise and empirically ground geographies of consumption (Jackson, 1995: 1875).
these commentaries have been analysed, dissected, reformed and critiqued. In short, it would seem that the "subject of consumption" (Shields, 1992) has been done to death, revived at the last, and then done to death again.

This project is not the space in which to re-open or review these debates and questions in detail. However, I infer through the contexts of the Night ahead that there are significant practices and contexts of consuming within our everyday lives that have been neglected or overlooked completely in the academic scramble for pastures new. These practices and contexts are critically implicated in processes of identity and identification formation and amendment, of socialisation and sociality and of the negotiation of difference and otherness. Their neglect is due both to what I argue is the rather narrow and limiting definition of what 'counts' as 'consumption' or 'consuming' but also to what represents an inability or reticence on behalf of the researcher of contemporary consuming to access these significant areas and practices.

More specifically, then, I want to stress the centrality of what I am calling 'experiential consuming' - or the consuming of experiences - in contemporary social life. In particular, I want to do this in the context of group interactions, crowd activities and identifications. Before I address this in some detail, however, I first skip quickly through a number of more general weaknesses in the existing debates and literatures.

As part of the clamour to write about aspects of the worlds of consuming, to which I have just alluded, the geographies - or spatialities - of consuming have received increasing attention. Again, the directions and deficiencies of this work have received plenty of exposure and need no introduction. However, a number of key points that have a direct bearing upon the notion of experiential consuming that I outline below bear repeating. First, most studies have lacked any engagement with the historical dimensions of consuming (Jackson, 1995; Glennie & Thrift, 1992; Sack, 1992). The overwhelming focus has rather been on casting our gaze forward to the shape of emerging societies of so-called 'postmodern consumption' (Bauman, 1995a; Featherstone, 1991; 1995). Furthermore, numerous studies have promoted the supposed authority of the contemporary consumer (Abercrombie, Keat & Whitley, 1994; Featherstone, 1991), and the sovereignty - even the freedom - that the consumer now purportedly enjoys in the marketplace. Yet little attention has been paid to the actual processes and practices of this supposed freedom - a freedom, it seems, which is

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29 These commentaries upon commentaries include: Edgell, Hetherington & Warde (1997); Friedman's (1994) edited collection on geographies of consumption and identity; Crewe and Lowe (1995) and Gregson & Crewe (1994; 1997a; 1997b) on alternative understandings of shopping and its role in constituting identities; Danny Miller's (1995) edited review of new studies of consumption across different social science sub-disciplines; and, Sulkunen et al (1997) on new approaches to what they refer to as "contemporary consumer society".
in fact much less about free choice than the inhabitation and negotiation of existing geographical worlds and the impacts of lifestyles and processes of stylisation upon individuals (Bauman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Kellner, 1984; Sack, 1992; Warde, 1994a; 1994b). This much-vaunted supposed freedom of the consumer has segued with another burgeoning area of study - or at least writing - which has been concerned with the tactics of resistance that one may employ at times, supposedly unwittingly, as a consumer. These tactics of resistance have often been cast as ploys one may use to subvert the imposition of power by and through the capitalist system, particularly in the contexts of working and often using the example of the spaces of contemporary cities (de Certeau, 1980; 1984; Kellner, 1984; Scott, 1985; 1990).

The frenzied search for new forms and new practices to study has resulted in important aspects of the geographies of contemporary consuming being overlooked in favour of a handful of by now familiar, but nonetheless still interesting and still evolving sites, practices and moments. These favoured sites include the mall[^30], the department store[^31], the fair/exhibition/carnival[^32], and latterly, the supermarket - kitchen - restaurant nexus[^33]. Within this ever-growing body of work, the overwhelming concentration upon the post-war cultures of mass consumption in America and Britain, and the rise and rise of advertising[^34], processes of commodification and stylisation as part of those cultures, has eclipsed perhaps less obvious and certainly more elusive geographies. These are geographies which are not about commodification in quite the same terms, but which are nevertheless integral to - and, particularly at the level of the consumer, largely constitutive of - wider yet equally significant processes of identity and identification formation.

In short, and following Jackson & Thrift’s (1995) review, I would suggest that the deficiencies of many contemporary approaches to understanding consuming cultures might be summed up in terms of a general but far-reaching reluctance that geographers, as well as others, have had to engage with the practices and social spaces of sociality (see below) and the constitution of consuming experiences by individuals.

[^30]: Contributions towards a social history / sociology / geography of the department store include Abelson (1989); Blomley (1996); and Dowling (1991).
[^31]: Contributions towards a social history / sociology / geography of the department store include Abelson (1989); Blomley (1996); and Dowling (1991).
[^32]: A number of writers have looked at the fairs, centennials, exhibitions and carnivals held in both European and North American cities: de Cauter (1994); Greenhalgh (1988); Jackson (1988); Ley & Olds (1988); and, Pred (1994). The imminent Millennium celebrations have surely triggered a further rash of similar works (see, for example, Pinnegar, forthcoming).
[^34]: Still curiously understudied, the consumption-advertising interface has expanded considerably in recent years (Nava et al, 1997) see, for example, Goldman (1992); Lury & Warde (1997); the recent collection edited by Nava et al (1997); Williams (1993[1962]); and, Williamson (1978).
and groups more broadly. This is a further outcome of the ethnographic inertia of geographers and tallies directly with the general paucity of detailed understandings of young people, their social lives, practices and spaces which I flagged up earlier. We know staggeringly little about the interactional order (Coffman, 1959) through which social life is played out on a micro, everyday, at times mundane and often non-rational level - what Danny Miller (1995) refers to as the ways that 'ordinary people' actually live their lives. This interactional order, and the practices and spaces of sociality through which it is formed, reformed and navigated, is at the core of the consuming geographies that I am highlighting during the forthcoming Night Out.

**consuming geographies - experiential consuming**

Countless forms of consuming do not involve the purchase of objects or tangible services but are instead premised upon an experience during and after which nothing material is 'taken home' - only an experience held subsequently as a memory. Even shopping, the form of consuming seemingly dearest to many theorists - presumably because it is what they do most often themselves - is at least partially constituted through social processes in which the purchase of objects is actually secondary to the thrill of the throng. Shopping in an empty shopping centre, for example, would for most be as strange as not shopping at all. Yet, few attempts have been made to extend this recognition into less obvious or perhaps methodologically more problematic areas or modes of consuming. In particular, few attempts have been made to explicitly look at the active creation of the consuming experience by the consumers themselves, although an increasingly significant exception to this paucity is work by Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe on car boot sales, thrift and charity shops (Crewe & Gregson, 1998; Gregson & Crewe, 1994; 1997a; 1997b; see also Gregson, Crewe & Longstaff, 1997).

This general absence is perplexing. An increasing emphasis on consumer reflexivity and the associated growth in both identity politics and individuation processes that have accompanied what Glennie & Thrift (1996: 234) call this “reflexive turn” have resulted in a heightened role for the practices constituting sociality, the role of identifications and the sites and spaces of social centrality that promote them. Thus, while the processes and practices of many forms of socialised and group consuming -

35 Noteworthy exceptions include work on the consuming television audience by Livingstone (1998); Moores (1993); Morley (1986; 1992; 1995); Morley & Silverstone (1990); and Nightingale, (1996); and Willis’ (1990) contribution towards an understanding of the “lived experience” of young people at play.

holidaying, the leisure centre, shopping, cruise ships, sports spectating, Centerparcs, wine tasting, bingo, gambling, ‘dangerous’ sports, paintballing, snowboarding, working out at the gym, and er ... clubbing (to name just a handful) - are seemingly more popular then ever, and at the least are of heightened prominence in society, this popularity is not reflected in research agenda.

From their relative absence one might assume that these forms and spaces of consuming and their constitutive practices are either less easily accessible to the researcher, and / or unworthy of or unsuitable for study. Colin Campbell (1995) appears to concur with the latter of these assumptions in voicing his concern over the extent and boundaries of current work on consumption. Campbell proposes that the consumption of “spectator sports” and the “arts” are steps too far: “[...] the suspicion must arise that in attempting to encompass so large and diverse a range of topic areas, the sociology of consumption may lose whatever meaningful or distinctive character it is in the process of developing” (1995: 111). Yet, only a few pages further on, Campbell presents his case study of tourism - which he suggests is “modern consumption illustrated” (ibid: 117) - in extending his theory that modern consumption is about the consumption of “novelty”, with the “essential activity of consumption” being the “imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself [...]” (ibid: 118; emphasis added). This would seem a confusing contradiction. For example, conceptually how different are ‘tourist’ experiences of France on the one hand, and World Cup football fandom in France on the other? Or going to an art gallery to view pictures and then going to the gallery shop to purchase a print?

Campbell contends that modern consumption might best be understood as a form of imaginative hedonism (see Campbell, 1987), in which anticipation is the main source of pleasure and actual consumption is likely to be “a literally disillusioning experience” (1995: 118). Yet Campbell’s thesis fails to recognise the value of, practices constituting, and pleasure gained through, experiences as varied as drug use (including the use of alcohol), dancing, eating, and hill-walking. While the power of the imagination in contributing toward the allure of certain forms of consuming cannot be denied - and in fact, as I argue through the Night Out, must be central within our

37 The literature on fairs and exhibitions has already been mentioned as an exception to this general trend. Further exceptions to this general lack of research and writing upon consuming crowds or groups and the social rituals through which they are constituted can be found in the literatures on Christmas and gift-giving/shopping (Fisher & Arnold, 1990; Otnes, Lowry and Kim, 1993; Sheryn & McGrath, 1989); theme park visits (O’Guinn & Belk, 1989); the experience of river rafting (Arnold & Price, 1993); sports spectating (Holt, 1993); and, rock climbing and forms of ‘dangerous’ play (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a). Belk (1995) notes how research on consumer behaviour and the practical constitution of consuming experiences remains focused predominantly upon the American consumer (a contention which the above sample of studies clearly supports), and largely through the annals of the Journal of Consumer Research.
conceptualisations - the actual practices of consuming themselves are surely also implicated as fundamental? On a very basic level, for example, the imaginative construction of consuming is inextricably tied into the practical constitution of consuming through the use of the body.

Ignoring the imaginative and practical constitution of many consuming experiences has meant that these experiences have often remained disembodied, decontextualised and bereft of emotions, imaginations and sensations. One result of the empirically-restricted boundaries around studies of contemporary consuming has thus been a rather limited conceptual understanding of how and why people consume what they do, where, with whom, and how this intersects with other facets of their lives. I am, of course, not attempting to comprehend all the various forms of collective, experientially-based consuming. Rather, I am highlighting one form - the practices and spatialities of clubbing - in a quest to progress and give texture to a number of current understandings of consuming more generally.

At the centre of consuming experiences such as clubbing, in which nothing material is purchased, are the practices of sociality - how the cultures of clubbing are actually constituted. These practices of sociality may be conceptualised through a performative lens. These two points together comprise my third starting point.

starting point three:
geographies of sociality and performativity

I am interested in the relationships between consuming, crowds and co-presencings, and the performance of identities and identifications in those crowds through the practices, spacings and timings of sociality. I first introduce the notion of sociality in some detail and link it with notions of experiential consuming. I then introduce the notion of performativity and suggest how crowd-based consuming experiences might be understood as simultaneously expressive and constructive of self. I finish by proposing that conceptualising consuming practices and spacings through the performative metaphor can provide a number of valuable insights into the relationships between practices, identities and contexts of identification.

sociality

Sociality can be defined as the common sense or human nature that underlies the more formal aspects of social life (Maffesoli, 1995). Sociality is the ‘softer’ side of sociability.
Sometimes seemingly invisible, at times secretive, often elusive, sociality is the dark underbelly of society and society's norms, mores and civilizing processes (Maffesoli, 1993a). Sociality is the underground centrality that constitutes the "world-that goes-without-saying" (Amirou, 1989: 119), where "what goes without saying' makes the community" (Maffesoli, 1993a: xiv; emphasis in original). For these reasons, the practices of sociality have been described as the glutinum mundi of social existence (Maffesoli, 1995; Shields, 1992a). In their discussion of the role of the 'throng' or crowd in the shopping experience, Glennie and Thrift (1996) define sociality as:

[... the basic everyday ways in which people relate to one another and maintain an atmosphere of normality, even in the midst of antagonisms based on gender, race, class or other social fractures: what Shields calls 'the connecting tissues of everyday interaction and co-operation' (Shields, 1992a: 106).](Glennie & Thrift, 1996: 225).

The practices that comprise sociality are comprised of ways of dressing, spoken and unspoken languages, traditions and customs, myths and folklore, and the sharing of styles, knowledges, and passions. The practices of sociality require skills, knowledges and competencies, all of which need to be acquired, regulated and honed, usually through repeated participation within the context of the sociality concerned, blended into a form of self-administered 'education' (Gregson & Crewe, 1997a; 1997b). A sharing of these practices can act to bind disparate groups of individuals together as well as providing the basis for processes of distinction and the construction of boundaries between social groupings. In contrast to previous conceptualisations of sociality (such as those of Goffman and Simmel), more recent work tends to emphasise the weak and fluid nature of this form of social relation (Glennie & Thrift, 1996)^{38}.

The growing number of texts by Michel Maffesoli (1988b; 1993a; 1995; 1997) are especially provocative in this respect^{39}. At times frustratingly off-hand, vague and
nebulous, the *oeuvre* of Michel Maffesoli provides a rich and provocative commentary upon the changing dynamics of social life and especially the “rise of the new consumer society” (Maffesoli, 1997). His project is the development of a sociology oriented towards a recognition of *sociality* as a central aspect of social life (Maffesoli, 1995) and a sociology which highlights the changing structures of everyday social interactions within this social life (Shields, 1991b). As part of this developing sociology, Maffesoli is interested in highlighting what he describes as - alluding to Weber’s (1976) notion of “dis-enchantment” - the “reenchantment of the world [...] by means of the image, myth, and the allegory [...] that characterise contemporary style” (Maffesoli, 1996b: xiv). Through emphasising the notion of identifications over that of identities, and highlighting situations in which one’s social environment can temporarily submerge one’s sense of identity, Maffesoli is concerned with social configurations which go beyond individualism: “the undefined masses, the faceless crowd, and the tribalism within them” (Maffesoli, 1995: 9). Finally, Maffesoli privileges a role for the crowd or what he terms a “being-togetherness” (1995: 81). This being-togetherness is based upon an “empathetic sociality” (1995: 11) and the constant coming and going between these crowds or “neo-tribes” (1988: 145). Maffesoli uses this sociality as the basis for his conception of “puissance” - or “the will to live” (1995: 31) - that can energise individuals and in doing so act to more strongly bind together these neo-tribal formations.

Maffesoli is keen to emphasise the everyday nature of the practices of sociality as well as their fundamental presence within social life on a basic level that is experienced by all, and their flexible, negotiable and overlapping form. For Maffesoli, the practices of sociality should be understood more as the fabric of tactile or proximate forms of communality than of the strong ‘contractual’ form of community that characterises ‘the social’ (Maffesoli, 1995). While the former are premised upon fluid, unsettled and unsettling social crystallisations and dispersals, the latter are based upon clearly defined lines of interaction (Maffesoli, 1993a). Thus, for Maffesoli, sociality is less about rules, and more about sentiments, feelings, emotions and imaginations; less about what has been or what will become than what is - the stress is the ‘right now’ and the ‘right here’ (Maffesoli, 1993a).

Perhaps the major weakness in Maffesoli’s work is that it almost completely lacks empirical contextualisation, although this is also one of the seductive features of his writings which are clearly and unashamedly theoretical⁴. Furthermore, although

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⁴To give an example, in a typically teasing yet ultimately unfulfilling detour in *The Shadow of Dionysus* (1993a) Maffesoli suggests that “night, blackness, obscurity” are all elements that often
provocative and useful in evoking some contemporary forms of temporary community and the sociality through which belongings are established, Maffesoli's "neo-tribes" thesis fails to evoke the demanding practical and stylistic requirements and competencies which many of these communities demand, and through which many of them are constituted. Affiliation and a sense of identification are inferred as being almost a matter of course, as openly 'up-for-grabs'.

As I unpack in more detail through the Night Out, the practices of sociality which constitute clubbing provide an empirical texturing to some of Maffesoli's notions and conceptions. To give just three examples: the relatively weak sense of a fixed order in clubbing in no way precludes a strong sense of dynamic orderings (Hetherington, 1997; Law, 1994); the mooted ease with which individuals supposedly move between, and even within, Maffesoli's "neo-tribes" is challenged - 'access' to clubbing crowds is clearly not 'open to all'; and, the idealism and utopianism which at times taints Maffesoli's notions of "being-together" and "puissance" are problematised and given practical context. That said, what makes the constituent practices of sociality relevant to the evolving notion of experiential consuming that I sketched out above is that they highlight the dynamism - or process - of consuming. Furthermore, and crucially, it appears that these practices of sociality are often themselves what is that is being consumed. The notion of performativity is one approach to understanding the relationships between these practices of sociality and the identities and identifications of the individual consumers.

**performativity**

The practical negotiation of crowd membership or affiliation involves processes of communication which are always dialogical. That is, they are two-way processes

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41 I discuss the notion of 'identifications' in more detail in Chapter One of the Night Out.

42 It should be emphasised at this preliminary stage that the proposed centrality of sociality in consuming practices in no way infrers the end of a role for social relations premised upon gender, social class or ethnicity (Glennie & Thrift, 1996) - facets of social life which have provided more usual foci for study. Rather, it is suggested that sociality takes on varying significance at varying times, in different places and in a variety of forms, although it is always present in any social interaction. Furthermore, sociality varies extensively over both time (Glennie & Thrift, 1996) and across and between spaces (Goffman, 1963; 1971; Hetherington, 1997).
This communication that takes place within a crowd, and can act to bound and bind that crowd, is what Boden & Moltoch (1994) call "body talk", Mauss (1979) labels "body techniques", and Goffman (1963) refers to as "body idiom". This communication can occur "with no words whatever, as in a pregnant silence or the gleam in a romantic eye" (Boden & Moltoch, 1994: 259).

The 'dance of life' (Boden & Moltoch, 1994: 260) through which self is expressed and constructed, and similarly others within the crowd are understood, is relevant to the notion of sociality outlined above for at least three important reasons. Firstly, individuals within a society or culture often attach similar meanings to physical appearance and bodily actions such as gestures and facial expressions. These are used as a common means of understanding embodied information (Crossley, 1995; Goffman, 1963). Secondly, the body generates these meanings even when an individual is not consciously articulating them. Constant attention is required for the successful management of the meanings projected by the body and even this is not always sufficient. For example, few people can control their sense of embarrassment, no matter how hard they try - it just happens (Goffman, 1959; Shilling, 1993). Thirdly, sociality comprises a learned set of practices and techniques. The consuming crowd can function "as a kind of 'classroom', as a means of reflexivity" (Glennie & Thrift, 1996: 227) through which individuals learn not just about commodities and their uses and meanings but also about styles of self-presentation, bodily techniques of expression, and associated notions of competency or even expertise. The consuming crowd becomes a potentially important context for the construction, transformation and expression of the "imaginary orders that constitute people's self-projects" (Glennie & Thrift, 1996: 235). In these ways sociality can be further understood as comprising performed and thus learned practices through which identity can be constructed and notions of belongings may be established. It is useful to briefly develop this notion of performativity through a brief review of some of the associated work of Judith Butler (1990a; 1990b; 1993) and Erving Goffman (1959; 1963; 1967; 1968; 1969; 1971).

In her notion of gender as a performatative act, Judith Butler (1990a) is inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's (1972) maxim that 'one is not born [as], but rather becomes a

43 For now I discuss these relationships between the individual and the crowd at a relatively conceptual level. These conceptualisations re-surface in Chapter Two of the Night Out where I discuss the nature of and important role for musical and dancing crowds within the clubbing experience.

44 Boden & Moltoch elucidate upon this notion by adding that, "[...] the statuses of the individuals, their past history together, prior statements in the talk, the intonation of voices, and the physical body attitude - all are simultaneously 'read' to constitute the very different, even opposite, senses of the same set of words" (1994: 259).
woman'. Butler criticises the commonly held idea that femininity and masculinity are merely the cultural expressions of the material maleness or femaleness of the body, instead proposing that the notion of gender might be better understood as performative (Aalten, 1997; Butler, 1990a). For Butler, gender is constituted through the on-going and repeated stylisation of the body rather than through any notion of biological facticity or cultural understanding. Thus, she proposes that bodily gestures, movements, and enactments effect the illusion of what she refers to as "an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1990b: 270).

An important strand of Butler's work is her emphasis upon the connectedness of the body and the subjectivity of the individual. Butler develops this point in detail:

 [...] acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments [...] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

(Butler, 1990a: 136; emphasis in original)

For Butler, then, the gendered body has no "ontological status" (ibid: 136) outside the performative actions which that body practices, where that performance is rooted within and routed through the bodily surface of the interior and organizing core: "gender becomes a performative and regulatory practice" (Pinnegar, 1995: 51), and one "that requires constant repetition" (Cream, 1995: 38). Through developing the example of 'drag', Butler goes on to claim that it is clearly possible for appearances to be an illusion, that the supposed distinction between inner and outer may be "mocked", "subverted" or "parodied", that the notion of a "true gender" identity can be displaced, and thus that notions of identification are always performative (Butler, 1990a: 136-141).

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45 This point spins out of much larger, more enduring and more detailed debates over intersubjectivity, and specifically out of critiques of Cartesian assumptions that mind and body are in some way independent of each other. Crossley (1995) provides a detailed yet succinct discussion of this debate, discussing the notion of subjectivity through an fusion of the concepts of "body techniques" (Mauss, 1979) and "intercorporeality" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), with a radical re-reading of Goffman's "Relations in Public" (1971).

Erving Coffman's much larger and earlier oeuvre can be used in contextualising Butler's at times abstract yet conceptually fascinating notions. Coffman is concerned first and foremost with the study of the face-to-face interactions which occur during situations of co-presence: "the ultimate behavioral [sic] materials are glances, gestures, positionings and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not" (Coffman, 1967: 1; see also Coffman, 1969). Coffman develops this interest through further concerns with the ground rules and associated orderings of behaviour through which social spaces are constituted (Coffman, 1968; 1971), with the "entry qualifications" that distinguish public from private spaces, and with the "multiple social realities" through which the same physical space may be experienced (Coffman, 1963).

Perhaps the most well-known element of Coffman's work is his interest in developing an understanding of social life through the "dramaturgical metaphor". That is, Coffman uses the notion of theatrical performance as a perspective upon social life more broadly (Coffman, 1959). It is through the development of this dramaturgical metaphor that Coffman is also most clearly concerned with notions of spatialisation. This interest in spatialisation manifests itself most obviously in Coffman's notions of "backstage", "frontstage", "settings" and "the outside" (Coffman, 1959), but also in more complicated notions of "open" and "closed" regions and "containment" (Coffman, 1963), and "use space", "personal space" and "possessional territories" (Coffman, 1971).

One of the major criticisms of Coffman's approach is that he tends to neglect aspects of social identity such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality, except in much broader terms, for example when he develops his notion of Stigma (1968)(Kendon, 1988). Coffman instead concentrates on developing understandings of the timings and spacings of bodies within social encounters (Giddens, 1988; Lemert & Branaman, 1997). Two criticisms of Butler's notion of performativity are that she discusses nothing except gender as an aspect of social identity and that her analysis is abstract and more specifically a-spatial (Mahtani, 1998). Thus, through fusing Coffman's recognition of the role for territorialisations and regionalisations with Butler's notion of social identity and self being performed concurrently, we arrive at a more textured and practically useable conceptual lens through which to approach notions such as belongings, and the practices of sociality which sustain them. Most significantly, through alloying together these two approaches to performativity we can improve our understandings of how the consuming experience of the crowd can be simultaneously expressive (Goffmanian) and constructive (Butlerian) of self. Thus, by conceptually 'folding together' the practices and spacings which constitute processes of identity-formation
and identification-formation it is possible to open out new understandings of the relationships between being 'in the crowd' and being conscious of one's self. This fluctuation between experiencing social situations through notions of self and through being part of, and submerged within, the crowd is a further theme that runs throughout the Night Out.

**performing consuming**

The work of Goffman and Butler demonstrates that approaching social life as a performance in this way is, of course, not new. Yet conceiving of consumption as a process of consuming in which the consumers are actively performing their involvement across time and spaces, and through which aspects of both their identities and identifications are concurrently constructed, transformed and expressed, does provide a number of further advantages.

First, the consumers are not merely positioned as passive spectators. Rather they are understood as embodied actors, engaging with the consuming world as both spectators and audience simultaneously, and in many ways indistinguishably (Crang & Malbon, 1996; Sack, 1992). Second, this conception acknowledges the significance of consuming in terms of self-investment and the efforts, techniques and competencies constantly required for the maintenance and amendment of self-identity, as well as in the establishment and reinforcement of group identifications. Third, the crucial contextual stagings - what I refer to during the Night Out as 'spacings' - of consuming and the relationships between these stagings are brought to the fore. Thus, notions of backstage and frontstage, of display and concealment, of collusion and group work, of props and scenery (environment), and of the design and 'inhabitation' of sets and spaces, are prominent. Furthermore, notions of audience and performer, of the 'in' cast and 'outcast' - notions of coolness and distinction - of inside and outside (or spatial belongings), and finally of timing and routine, are highlighted. Fourth, approaching the processes and experiences of consuming through notions of performativity also foregrounds a sense of the structural power of *scriptings* which intersects with notions of the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984)47. Consuming is, of course, not completely fluid and 'up-for-grabs', but is cut through by the surveillance practices of *directing* - or production and staging - as well as the tactical nature of the multiple interpretations, or *ad-libbings*, of these scripts. Fifth, approaching consuming and its constitutive practices

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47 Conceived of in this way, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the 'habitus' might be utilised in developing understandings of, for example, how notions of 'coolness' impact upon the practical embodied techniques one employs in social situations in attempting to communicate or re-state that coolness. The practices of consuming are - to varying extents - pre-scripted, if only in some cases by prior experiences. I develop these points in Chapters One and Two of the Night Out.
of sociality through the lens of performativity allows us to challenge the neat and oft-cited dichotomy between power and resistance - de Certeau’s (1984) strategies and tactics and Maffesoli’s (1995) power and puissance spring to mind - through a recognition of the significance of notions of strength and vitality in everyday life, and their role as potentially desirable outcomes from a ‘re-reading’ of the script (Crang & Malbon, 1996). These notions of strength and vitality, which Maffesoli approaches in his conception of puissance yet never quite hits directly, are curiously absent from the literatures on resistance. Instead, these literatures, as I indicated briefly in the discussion of the geographies of youth, seem intent on meta-politicising virtually every human action.

the starting points ... and clubbing?

A first starting point, then, are specific weaknesses in existing geographies of young people’s leisure and pleasure, and the nature and spacings of young people’s practices especially. In particular, I am interested in progressing what I argue are simplistic notions of ‘youth resistance’.

A second starting point are existing geographies of consumption, many of which appear narrow and somewhat de-humanised in their understandings. Excessive concentration on certain sites and forms results in other practices and spacings of consuming being ignored. Thus, I am interested in developing notions of experiential consuming in which the imaginative construction and practical constitution of these experiences by the consumers themselves are based upon and within notions of group togetherness and of the crowd.

A third starting point gives added texture to these first two points. It is concerned with the important yet presently largely unrecognised role for the practices and spacings of sociality in the constitution of these consuming experiences, and in the nature and orientation of notions of resistance. Through approaching the relationships between this sociality and the identities and identifications of the consumers concerned at least partially through a performative lens - a lens which prioritises the concurrent development of identity and of identifications within the crowd - I suggest that we can give vital contextual detail to our understandings of these social formations.

The four thematically-ordered Chapters which together form the Night Out - belongings, musical and dancing crowds, moments of ecstasy and euphoria, and the notion of play as a form of resistance or vitality - provide a progressively more deeply
textured understanding of clubbing. It is through this Night Out that I attempt to develop these starting points.

* * * *

5 Researching Clubbing - Logics and Logistics

To hell with scholasticism, its solemnity and injunctions. The 'style' of everyday life has a rambling side to it which is worthy of our attention; these are elements that cannot be synthesized, and which call for a contradictory description.

(Maffesoli, 1996a: 129)

There is doubtless no text more perilous than that text in which the public writer must provide commentaries to the messages she [sic] has had confided in her.

(Bourdieu, 1996: 33)

What is utterly strange to us at the moment - because, whenever we attempt to engage in rational discussion of its nature, we mystify ourselves by routinely adopting a decontextualised, theoretical stance - is our ordinary world of everyday social life.

(Shotter, 1993: 34)

not raving but drowning ...

It has often been the case that studies of young people and their cultures have prioritised methodologies which foreground semiotic readings of the supposed meanings of actions and styles. The work of the CCCS, for example, was at least initially based on the identification of clearly defined groups of young people - a process undertaken with little regard "to the question of the relation between the meaning of youth cultures for participants and that for sociologists" (Dorn & South, 1982: 16; cited in Muggleton, 1997: 201)

It has become apparent, for example, that semiotic analysis of, say, clothing is not a very productive way of understanding the wearer's motivations and intentions (Campbell, 1994: 1996). As Kaiser et al (1991: 176) explain, "[...] (i)nividuals obtaining ideas about what to wear may neither be aware of, nor necessarily care about, the ideology to which styles have originally referred. Hence PLO headscarves become trendy on the streets of New York City, skulls and crossbones become insignia on children's clothing, and Rastafarian dreadlocks are preempted by runaway fashion models and rock (not necessarily reggae) musicians".

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subcultures were produced by subcultural theories, not the other way around” (Redhead, 1990: 25). Some have even started to pose the question of whether we, the authors of the subcultural theories of which Redhead talks, can continue to theorise young people as ‘belonging’ to subcultures at all (see Muggleton, 1995; 1997). Put bluntly, a critical question for the researcher becomes: exactly how is it possible to access these worlds within worlds, these practices and spaces that do not particularly want to be seen nor noticed, let alone studied by what many young people perceive as notebook-wielding squares? If we accept that an approach which privileges a semiotic reading of a culture provides a flawed account of that culture, especially when used as the sole research method, what routes are then are open to us in its place?

In the accounts of Hebdige (1979 & 1988) on Punk and Mods, of Chambers (1985 & 1986) who looks at the urban-based activities of post-war young people more generally, and of Back (1996) who concentrates on a small group of young South Londoners, we can catch glimpses of young people in the process of being young people, of actually doing whatever they do. These are relatively rare yet invaluable contributions. In terms of clubbing, in particular, the most incisive and evocative writing on the worlds of young people can often be found in fiction and other non-academic writing⁴⁹. However, even ‘style magazines’ at the very cutting edge of youth culture have questioned the efficacy of these representations. As a writer in The Face magazine recently pondered, it might be that club cultures really do express themselves best through themselves, “via the media of clubs and music” (Neate, 1996: 194)⁵⁰. A former Editor of The Face, Matthew Collin (1996: 168), suggests that the huge majority of fictional texts on clubbing and particularly on taking ecstasy (MDMA) at clubs have been largely rejected by clubbers as “mundane and ridiculous” - the experience is “something that’s almost beyond words”. It is partly in response to this lack of understandings of the lived, performed and emotional nature of clubbing, and partly as a response to the challenges presented by any attempt to re-present such a dynamic and fleeting social and cultural formation, that this thesis approaches clubbing broadly ethnographically.

⁴⁹ For writing (both fiction and non-fiction) about dancing and clubbing, see Benson’s (1997) edited collection of magazine articles and Champion’s (1997; 1998) edited collections of short stories. Harrison (1998) provides ‘raw’ interview material and writing about clubbing experiences. Jayne Miller (1995) provides a relatively superficial ‘vox-pop’ dissection of 1990s young people and their attitudes, while Fleming’s (1995) much more substantial ‘vox-pop’ concentrates particularly upon the stories of ‘house’ music DJ’s and producers. Collin (1997; second edition published in 1998) is, to date, the most comprehensive history of the rise of dance (and particularly ecstasy [MDMA]) cultures. Albert Goldman’s (1978) account of Disco has, for me, stood the test of time and remains the seminal text on clubbing. See also: Geraghty (1996), Holleran (1979), Maclnnes (1959), McInerney (1984), Savage (1992), and Welsh (1993; 1995; 1996).

⁵⁰ Neate continues, “... if you want to grasp the experience of a house club coked to the eyeballs, wouldn’t you rather DIY [do it yourself] than read about it in bed?” (ibid: 194).
It should now be clear that the understandings of clubbing that are presented through this thesis are not just about meanings but are also about actions, emotions and imaginations. Thus, each stage of the methodological approach is designed to privilege “being in touch” (Maffesoli, 1996a) and notions of tactility over those of observation and a distanced approach. I now make four sets of points about the practice and theory of researching clubbing which spin off this central theme of ‘being in touch’. First, I open out the conception of ‘practical geographies’ or “non-representational theory” (Thrift, 1996a; 1996b) as a useful foundation for approaching the study, understanding and representation of the clubbing experience. Second, I turn to the actual processes of, rationales underlying, and practical issues concerning the number, nature and recruitment of the eighteen clubber-interviewees who assisted me with the main part of the research. Third, I move on to other and subsequent elements of data construction - inscription, transcription, description and the details of my actual involvement with these clubbers in the clubbing experience in the form of what I call ‘observant participation’. Fourth, completing the research process, I review the practices of evocation and representation that have been utilised in the writing of the thesis and explain how I have (f)used understandings of the clubbers with those of more formalised academic knowledges in staging a synergistic dialogue between different forms of understandings.

(i) practical geographies

Throughout the Night Out that follows these Beginnings, I am implicitly arguing for a non-scientistic view and understanding of clubbing. Our interpretations of an experience differ according to our standpoint. It perhaps goes without saying that there is a divergence between “our view of the social world in which we naively live and the social world which is the object of scientific observation” (Schutz, 1964a: 66). The social scientist often approaches and acts within social life with a sense of “detached equanimity, like a physicist contemplating an experiment”, yet at the same time the ‘scientific’ activity we undertake is only one of our many human faces or personae (Schutz, 1964a: 69). However, in our role as social scientists, the specific attitude which we adopt is usually based upon a rational interpretation of society and of rational action. This contrasts with the non-rational - though not necessarily irrational - way in which people act in and interpret the social world more generally (Maffesoli, 1996a; Schutz, 1964a). What Alfred Schutz implies here, yet stops short of stating explicitly, is that as far as an understanding of social experience as lived is concerned, a conventional social scientific approach based upon a rationalisation of social experience is insufficient. To understand - or, to phrase it perhaps more modestly, to
comprehend - everyday life in a way that at least begins to recognise its rich textures and conflicting nature, the researcher must, first of all, engage empathically with the objects of his or her enquiry. This empathy - this ‘being in touch’ - is the essential quality of an ethnographic approach.

While ethnographies do not infer that we can only research areas of social life of which we are already a part, they do raise vital questions about who may be best equipped for the process of fieldwork and how they might approach that fieldwork (Bourdieu, 1996; Fowler, 1996; McCracken, 1988b; Song & Parker, 1995). Through, as far as is possible given the constraints of time and access, becoming part of the social world we are researching, we can at least begin to reduce the tendency to research “by looking” rather than “by being in touch” (Maffesoli, 1996a). For, as Shotter (1993: 19-20) argues, it is only through contact that we can ‘know’ the everyday knowledges we possess and make use of in our daily lives. A subtle shift from a concern with only theories to a concern with practices and theories is therefore implied. Our understandings should be constituted through both “looking at” - a hermeneutic relationship - and through “being in touch” - an embodied, tactile relationship - with what we are interpreting (Shotter, 1993).

Furthermore, ethnographies entail a certain pluralism at the level of analysis which is to an extent a positive feature because, after all, contradiction is “part of normal human inconsistency” (Cook & Crang, 1995: 85). However, not only should we embrace contradictory accounts in our work - that is, treat as legitimate accounts and stories that do not chime neatly with each other nor with our own theorisations - but we must also look closely at, without being vainly self-reflexive about, our own roles within these research processes. When attempting to access the fusional realm of the crowd where ‘being-togetherness’ and an empathic understanding of the situation are primary structuring features, the researcher should not be afraid of losing (or loosening) their individuality, of walking that delicate tightrope between forgetting and knowing what and where they are, and why. Active and enthusiastic participation within the social worlds of those being studied is essential (Rosaldo, 1989).

It should now be clear that this thesis is not a quest for empirical generalisations about clubbing nor quantitative evaluations of clubbing’s impact or scale. Rather, I am concerned with deepening existing as well as generating new understandings of how

51 It is notable how notions of ‘empathy’ have shifted from the mysticism that surrounded some human geographer’s uses of phenomenology (and its associated and nebulous-sounding ‘essences’) to the much more practical framing of ‘being in touch’ as an embodied practical research activity to which Thrift’s (1996a) concept of “non-representational theory” alludes.  
52 Song & Parker (1995: 253), for example, argue that “more attention needs to be paid to how researchers themselves may be actively constructed and perceived by the interviewees”.

the practices, spacings, timings and imaginative-emotional facets of clubbing constitute it as a meaningful activity to those that enjoy it. Nigel Thrift’s (1996a; 1996b) conception of “non-representational theory” is especially useful as a point of departure for these understandings of clubbing. According to Thrift, approaching the study of social life through such a “non-representative” lens can provide the following major benefits: first, its main concern is with the banal, the mundane and the apparently frivolous practices that comprise everyday life; second, it privileges the processes of subjectification rather than the subject as object, with embodiment, the affective nature of the body, and the dialogical quality of interaction foregrounded; third, the interpretative nature of non-representational theorisations highlights the spatial and temporal organisation of the social - always in process, based upon the contexts in which different encounters may evolve; and fourth, non-representational theory is concerned with “technologies of being” - that is, it recognises that spatialisations of techniques and competencies are striated with a multiplicity of places, planes and other practices and thus the geography of encounters or interactions becomes pivotal to any understanding of everyday life (Thrift, 1996a; 1996b).

Thrift’s evocation of non-representational theories has impacted upon my approach to the Night Out in a number of ways. First, I have consciously attempted to avoid the scientistic baggage of ‘key informants’, ‘gatekeepers’, ‘schedules’ and ‘coding’. I have instead attempted to approach clubbing through the employment of what Smith (1988: 22) describes as “experiential research” - a “purposive entry into a stream of social encounters” through which the researcher tries to get to grips with the “practical knowledges” required to participate in “local life”. For example, although I obviously had pre-existing notions of what I hoped to cover during the interviews, formalised interview schedules were discarded after the pilot interviews in favour of a looser and more open conversational style. Furthermore, each clubber was their own ‘gatekeeper’, each volunteering directly to me. All my clubbers were ‘key informants’ - I privileged none above another, although not surprisingly some articulated their experiences more clearly than others. Each interview was ‘coded’ in and through itself, without the often narrow and constraining grid of more formally constituted processes of coding (see below).

Second, throughout both the interviews and the observant participation (again, see below) I was especially interested in the unfolding processes and socio-spatial orderings through which clubbing was being constituted by the clubbers themselves. The practices and spacings of dancing within the clubbing crowd are, for example, pivotal in the synchronously evolving identities and identifications of the individual clubbers.
concerned. This dialogue between crowd and individual was of particular interest to me in developing my understandings of clubbing.

Lastly, I have been wary of attempting to demonstrate, post-Night Out, how my research might or should have been conducted by falling back upon and merely reproducing ‘classic’ methodological texts about ‘how you should do fieldwork’. Rather, I have attempted to illustrate how and why the specific problems and challenges that presented themselves throughout the research were tackled in the ways that they were. I have been honest about what I have learned, with the intention that this openness about the process of research may assist others who might build upon this study in the future.

In short, I am concerned with the wider significance of clubbing and its constitutive practices and spacings within the social lives of the clubbers concerned, and to some extent this search for significance is conducted through a theoretical vocabulary. Thus, I am interested here in the processes, practices and spacings of clubbing rather more than the broader culture(s) of clubbing that Interested Thornton (1995), for example. I am more interested in drawing out intersections between apparently bounded cultural groups and spaces than about delineating and categorising per se.

(ii) clubber-interviewees

Clubbing is often subdivided into strands such as ‘mainstream’, ‘gay’, ‘student’, ‘S&M’, ‘indie’, ‘suburban’, house, techno, jungle, to name only a handful which themselves might be further subclassified. From the outset, it was obvious that I could not cover all strands or forms of clubbing. This was for the same reasons that I could not cover all club nights or all clubbers. The strands of clubbing with which the thesis is concerned are therefore the result of both luck and design.

First, I chose to access what I perceived as the largest general group of clubbers: predominantly ‘straight’, dance-music-oriented and based within central London. I also selected clubbing experiences which, given the constraints of the thesis and of time especially, I believed I would have the least problems in accessing and in gaining real understandings relatively quickly. I wanted and needed to be able to empathise with the clubbers who were helping me; I wanted to ‘be in touch’ with them as far as I could.

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53 This point is forcefully made by van Velsen (1967) in an important discussion of situational case-study analysis in which he argues that the object of the analysis should be the social practices that constitute the events analysed as opposed to the ‘culture’ or ‘society’ of which the events might be considered ‘samples’.
be. Primarily, I was keen to attain as near as possible to an 'equal relationship' between myself as interviewer and the clubbers as interviewees. I did not want to be seen as more of an 'outsider' than was partly inevitable. Thus, I presented myself intentionally as a clubber - 'like them' - who also happened to be doing a project on clubbing. Therefore (and after Brenner [1985] and Lofland [1971]), I attempted to empathise, offering my own experiences, despite often feeling them to be bland and limited by comparison, in exchange for theirs. This trading of stories was an essential element of the research process and I believe this empathy and the construction of my credentials in the interviewee's eyes would not have been as easily attainable in, say, suburban clubbing, student clubbing, or gay clubbing cultures (see Cook & Crang [1995] for more detailed debate about this issue). As Winchester (1996: 122) points out "it is generally assumed that an unequal power relationship exists with interviewers more powerful than their 'subjects'", although she mentions a number of exceptions - for example, interviews involving big business, large corporations and the judiciary. To elaborate briefly with one example, the study of the hugely significant gay clubbing scene in London would have entailed what I felt to be voyeuristic practices. With no intention or ability to participate fully, the value of observant participation would have been lessened and the contribution of empathy on both mine and the clubbers' behalves would have been severely restricted. Accessing many of the clubs and clubbers concerned would also have been highly problematic.

Secondly, I specifically selected clubbers who lived in or very near London and who went clubbing regularly in central London. This was partly for reasons of ease of access, both for the clubbers and for myself - the night bus service from Guildford, for example, is not very comprehensive. However, related to this first point, I also wanted the clubbers to take me to club nights to which they regularly went clubbing, and at which they would be more likely to have established routines, at least some of which I hoped might survive the ordeal of me being there for the night.

At the pilot interview stage, of which only one extract is reproduced during the Night Out, I relied on friends of friends for my seven interviewees. However, for the main stage of intensive ethnography I was concerned to recruit clubbers whom I did not know at all. I did not want them to make any assumptions about me and what I knew or wanted to 'discover' in the same way that I did not want to be able to make any assumptions - for example, in terms of preferences and practices - about them. I wrote

54 For further discussion of the practices and pitfalls of interviewing those 'with power' see also: Keith (1992), McDowell (1992), and McDowell & Court (1994), Schoenberger (1991; 1992), and Smart (1984).

55 For further discussion on this voyeuristic element of fieldwork see: Humphreys (1970), especially Chapter 2 - "Methods: The Sociologist as Voyeur" (pp 16-44).
letters requesting assistance to all the major clubbing, ‘style’ and music magazines in Britain, of which only two printed them - *The Face* and *i-D*. I made a similar request for help on two internet discussion groups. In total I received over forty offers of help from places as diverse as Russia, Brazil and Dartford.

Eighteen clubbers were recruited over a period of six months. Quite by chance, ten were men and eight were women, they were aged between twenty-one and twenty-eight years old, were all in employment with the exception of one whom was still at university, and (with that one exception) were all graduates. In terms of ethnicity, all but one of the clubbers were ‘white’. Sun, whose parents moved to England from India when he was a child, described himself as neither English nor Indian: “I’m not English in the normal sense of the word English, I’m not Indian ... by any means, ummmm ...”.

I had initially planned and hoped to recruit a more socially-varied mixture of clubbers than I eventually did. This was because, for example, I had hoped to problematise and critically examine claims made elsewhere for communality and the muffling of social differences on the dance floor (see O’Connor, 1997; Richard & Kruger, 1998). It should be noted, however, that ethnicity, employment status, sexuality and age were almost always not ‘discovered’ until the first meeting itself. I felt it was wrong to go through a check-list of my requirements with clubbers before we had even met, given that they had made the effort to contact me and volunteer their time. Thus, to some extent I could not be, and was certainly wary of appearing, overly picky as far as accepting offers of help was concerned. For example, the twenty-two clubbers who responded to my requests but did not take part in the research were either resident too...
far outside London, and would have made meetings and clubbing visits prohibitively expensive and inconvenient, did not reply to my initial follow-up e-mail or letter, or backed down when they discovered the nature of my interest in more detail. Of those who offered their help I recruited nearly all whom it was practically appropriate to do so. I was aware from the start that I was much less likely to recruit a sixteen-year-old clubber without access to a computer and who did not buy the magazines in which my requests were published, than I was to recruit a clubber whose job provided them with free internet access and/or who bought the magazines in which my letters appeared. I felt that by intentionally going out to recruit specific ‘types’ of clubber - ‘black’ or ‘Asian’ for example, which I could have done through ‘black’ music magazines and music discussion lists on the internet - would have significantly affected the role that those clubbers might have played within the thesis. In any case, the clubbers who were interviewed should not be understood as ‘without ethnicity’. Their overwhelming ‘whiteness’ meant that in one sense what I have developed is understandings of what are, at least approached through this lens, ‘white’ clubbing practices and spacings. It should be added that the clubbers who did volunteer provided an extraordinarily and somewhat unexpectedly diverse range of experiences, of preferences, of musical tastes, ages, employment types and personalities. It quickly became evident that this variety in clubbing experiences would provide an opportunity for unpacking and contextualising a number of key debates and notions that spin off the Night Out: existing debates about communality (Maffesoli, 1995), sexualisation and sexual liberation (Pini, 1997a; 1997b), and the experiencing and negotiation of differences on the dance floor (Turner, 1969; 1974), to give only three examples. I periodically engage with these and other related debates throughout the Night Out.

Even in the short period of contact that I had with each of the clubbers I came to understand each of them as an individual with a wide and hugely varied range of experiences and memories and a deeply complex personality. I did not at any stage understand them simply as “a white clubber aged twenty-four”, for example. The ‘grids of identity’ so frequently imposed upon interviewees in projects such as this, often

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60 In his brilliant examination of the representation of “whiteness” by white people, Richard Dyer (1997: 10) continually stresses how it is important that white people “learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity”; “whiteness”, he argues, “needs to be made strange”. For Dyer, it is only through recognising that white people ‘have race too’ that we may begin to dislodge whiteness from its centrality and start to challenge its overwhelming power (Dyer, 1997). I am not claiming to be contributing towards Dyer’s project through this thesis; rather, I am making two points. Firstly, the fetishism around ‘other races’ as subjects for study - the notion that one must get ‘out there’ into ‘other’ cultures and their spaces, with all the associated and very dubious connotations of ‘danger’ and ‘discovery’ - is a product of this overwhelming whiteness. Secondly, the seventeen ‘white’ clubbers in this study do have ethnicity: “we need to recognise white as a colour too” (Dyer, 1997: 11). That said, this issue remains peripheral to the current project which, as I indicate above, is primarily concerned with the identificatory understandings of the clubbers involved rather than with their ascribed qualities as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘Asian’ or ‘other’.
realised in practice in terms of a ‘quota’ of this ‘type’ and a ‘quota’ of that ‘type’ at the recruitment stage, were thus not issues in this thesis. I was less interested in identity characteristics as ascribed by the researcher than I was in the processes of identification through which the clubbers themselves understood their clubbing crowds to be constituted. I thus understood the clubbers first and foremost as clubbers, with aspects of their social identities and biographies emerging - to a greater or lesser extent - only at subsequent stages of the research process.

(iii) inscription / transcription / description

The staging of a dialogical fusion between the stories and understandings of clubbing of the clubbers on the one hand, and the more explicitly academic understandings of clubbing present in the formal literatures on the other, necessitated a particular approach to the data construction. This approach was based predominantly upon interviews with the clubbers and supplemented with clubbing visits both with and without these clubbers. This was further complemented with a continually evolving and unfolding process of readings from academic literatures that appeared to deal directly with aspects of the practices of clubbing with which I was coming into contact through the clubber interviews. It is these two forms of understanding - clubber and academic - that I am interested in fusing and at times counter-poising through this thesis.

Each clubber was interviewed twice, except in the case of Sun, who was interviewed a third time, with the initial interview coming prior to our clubbing visit(s), and both Carol and Lucy did not respond to my attempts to contact them subsequent to our first interview. All interviews were fully transcribed, and included pauses, laughter, repetition and the preliminaries and post-interview chit-chat that topped and tailed the ‘main’ interview. The process of transcription was completed by me, with an average interview of ninety minutes taking approximately nine hours to transcribe: 350,000 words and approximately ten weeks in total. Each interview was transcribed as soon as was practically possible afterwards, both in preparation for the clubbing visits and the second interview, but also so that the workload never became too daunting. Interviews carried out in bars often required longer to transcribe, given the variable background noise and music. I was extremely aware of the semi-legal / illegal nature of certain practices of which many of the clubbers talked openly in the interviews, and prior to these interviews I gave my assurance to the clubbers that no one else would hear the interview tapes, even for transcription purposes, or see the transcripts except actually in the thesis. I felt strongly about this, even during semi-hallucinogenic periods.
of temporary arm-paralysis brought about by nine-hour stints at the transcription machine.

Because I transcribed all interviews myself, focus groups and group interviews were discarded as possibilities at an early stage due to the logistical problems of transcription. For example, the first interview with Kim and Valerie, to which they came together (see below) took almost twice as long to transcribe as a ninety minute interview with an individual clubber. Furthermore, and more significant theoretically, on more than one occasion a clubber that I was interviewing / chatting with individually confided that they were revealing aspects of their emotions and feelings about clubbing that they had not told even their closest clubbing friends, and that they felt they could tell me precisely because I was not a close friend. One clubber joked that he treated me like his hairdresser because he could tell me “anything”. Thus, although I have no doubt that exciting discussions would have resulted from group interview sessions, especially given the group nature of much of the clubbing experience, I also feel that group interview sessions would have resulted in a more restrained set of clubber stories.

Clubbers were interviewed on their own with the exception of Valerie and Kim, and Carol and Lucy. In these cases both first interviews took place with each pair of women together while the second interviews with Valerie and Kim were conducted separately\(^{61}\). The first interview was designed to achieve three main goals: first, and above all, it was important to put the clubber at ease while at the same time explaining clearly and fully in what ways I was hoping for help; second, I used the first interview to begin to sketch in details of the clubbers’ wider lives, as well as their clubbing preferences, motivations and histories (see below); and third, the first interview was an opportunity for me to decide how to approach the Night(s) Out that I would be spending with the clubber - what shall I wear? what kind of club will it be? will they be taking drugs?\(^{62}\). This preparation was crucial to the success of the Nights Out\(^{63}\).

\(^{61}\) This was partly by accident but also partly by design on the women’s behalves. They were meeting a ‘strange’ man in a city centre bar who professed to be interested in their clubbing experiences, and that they had met only over the internet! It was thus reassuring to find that Valerie and Kim were happy for the second interviews to be individual in nature but equally disturbing to find that Carol and Lucy did not respond to my attempts to contact them after our first interview.

\(^{62}\) One of the oft-cited ‘manuals’ about the practice of ethnography offers little practical help in terms of these types of questions, suggesting only that, “there can be no clear prescription for dress other than to commend a high degree of awareness of self-presentation. A mistake over such a matter can jeopardize the entire enterprise” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992: 83-84). Not a great help, but this extract does illustrate the need for a continual awareness from the researcher of the often subtle contextual and situational demands of ethnographic work.

\(^{63}\) During one Night Out I turned up to meet the clubber and was told I was wearing all the ‘wrong clothes’ - all black: my standard neutral clubbing garb. Apart from my own embarrassment and the subsequent humiliation of being hastily taken by the clubber to be body-
Both first and second interviews were conducted in a conversational style, enabling the clubber-interviewees to talk more on their own terms (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). After an initial introduction in which I explained in brief what I was doing in the thesis, the stage I had reached, and what I hoped they might help me with, I usually started with the simple ‘opener’, “So, how did you start clubbing?”. In most cases little further prompting was needed, although I tried to cover aspects of choice of club and musical genre (the ‘where’), with whom they went clubbing (the ‘who’), what they particularly enjoyed about clubbing (the ‘why’) and whether they ever took drugs, how they danced, what they wore and so on (the ‘how’). I was concerned that the clubbers steered the direction of the interview as much as possible, although I was fully aware that it was me that was essentially setting the agenda, not least because I had arranged the meeting in the first place, but also because I was choosing when and how to respond to - and interject within - their stories. The conversational interview style worked well partly because many clubbers are used to sharing their stories with others anyway - telling stories about one’s previous Nights Out is a big part of the clubbing experience.

Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, except in the case of the two interviews with Seb, where each interview lasted two hours. Most interviews lasted a full ninety minutes. Interviews were conducted in a pub or bar of - as far as was practical - the clubber’s own choice. The decision not to interview the clubbers in the clubs was taken because of the impracticality of the physical space for interviewing, and only after a pilot interview carried out in a club resulted in nothing more than forty-five minutes of techno music to transcribe. This point is acknowledged by the authors of a much larger study of 520 people who nevertheless carried out their questionnaire within the clubs (Release, 1997). Release claim that the difficulties of “loud music, dark lighting and an array of distractions [...] proved less substantial than at first envisaged with an apparently minimal impact upon the data” (ibid: 2). I would suggest, however, that a ninety minute interview is qualitatively different from a three minute ‘yes/no’ questionnaire.

One pair of interviews, with Luke who was based in Amsterdam, were carried out through the use of e-mail. Luke had originally suggested he would come to London ‘soon’ so that we could go clubbing. When this do not prove possible we decided to continue with the second interview despite not having been out together as we had by then established what one might call a ‘sense of identification’ in the process of the first e-mail interview, and we were keen to continue our discussions. Of course, I was painted with fluorescent markers (this was a ‘Goa Trance’ night), I felt that I had lost any respect that this particular clubber might have had for me.
unable to pick up on points made by Luke immediately, as I would have been able to in a face-to-face interview, and the second interview was based upon his experiences alone as opposed to those shared with me. I felt, however, that this form of e-mail interview still provided some excellent insights into the nature and practices of Luke’s clubbing experiences.

**Observant participation** was employed throughout the gathering of information for the thesis. Thus, it was not restricted to the clubbing situation itself but included both pre- and post-club situations, as well as the interviews. Neither was it restricted to the clubbers whom I interviewed, but also included clubbers who were completely outside the formal research process. This observant participation was designed as a means of “developing intersubjective understandings between researcher and researched” (Cook & Crang, 1995: 21) and was especially important given the ineffable nature of much of the clubbing experience (Evans, 1988; Smith, 1988). The massive sensory stimulation of clubbing - as a result of the music, the lighting and darkness, the crowd and the possible use of drugs, combined with the movement of the clubbers - results in an experience which is extremely difficult to articulate verbally. Added to this in this particular case was the unfamiliarity of recounting to a stranger the innermost feelings one experiences whilst clubbing. The observant participation and the club visits more generally, both with and without the clubbers I was interviewing, were specifically targeted at accessing and elaborating upon facets of clubbing that for one reason or another might have escaped a purely verbal exchange. This is best exemplified in the interviews themselves, where clubbers had difficulty talking about their experiences of dancing in both the first and the second interviews but where in the second interview this difficulty was offset slightly by the experience of the dance floor that we had by then both shared.

Detailed and systematic research diaries were maintained throughout. Initial attempts to take extensive notes within club settings were abandoned due to their impractical nature. First, club loos are not known for their quiet, clean or safe qualities; second, I would often return home completely soaked with sweat and condensation, transforming notepaper to wet papier mâché; and, third, I also risked being viewed as

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64 Based on - although in subtle distinction to - ‘participant observation’, an observant participation approach privileges the ‘doing’ over the ‘observing’, thus attempting to switch the emphasis from the optical understandings of conventional (rationalizing) intellectual enquiry (ethnography) to the more tactile (empathic) understandings of an ethnography of the everyday - ‘look but don’t touch’ becomes instead ‘touch and look’.


66 Once clubbers found out that I was a shockingly uncoordinated dancer any sense of embarrassment on their part seemed to disappear.
Part One - Beginnings

an undercover police officer. On arriving home after club visits I would thus write frenetically for as long as I could stay awake before collapsing into sleep. The writing consisted of immediate thoughts, key recollections and important questions. These notes were deepened and expanded during the morning (or in many cases, the afternoon) immediately afterwards. Although heavily dependent upon what was certainly a less-than-perfect memory (Evans, 1988) - certainly not always crystal-clear after a long Night Out - this method provided what I believe was the only practical option for the taking of ‘field-notes’.

The second interview provided a forum for what was usually a much more relaxed meeting than the first interview, given that we had spent at least one evening together in the interim period; indeed, this increasing informality is perhaps the major benefit of this type of serial interview (Cook & Crang, 1995; McCracken, 1988b). The main content of the second interview consisted of comments, discussion and questions about the club visits we had made together, and the nature of the Night Out as an experience. In the latter half of these second interviews, discussion occasionally diversified in scope to cover wider aspects of the clubbers’ lives: their relationships to work or study, their relationships with friends and loved ones, their hopes and fears for the future, and their impressions of a social life beyond and after clubbing. Without doubt, further interviews would have added interesting nuances to the increasingly complex stories that the clubbers were recounting, and more specifically would have allowed me to construct a more detailed picture of the broader lives of the clubbers outside clubbing. However, these further interviews would have necessitated a reduction in the overall number of clubbers involved in the study or a weakening of the insights provided about clubbing itself. The variety and depth of the stories about clubbing provided by the eighteen clubbers justified my reluctance to opt for this reduction.

Because I was keen to retain control over the relationships drawn out from the mass of interview and observant participation materials, and I was also concerned to retain as much of the feel of conversation and ‘story-telling’ as possible in the extracts that I use in the Night Out, computer analyses of the interview transcripts through programmes such as The Ethnograph, Nudist, or Atlas-ti was rejected, after pilot study trials. Transcribed interviews were instead rigorously and repeatedly read, annotated and analysed in conjunction with at least two full ‘re-listenings’ of the interview tapes themselves (see McCracken, 1988b; Strauss, 1987). I was especially interested in the way that the clubbers’ understandings of their experiences were recounted largely in the form of stories about certain nights and memories, some of which had become ‘classics’. I regard one of the advantages of conversational interviewing to be that the
clubbers are, to a certain extent, speaking for themselves (Rosaldo, 1989; Winchester, 1996). The emotional resonance of these nights as ‘special experiences’ was, in many cases, palpable, and something that I regard as important and that I wanted to bring through in my re-presentation (McCracken, 1988b; Portelli, 1981). In his discussion of the different ways he might have described the cultures of the Ilongot hunters in the Philippines, Renato Rosaldo (1989) notes how the stories the hunters tell about their experiences act to almost then structure these experiences. Rosaldo proposes that people continually tell themselves and others stories about themselves, who they are, what they aspire to be, or, indeed, have been, and how they intend to attain their goals.

Huntsmen in fact seek out experiences that can be told as stories. In other words, stories often shape, rather than simply reflect, human conduct.

(Rosaldo, 1989: 129)

Following Rosaldo’s point, I wanted to retain a feeling of the clubbers’ story-telling in the re-presentation of the Night Out that follows. I believe that these stories provide a deeper, more textured and in one sense more tactile understanding of the clubbing experience than a ‘cut’n’paste’ form of coding and the allocation of utterances to created groupings, no matter how powerful the mind doing the mind-mapping. These slightly longer stories from individual clubbers also engage the reader more fully and more intensively with that clubber than do sets of staccato extracts from different interviewees. Given that going out clubbing with the clubbers is not an option for the reader, the stories re-presented in the Night Out provide an effective way into developing empathic and progressively more detailed understandings of the role and nature of these clubbers’ clubbing practices. The clubbing stories that constitute the Night Out provide detailed, carefully nuanced and at times contrasting accounts of what clubbing is, how it is ‘done’, and why; as I suggested earlier, this facet of being young is one that is rarely foregrounded in academic accounts.

Theoretically, I wanted to structure the main body of the thesis - the ‘Night Out’ - in terms of the differing timings and spacings of clubbing and of the individual clubbers concerned. These timings and spacings were not presumed but were generated and fine-tuned through the interviews. The notion of a ‘Night Out’ was the dominant way in which many clubbers organised and remembered both individual nights but also their recollections of nights in the past. I was thus fortunate enough to have what was in many ways a pre-existing structure which the clubbers’ provided through their interviews and our shared experiences of clubbing. Furthermore, this ‘Night Out’
structure coincided with the manner in which I wanted to present a cumulative spotlighting of theoretical insights into clubbing as the thesis progressed.

Finally, the clubbing experience is part of a broader dance or clubbing culture which consists of much more than an oral or ‘merely’ fleetingly experiential tradition, accessed only through interviews and participation. It should be added that the research also included the gathering of extensive material artefacts - club flyers, styles magazines, clubbing publications, listings sources - which were used in filling in further details of the contextual background of each of the clubbers’ experiences.

(iv) evocation / re-presentation / intention

Whenever we problematize the issue of writing, we run the risk of making it unintelligible to the people we want to read it.

(Cosgrove & Domosh, 1993: 36)

If we accept that social enquiry should have nothing at all to do with claims to ‘absolute knowledge’ but should be rather more concerned with fleshing out and complicating or even contradicting understandings (Hammersley, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), we then have an opportunity to develop a useful framework for understanding the practices of everyday life. This is a framework built upon a firmly ecumenical approach to ‘knowledge’. In terms of writing strategies this means that we should not be afraid of what Maffesoli calls “stereoscopic vision” (1996a: 14). That is, we should not shy away from eclecticism, but rather actively embrace a plurality of authors and levels of understandings both in our analysis and our re-presentations. People create different social worlds through their actions and imaginations (Blumer, 1969). Divergence between these social worlds should not be presented as a problem or flaw - “the fact that they disagree guarantees that our approach will be polydimensional” (Maffesoli, 1996a: 130). The introduction of nuances into an understanding of a society or culture highlights the firmly comparativist notion which underlies the “interpretative” method - a method in which the contradictory and the empathic ethnography are both elements.

The stories, excerpts from stories and academic understandings that I present in the Night Out that follows are thus at times contrasting. I would worry if they were not, for even clubbers at the same club night might have hugely differing experiences of that night. Non-contradictory re-presentation suggests either an overly structured interview ‘schedule’ or coding process, or / and pre-conceived notions of what one intends to ‘find out’ through the research. Furthermore, once we come to realise that ethnographers are responsible for the construction of social worlds through their
interpretation of it, there is a conflict with the naturalistic realism upon which ethnographies are often premised (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Smith, 1988). I thus approach 'everyday life' more as reality *immersing* theories than as reality *versus* theory, with theory, like any form of knowledge, being produced by social practices and reflection upon those practices (Evans, 1988).

This thesis then, is certainly not about the search for, nor the representation of, the 'natural' world of clubbing, even for the eighteen clubbers that form the focus of the study. It is not about the quest to re-present the Night Out 'as lived' or 'as it really is'. Rather, it is presented in the broad schematic format of a Night Out both as an aid to understanding and in order to allow a slow build-up of understandings of clubbing as subsequent layers of thematically-formulated arguments are progressively spotlighted and folded together. My aims as far as re-presentation and evocation are concerned are three-fold: first, to re-present the clubbing experience as narrated and evoked by eighteen clubbers in London during 1996; second, to do so very explicitly through my own experiences with these eighteen people but also through my experiences immediately prior and subsequent to this year-long period of intensive clubber contact (1996); and third, to re-present these experiences in conjunction with - and at times through a fusion or dialogue between - a diverse array of academic and non-academic literatures which provide understandings of either the clubbing experience itself or constitutive elements within it.

The understandings of the clubbing experience re-presented within this thesis are openly and purposefully designed with a number of different audiences in mind. First and foremost, given the format of the re-presentation, these understandings are presented as interventions within a number of on-going debates in the social sciences, and within British Social and Cultural Geography especially, although by no means exclusively. These debates, as I suggested through the starting points I outlined above, revolve around the nature, form and relevance of contemporary consuming practices, about the significance and nature of relationships between identities and identifications, about our understandings and conceptions of the modes of young people's leisure and pleasure, and about the relationships between - and our understandings of - notions of power and of resistance.

Second, these understandings are more specifically presented for those with a particular interest in the cultures, practices, spacings and experiences of clubbing. It is hoped that the combination of depth and breadth of the understandings of clubbing represented in this thesis may provide starting points for further and much more detailed

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research upon individual facets of the clubbing experience. For example, dancing, the use of recreational drugs, and the relationships between clubbing and other facets of the clubbers’ lives are all worthy of many theses in their own right.

Finally, and related to these previous points, these understandings of the clubbing experience are - despite the potential problems of access to the thesis - presented for clubbers who might be interested in reading a relatively detailed and suggestive account of what I propose are incredibly powerful experiences that might in some ways be similar to their own.

But now it is evening. It is that strange, equivocal hour when the curtains of heaven are drawn and cities light up ... Honest men and rogues, sane men and mad, are all saying to themselves, ‘The end of another day!’ . The thoughts of all, whether good men or knaves, turn to pleasure, and each one hastens to the place of his choice to drink the cup of oblivion.

(Baudelaire, 1964: 11)

* * * *
Night-life ... night-club ... night-bird. There is something about the word Night, as about the word Paris, that sends through some Englishmen a shiver of misgiving, and through another type a current of undue delight. The latter never get over the excitement of Sitting Up Late. The others see any happening after midnight - even a game of snakes and ladders - as something verging on the unholy; as though Satan were never abroad in sunlight. A club they can tolerate. Call it a night-club, and they see it as the ante-room to hell.

(Burke, 1941: v)
Chapter 1

Getting Into It, Feeling Part Of It

**club** - (often followed by *together*) to gather or become gathered into a group; to unite or combine (resources, efforts, etc) for a common purpose [C13: from Old Norse *klubba*, related to CLUMP).

... a current of undue delight

Clubbing is heavily entangled with notions of identification and style - the word 'clubbing' is itself connotative of membership and belongings. In this first stage of the Night Out, I develop this interest through focusing on getting into clubbing and choosing where and with whom to go clubbing. I cover three main themes.

I first explore some of the reasons clubbers give for going clubbing, drawing out the notions of clubbing as a different experience of social space and as thus involving alternate modes of social interaction, particularly, it would seem, for women. I develop this exploration through discussing the notions of identification and belongings.

Second, and spinning off numerous clubber stories about issues of style or 'cool', I outline a brief conceptualisation of the clubbers' relationships to issues of being cool. Stylisation and constructions of coolness appear central to processes of identification, with notions of the 'in' crowd and 'out' crowd, and choice of club Night being crucial and, it appears, always relative.

Thirdly, and following on from these first two themes, I turn explicitly to clubbers negotiating entry to the club as an important influence on the constitution of these clubbing belongings and the crowds to which I turn in the Chapter Two. At times, and for some more than others, entry appears tricky.
introduction

Clubbing is an extremely popular way in which to spend 'leisure' time, particularly for young people, and clearly holds countless attractions. Each clubber will go clubbing for differing reasons, will employ different practices at different times and in different spaces, and take from the experience differing memories. These attractions and experiences cannot be easily generalised. However, notions of belonging, of freedom, of fun, and of alterity - compared to the 'city' beyond and many of its other apparently less convivial social spaces - are recurring themes in the clubbers' discussions.

BRUCE: ... I mean I came down from Leeds where there had been just one or two club nights down to London and I went to things at Stereo a lot and things like that [ummm] and that started me clubbing a bit more and generally to be a bit more discerning about what it was that I was listening to because that was when things started to get really really hard - so I started going back to original house [music] rather than going off on a hard thing, and I'm so glad now because I would probably have ended up begin a hardcore freak which I'm so glad I'm not [yeah].

BEN: That period lasted about how long?

BRUCE: Well, I mean that started when I started going clubbing - as soon as I was doing it I knew that I quite enjoyed it and I liked it and then when I came back down to London I sort of ... because also the way in which it worked was that when I left to go up to university I left all my friends that I'd grown up with so I very much had a new set of friends that going clubbing was part of doing and it was a new experience. When I came back down to London I found that most of my other friends that I'd grown up with were also into clubbing [yeah] so that somehow changed it, because the people I was going with were sort of old friends, that sort of changed the way that I went about it, if you can see what I mean [yeah, yeah]. So, so then when I started going clubbing with them it went onto a different kind of level - I'm not saying that it was better, but it didn't feel new any more, it had a different quality to it. And then that's gone on ever since.

BEN: And you go out how often, on average?

BRUCE: I don't know - it's hard to say. I don't go to very many big clubs any more ... ummm ... the bar that we were just in, Track [yeah] is run by two
brothers, Steve and Chas and they umm .. run a soundsystem called Che Guevara and they put on parties like once a month and they'll go up and down the Thames on a Sunday and they are just brilliant. I mean, I love the music they play, I love the people that go there, all my friends go there, they're all really nice, there's no hassle, there's no searches at the door, there's no hassle at all, they've got a sort of core of about 600 people [wow] and they just keep it nice and personal and it's very much what I like, and I don't feel the need to go to South anymore although I do [yeah], you know I mean I definitely go to Che Guevara once a month and say every other month I'll go out as well, so yeah, sometimes twice a month and it's gone on a downward curve and now it's levelled out, you know - I used to go every week [right] ummm .....  

BEN: How significant is the Night Out?  
BRUCE: It's very significant because it's what ... it's very much a known factor within my life now, it's a thing that I allow myself every ... you know, how ever often that it comes along and I know that if it were to go weekly then I wouldn't go every week because I'd probably kill myself and you know ... but it's very important within my life because it's what I like doing most in a way, well it's one of the things that I like doing most, and they have got it just right, so what it means is that every time that I go I know that I'm guaranteed to have a great time. Previously when I've gone clubbing I haven't been in full control over what I'm going to ... I've just been going to any old club, sometimes for the first time [yeah] - you HOPE that it's going to be a really good experience but you sometimes get disappointed, sometimes there's a bit of trouble, sometimes, you know ... you get searched on the door, or whatever and it can be disappointing. With this, I know that it's going to be good because I've just been to them so many times, I know they're going to play the music that I like, I know that people I know are going to be there you know, and I know that everybody is going to be taken care of, so that's why it's important to me.¹

Bruce values the known quality of his clubbing experiences. The particular Nights he likes offer a blend of people, music and good times that he is used to, and the guarantee that he will find this blend every time that he goes clubbing is important. Bruce found that, although he had been separated from his London-based friends for three years while he was at university, when he arrived back in London, a shared interest in clubbing was one of

¹ From the first interview with Bruce.
the things which he and his friends had developed in common, despite being more or less apart for that length of time. A final point on which I elaborate below is Bruce's passing distinction between 'his' preferred genre of clubbing - based on house music - and one example of another genre - hardcore - which he "could so easily" have fallen into liking, but is glad he did not. Thus Bruce infers that house is cooler than hardcore - he became "more discerning". Other clubbers tell different stories, yet certain similar sentiments appear to be central.

BEN: So can we start with when you started to go clubbing?
VALERIE: Two years ago? Less than two years ago ... it was about a year and eight months ago ... 
KIM: ... just before the Christmas before last.
VALERIE: And I'd gone to clubs before but it had been a lot different. My idea of going to a club was to pull, yeah [uh-huh] until I started going to clubs with like Kim, Tim and Matt, it's different ...
KIM: ... I don't know about you saying ...
VALERIE: ... It's about going out with your friends when I started going out with them or to go out and enjoy the night rather than to go out and pull.
KIM: I think that's the type that we go to as well. I never went out clubbing much but I suppose that I went to two or three clubs until about a year-and-a-half ago and uhhhh, and things like Zens [local suburban club] and that, they're very much sort of places where you just sort of guys trying to buy you a drink and you can't relax and ... it's a meat market [right]. You can't relax, you can't talk, you don't want to dance because everyone is looking at you ....
BEN: But did you enjoy them at the time?
VALERIE: No I didn't enjoy them at the time, well a bit, but I didn't do it often so I can't have enjoyed it as much because when I started going out with this lot I started really enjoying it.
BEN: Was it that noticeably different?
VALERIE: It was really different - I think part of the reason that it was so different was that we started pilling [taking drugs] [uh-huh] and so it was a totally different reason for going [uh-huh] ...
KIM: Yeah ...
BEN: So is that one of the reasons to go?
VALERIE: Oh yeah, I mean I didn't go to clubs to pill usually, but ...
KIM: Generally if we go out clubbing then we will.
VALERIE: That’s not quite as true for me - I couldn’t do as much cos I started getting ill [right] so I stopped doing it and the reason that I go to clubs was just to enjoy myself and the fact of going to a club. At first I found that really difficult cos I wasn’t going for the original reason [uh-huh] and then I got used to it and now I go to clubs regularly, just for the fun of it, for the whole atmosphere.

BEN: Right... is that the same for you Kim?

KIM: Yeah, I don’t get ill, but I don’t... generally I can’t afford to and I don’t want to pump a lot of chemicals into my body so yeah I do go out quite often without taking anything.

BEN: Does it have to be a big occasion?

KIM: No, not really, it’s just, well... if it’s Tim’s birthday or there’s a festival or something, but it’s more the mood I’m in, how I’m feeling, what I want to do.

BEN: So it seems like the last year-and-a-half or so has been pretty much the same for both of you?

KIM: Uhhh... no, I went... as I say I didn’t go out clubbing at all, I wasn’t into it at all. I went once before and wasn’t particularly interested and uhhh... a friend of mine had talked me into going with him and we went up to a club and we went to Banana Split and it was totally unlike any of the other clubs that I’d been to [uh-huh] and we... I mean I wasn’t pilling... I was against it at the time - it was about six months before I started going out pilling and uhhh... we had a really good night and we were up dancing all night, really really hard and fast, like six o’clock in the morning I was still there, y’know [we laugh] “I want to stay and dance, it’s really good!”.

The different form that social interaction between the sexes can take in clubbing appears to have changed the way that Kim and Valerie perceive and experience clubbing from their earlier experiences. Kim and Valerie draw distinctions between the “meat market” that is Zens, a local club in suburban outer London, and Banana Split, the central London club which was “totally unlike any of the other clubs that [they had] been to”. Furthermore, the impact of the drug ecstasy (or MDMA) is centrally implicated in their experiences.

2 From the first interview (to which they came together) with Kim and Valerie. The final point about drug use and clubbing deserves a fuller treatment than I can provide in this initial Chapter, and I turn to it at length in Chapter Three of the Night Out.
These two extracts begin to convey the complex reasoning both behind clubbers' initial forays into clubbing and the constitution of their current experiences. Even close friends, such as Kim and Valerie, who go clubbing together on a regular basis, will have subtly differing reasons behind their enjoyment of clubbing, as well as their own personal histories of how they started. Despite these differences, processes of stylisation and group identifications appear central in both the accounts presented.

In this initial Chapter of the Night I discuss a number of facets of pre-clubbing which in many ways precede and provide important foundations for subsequent stages of the Night. I am interested in much more than merely flagging up how the clubbers to whom I talked first began clubbing. Although significant, I want to go beyond relatively simple tales of ‘getting started’ to look in some detail at issues of belongings. More specifically, this Chapter is about drawing out some of the relationships between notions of stylisation or ‘coolness’ and the practices and negotiations of group belongings and identifications.

* * * *

1 Getting Into Clubbing

Questions of stylisation and the management and presentation of coolness, club choice, club access - the vital negotiation of ‘the door’ - and social exclusivity (being refused entry) will be broached and deepened in the latter half of the Chapter. For now, I draw out three related aspects of clubbers’ reasoning for going clubbing. First, I highlight the notion of clubbing as constituting a quite different form of social space within the city to, say, the ‘streets outside’. Second, in highlighting what are apparently the different codes of social interaction that clubbing demands and allows, I look at the example of women’s experience of clubbing in comparison to other, perhaps more oppressive and intimidatory, social spaces. Third, and building on these first two points, I highlight the clubbers’ articulations of some form of need or desire for a sense of belonging, and further unpack the notion of identifications which I briefly mentioned in the ‘Beginnings’ as being potentially helpful in understanding some of these impulses towards clubbing.

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3 Brief biographical snapshots of all the clubber-interviewees can be found in Appendix 1. Most of these snapshots contain further details of how each of the clubbers first started to go clubbing, and in certain cases some indication of why they enjoy clubbing.
being in the city yet being out of the city

MARIA: You know, when you live in a city like London where everything goes pretty much ... I was desperate to get away from Southend - I really wanted to come to London, ummm, as it turned out, which is a bit weird. I come from a village just outside Southend and my parents moved there when it was quite small there, a lot of people in the village know my parents because they were involved with a lot of things when I was younger, umm ... I was sort of, in a way, a little bit of a celebrity when I was younger because I used to do a lot of swimming and people knew me from my swimming and so everybody knew me and it was nice to come somewhere where no one knew the fuck who you were and no one gave a shit anyway, so [yeah, right] it was great, yeah. I don’t like the - I now don’t like the anonymity of it, well sometimes it’s nice but erm, it would be nice to - I mean people can be very unfriendly in London, but that depends upon how you take it because I do like that, because sometimes I don’t want to talk to people so I don’t make the effort and other days I’m feeling good and happy and I’ll ... I’ll just start talking to somebody on the tube or I’ll walk into a shop and just have a conversation with somebody, so it’s how .. it’s nice because I can have it both ways. I was interested in sort of going out clubbing here [in London] because I knew that I didn’t like what was happening in Southend that I had experienced ... I suppose I felt quite naive, and erm, quite sort of green as well, I definitely felt very uncool and untrendy, umm, you know? [yeah, I know what you mean].

Maria’s differing relationships with the place from which she originally comes (a village near Southend) and with London begin to emerge in this extract. First, London seems to have released her from a stifling sense of familiarity with others who lived nearby. Second, the apparent anonymity of London - including its clubbing experiences - was, for Maria, potentially both a pleasant and an unpleasant experience (“I don’t like the anonymity of it, well sometimes it’s nice”) - she doesn’t have the obligations of having to interact with those she is with, yet she can if she so desires. Third, and related to this, during her early clubbing experiences in London Maria felt “quite naive ... definitely very uncool and untrendy” compared to clubbing in Southend. The city is qualitatively and socially quite different for Maria.

From the first interview with Maria.
This city life which Maria is evoking through her story appears to be both seductive yet also, at times, overpowering, and this paradoxical quality of the city is one which many writers have attempted to distil through their writing. A myriad of possibilities, lifestyles and activities are on offer in the city in which “we are barraged with images of the people we might become” (Raban, 1974: 64). The “wrap-around reality of contemporary metropolitan life” (Chambers, 1990: 60), structured through processes of time-keeping, punctuality, spatial ordering and the “organisation” on the one hand (Simmel, 1950b), yet appearing more as “a maniac’s scrap-book, filled with colorful entries which have no relation to each other” on the other (Raban, 1974:129), creates a sensory and stimulatory environment of intensity and complexity. At times this can be pleasurable, but it can also result in ‘sensory overload’ and unpleasant notions of exposure. City life, claims Bauman (1995a: 126) “is carried on by strangers among strangers”, and it is this continual and often stressful presence of strangers that can result in the impulse for experiencing an alternate atmosphere of belonging or identification. “Modern living means living with strangers, and living with strangers is at all times a precarious, unnerving and testing life” (Bauman, 1993:161).

In his musings on Parisian life, Charles Baudelaire was struck by the relief from their “inner subjective demons” that citizens experienced in a city of passing encounters, fragmentary exchanges, strangers, and large crowds (Sennett, 1990). Yet for many people - perhaps unschooled in the ways of the flâneur, perhaps merely ‘flâneured out’, for even flâneurs need days or nights off - the social spaces of the city in which relief from ‘inner subjective demons’ may be found are usually less exposing, less structured through formalised codes of civility, and much more constituted through the establishment and experiencing of intimacy than are the ‘streets’ of which Baudelaire writes (Bauman, 1995b; Sennett, 1990). These social spaces of alternate ordering are premised upon the expression of spontaneity, emotion and conviviality rather their suppression or even exclusion.

In “The Stranger Revisited - and Revisiting” (Chapter 5, 1995b), Zygmunt Bauman offers a suggestive account of the relationships between contemporary city living and the formation and amendment of identities and identifications. For a more tightly theoretical discussion of how ‘strangers’ might become part of the social groups they approach see Schütz (1964b). I use the term ‘flâneur’ not in the strict Benjaminesque (1973) sense of being a man who takes visual possession of the city, wandering at will and gaining a form of melancholy pleasure through the experience of the aesthetic pleasures of the city (see Wilson, 1995). Rather, I use the term more simply to evoke the mentality of those who suggest they can feel at home amongst strangers, and I of course include both women and men in this evocation.

I am not suggesting that social spaces such as the streets, public squares, or public transport do not require, and are not thus also constituted through, the expression of emotions, passions and feelings - of course they are. Rather, I am drawing a distinction between forms of ordering, with the interactional codes of many publicly accessible and open social spaces being more restrictive and based upon more conventional notions of civility than ‘effervescent’ social spaces of “manifest togetherness”, such as those of clubbing (Bauman, 1995a: 46).
The presence of strangers, by definition, means that there also becomes possible the identification of those with whom one might establish a belonging - literally, a sense of identification. The social spaces of the city are not only constituted through situations of anxiety and exposure, then, but also through spaces of identification. These are spaces which provide opportunities for personal expression, conviviality and a going-beyond of the self as the individual is, usually both affectively and electively, subsumed within a larger social formation.

LUKE: In general, if the public is happy, open minded and cheerful, I get that feeling too. And if the crowd is nasty, shy and things like that, I have a boring evening. Just a story about dancing together ... I remember a night in another club (Shiva, a club with much dope and quite a lot of ordinary people ... Might be fun once every few months...). I was particularly out of my head on E, and sudden there was a gabber* (I’m not a gabber) dancing in front of me, with a lighting stick, which he moved around my head. That was nice, we danced for a while and had fun together, though we wouldn’t see each other while walkin’ in the streets ...

Especially interesting in this extract is Luke’s claim that he and the “gabber” would not interact in this way in a non-club situation (the “streets”) and in fact they “wouldn’t see each other”. This is a sensation reminiscent of the “scrutiny disguised as indifference” of which Lofland (1973: 178) speaks in her discussion of Goffman’s (1971) notion of “mismeetings”. In cases such as these the ‘trick’ or the technique is to see whilst feigning complete indifference - to look at but also stare through simultaneously. Luke thus contrasts the interactional ordering of clubbing with that of “the streets”. A common feature of clubbers’ accounts was the quite different set of codes of social interaction which clubbing appears to both demand and allow. Clubbing was described as being less about the indifference of the crowd - so beloved by Baudelaire, for example - nor about the civility of structured distanciation necessitated by the crowd, as discussed by Bauman, but about the identifications possible with and through that clubbing crowd. This notion of

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8 A “gabber” is clubber slang for a very hardcore clubber who has a penchant for exceptionally fast and hard techno music.
9 This extract is from the second e-mail interview with Luke - he was living in Holland at the time - and is presented unaltered as he e-mailed it to me.
10 A notion also reminiscent of Simmel’s (1950b) “blase outlook” which is characterised by (in Wolff’s translation from German) “the bluntness of discrimination” (Simmel, 1950b: 414), or (rather more evocatively, in Levine’s [1971: 324-339] translation) by “an indifference toward the distinctions between things” (the piece was actually translated by Edward A. Shils [1948], and first appeared Shils’ text: Social Sciences II: Selections and Selected Readings, vol. 2, [14th edition]. University of Chicago Press: Chicago).
belonging, and the associated sensation of liberation experienced through this interactional alterity, seemed to be particularly significant for some of the women clubbers whom I interviewed.

codes of social interaction - women, clubbing (and ‘liberation’?)

CARMEL: If you’re out, as far as the people I knew - blokes and girls included - you’d go out and the whole intention was to go out and get a bit out of your face and dance, sweat and have a laugh. Just having a laugh with none of those sort of social pressures I suppose [right] ... blokes that come into the party might, or girls, that maybe were a bit insecure before that ... it wouldn’t matter in a party cos you could do exactly as you’d like, it didn’t matter, and people didn’t give a shit. For me guys do feel like that - they feel, y’know, that girl, she may look nice but she hasn’t come out to get chatted up - she’s come out here with her mates to get a bit out of it and dance so maybe I’m going to interrupt her night by trying to talk to her on that level because, I mean ... to me it’s just, it was just ... if someone ever did come and talk to me it was like “No!, I don’t want to talk to you, this is a really good record - I want to go and dance!” and that’s what I’d be thinking all night.\(^\text{11}\)

It is clear that Carmel goes clubbing primarily to dance, but I want to draw out from this extract three more subtle points. First, Carmel suggests that “none of those sort of social pressures” are present, at least amongst her group of friends - the social pressures she mentions are presumably those which characterise other social spaces she experiences. Second, the absence of these conventional social rules and their replacement with another alternate ordering, was recognised by the men as well as the women. Third, the quite detailed evocation of what a man might be thinking - “she’s come out here with her mates to get a bit out of it and dance so maybe I’m going to interrupt her Night by trying to talk to her on that level” - suggests that Carmel has thought in some depth about how and why clubbing is particularly attractive to her, as well as how others understand it.

Of the clubbers whom I interviewed, some of the women appeared to have been at first pleasantly surprised by and now currently value the different ‘rules’ and customs guiding or influencing forms of social interaction and intersubjectivity in their clubbing experiences. During our discussions of their reasons for going clubbing these women articulated these

\(^{11}\) An extract from the first interview with Carmel.
differences in interactional regimes between clubbing and other social spaces through talking about feelings of sexual liberation and a relative absence of often predatory men; the latter being viewed by many women, it seems, as a feature of other social spaces such as bars and pubs. Often, rather than clubbing being premised upon opportunities for sexual interaction, it appeared that it was dancing that was central. Thus while women are undoubtedly still interested in ‘looking good’ while clubbing they do not feel the same pressures as they might feel in a pub situation to interact in a more concerted fashion with men. This subtle difference is inferred in the extract from the first interview with Carol and Lucy, below.

CAROL: You go out obviously, and you look around, d’you know what I mean? Especially when you’re with your mates.

LUCY: I’d say I have but I don’t now. I mean I would do - there’s nothing wrong with that! [we laugh]

BEN: So why is it less important to you now?

CAROL: I don’t know. I mean, quite a lot of the time I’d rather just go out and enjoy myself, because if you’re on the pull ... I don’t think girls ever go out and talk to blokes like they talk to us. I’d never go out to pull [right], and I don’t think it’s like that at a club anyway, because you can talk to hundreds of blokes and there’s nothing in it at all [no] whereas if you’re going to a pub and a bloke comes up and talks to you or you go over and talk to a bloke they automatically think that you fancy them, which isn’t the same in a club where you can just go up and talk to anybody and they don’t think anything of it.

However, certain accounts of women’s relationships to clubbing appear to overstate and at times romanticise this process of what might be referred to as de-sexualisation (Ward, 1995). In this brief examination of the alternate interactional demands of clubbing that some of the clubbers to whom I talked conveyed during their interviews, I want to make use of and attempt to modestly ‘texture’ some of the work of Maria Pini (1997a; 1997b) on women and their relationships to raving. Pini (1997b) notes how, in her research, women involved in the early-British rave scene of the late-1980s and early-1990s appeared to experience the scene as sexually progressive inasmuch as it “enabled an escape from the

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12 For further discussion and comparison of the different appeal of clubs versus pubs see Thornton (1995: pp 20-22).
13 From first interview with Carol and Lucy, to which they came together.
traditional associations between dancing, drugged-up women and sexual interaction” (cited in Pini, 1997a: 117). Pini suggests that women in her study all saw raving as a “movement away from sexual pick-up” and towards dancing, and she proposes that raving’s main appeal “seemed to lie in its ability to both offer [the women] new ways of experiencing themselves, and to transform their understandings of intersubjectivity” (ibid: 118). Rave, she suggested, was not so much concerned with “changing the world” as with the “constitution of a particular mind / body / spirit / technology assemblage which makes for an alternative experience of the self” (ibid: 118).

In an earlier but related discussion about women and the ‘rave culture’ (to which Pini also refers), McRobbie (1994b) similarly proposes that dance culture has opened out a new possibility for women to be confident and prominent in forms of youth leisure. In rave, argues McRobbie, the “ladishness” is replaced by friendliness, permitting “pure physical abandon in the company of others without requiring the narrative of sex or romance” (ibid: 168). Women who went ‘raving’ experienced the new-found tension which comes “from remaining in control, and at the same time losing themselves in dance and music” (ibid: 169)15.

Yet Pini and McRobbie present only part of the picture. Firstly, as Thornton notes, “these studies tend to conflate the feeling of freedom fostered by the discotheque environment with substantive political rights and freedoms” (1995: 21; emphasis in original)16. Secondly,

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15 The Release (1997) survey of 520 clubbers presents confusing results in terms of the links between sexual interaction and clubbing. While 45% indicated music, 37% socialising and 35% atmosphere as important to their clubbing experiences, only 6% of clubber respondents suggested that “meeting prospective sexual partners” was important. Yet Release also note that of those surveyed, over half had had sex with “someone they had met at a dance event”. This would suggest that while sexual interaction during the clubbing experience itself appeared much less significant than one might imagine, clubbing as a meeting place for prospective sexual partners was still important. An additional point of note in the Release (1997) study was that men appeared slightly more likely than women to have met sexual partners whilst clubbing. Thus, while Sheila Henderson (1993) suggests (somewhat incredibly!) that during ecstasy (MDMA) experiences, “...most men have the opposite to an erection: a shrinking penis” (one cannot help but marvel at what must have been an ingenious methodology), the Release (1997) survey suggests that 15% of their male respondents had met two or more sexual partners whilst clubbing, and 19% had met three or more. The disparity between the Release survey results and the individual accounts that Pini, McRobbie and myself have gathered in our research on clubbing would suggest that there is the possibility that during interviews clubbers (of whatever gender) downplay the sexual facet of clubbing and almost idealise their experiences. These clearly complex relationships between sex and clubbing would appear to require further (and particularly empirically-grounded) study.

16 Thornton further notes how the lyrical content of many of the dance tracks (and this is especially so in many of the ‘rave’ tracks of the early-1990s) helped to promote this conflation - “the lyrics of dance tracks, which raid the speeches of political figures like Martin Luther King and feature female vocalists singing ‘I got the power’ and ‘I feel free’ work to blur the boundaries between affective and political freedom” (ibid: 21-22). These debates over clubbing (or raving) and notions of resistance are opened out further in Chapter Four.
while a number of the clubbers, such as Carmel, above, and Kim and Valerie at the start of the Chapter, would seem to support both Pini's contention of changing intersubjectivities and McRobbie's related suggestion that the physical pleasures of raving become, for women, somehow relatively desexualised, other clubbers described qualitatively different experiences of clubbing in which the practices of sexualisation were as - if not more - important as within other social spaces. These clubbers seemed to experience liberation in completely the opposite fashion - through what might be termed 'hyper-sexualisation'.

SARAH: I'd be lying.. okay, I go down there, because ... I like flirting, and for me it's like my form of safe sex [uh-huh]. If I go down there, I look good, y'know, loads of blokes that are in bands that are famous - they've got screaming women after them - they'll look at me and go "Oh who's she, she's really nice?" [uh-huh]. You know - come and buy me a drink, and that's as far as it goes, I'm happy, I've had a dose - I can go home. It's the attention thing - it doesn't have to lead to anything [no] and the few times that it has it's always ended up trouble so I'm very wary of going out with anyone connected with that scene cos I've been out with two people that have been in bands and they're just complete head-fucks - it just doesn't work, unless you're in that business, totally. For me, I get more of a high, an adrenaline rush, if I end up just hanging out ... to me that's just as good sometimes. That's a successful night.  

That the 'abandon-without-intent' of which McRobbie speaks above is not a consistent feature of clubbing is apparent in this extract from my first conversation with Sarah. Sarah claims to enjoy flirting with men when clubbing, on the one hand, yet also enjoys the 'adrenaline rush' of just being with people - "just hanging out". When she does flirt, Sarah appears to be more concerned about being seen with someone than about being with someone as the prelude to a fully consummated sexual experience. Clubbing for Sarah appears to be as much as about sexual display and flirting for herself as about being with others. As Sarah puts it, clubbing is her form of "safe sex".

In contrast to the generalised claims of Pini and McRobbie then, it is clear that some women clubbers experience clubbing as involving a level of often heightened sexualisation or sexual display. Yet, and this is where I believe Pini does get it right, while this sexualisation infers that being seen as sexy is important to these women, it is less apparent

17 An extract from the first interview with Sarah.
that they are presenting their sexuality in this fashion in order to find a ‘partner’\textsuperscript{18}. It may well be that these women are constructing themselves as ‘sexy’ for themselves because they cannot or do not express their sexualisation in the same relatively open way in other areas of their lives - their work, their homes, and the pubs, bars, restaurants and other social spaces they visit\textsuperscript{19}. In this way women may exhibit a confidence and form of almost self-sufficiency - a dis-interest in compulsorily and inevitably consummated sexual interaction - which is unlike that which they might exhibit or experience in, say, a pub. The underlying codes of interaction are quite different, and this difference appears to be attractive to women.

I would therefore partially agree with Pini and McRobbie in their general contentions regarding the apparently liberatory aspect of clubbing for some women. However, I would contextualise these suggestions by proposing that it is less that women become desexualised, for they do not, just as it is quite obvious that men do not suddenly become disinterested in sex. Rather, their sexuality becomes differently important. Some women choose to play-down their sexuality, other choose to exaggerate it. Some women are less concerned with sexual interaction during clubbing that they would be during, say, pubbing, while other women are more interested in sexual interaction. The one thing that can be suggested with certainty is that further work is required in developing a fuller understanding of these relationships - work which specifically sets out to expose and uncover these complex interactional practices and their difference (or not) from those that constitute other social spaces. While potentially fascinating, this development of a cross-cultural and cross-spatial understanding is beyond the bounds of the current project.

For a variety of reasons - such as the difficulty of verbal communication, clubbers’ enjoyment of and focus upon dancing, the lack of spaces within the club for sitting and chatting, and the presence of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) which can suppress the libido (Saunders, 1995) - clubbing is constituted much more through the practices of dancing within the clubbing crowd than upon one-on-one social interaction. Finding a partner will of course still be a concern, as the Release (1997) survey rather confusingly infers, but a

\textsuperscript{18} Clubbing, and particularly dancing, represents a more complex form of social interaction than merely the “Meccanization of the sexual impulse [where] chatting up a girl becomes the centrepiece, the core-drama of the evening’s play” (Mungham & Pearson, 1976: 92-93; cited in Ward (1993: 21). Mungham’s evocative image of dancing overlooks the role of dancing as a process of sexualisation which does not inevitably entail one-on-one sexual interaction, and, more broadly, overlooks dancing simply in and for itself (Ward, 1993). I return to this central theme of dancing in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{19} As I go on to discuss in Chapter Four, this notion of clubbing representing for the clubber an alternate experience (persona) of themselves can provide a source of individual vitality.
concern that may take second place behind and beneath a desire to dance and to interact with the clubbing crowd as a crowd.20

Undoubtedly, the codes and demands of interaction in clubbing differ from those in many other social spaces. It would appear that for many woman, it is this very difference between the overtly predatory interactional ordering of, for example, pubs, and the more 'look but don't touch' codes of sexual expression in clubbing that contributes towards the attraction of clubbing. Clubbing constitutes a different experience of togetherness than that experienced in other social spaces: an experience less explicitly centred on couples (and 'one-on-one') and more within notions of being within the crowd ('one-among-many'). The flux between the experience of identities - including sexual identities - and identifications that the practices and spacings of the clubbing crowd can facilitate appears critical.

**belongings and identifications**

The logic of identity is, for good or ill, finished.

(Hall, 1991: 43)

The twin notions that clubbing as a form of social space is qualitatively different from the 'city streets' beyond and that clubbing involves alternate orderings, codes and modes of social interaction are linked. The common thread that cuts through both of these conceptions is that of belongings and of the search for spaces and experiences of identifications or affective gatherings (Maffesoli, 1995).

BEN: In a sentence, can you say what you enjoy about clubbing ... that you particularly enjoy?

20 While many traditional alcohol-based events have had and continue to have an undertone of trying to score sexually through flirting and small talk, "this [is] consciously rejected by the rave culture where women [find] it a relief to have fun without being hassled by men" (Saunders, 1995: 52). It is true that these effects may be partly due to the presence of MDMA, which is known to be a sexual suppressant, but Saunders goes on to propose that this change in interactional codes might also be due to the fact that while many young people in the dance scene do not take ecstasy (MDMA) but rather drink instead, many of these same young people have never been to clubs such as old-style discos in which sexual aggression is common, "so that this new style is not so much a rejection as a socially accepted normal way to behave" (op cit). For further discussions of the relationships between changing experiences of sexuality, sexual activity, drug use and clubbing see Release (1997), and Solowij, Hall & Lee (1992). I further discuss the role of drug use in the clubbing experience in Chapter Three of the Night.
SUN: I could come up with one, I'd need to think for a couple of seconds [um-huh] 

........ basically ummm, .... I've grown up believing and being told that life is pretty 
grim and you've got to fucking work your bollocks off cos otherwise you're not 
going to get anywhere - I've still a very strong work ethic, that's inherited from my 
Asian background ... ummm ... but what I really like about going clubbing is .. is .. 
just, it's just the trash Western, hedonistic nonsense of it all, y'know, just going out 
to have a good time for the sake of it, and just meeting people and actually being 
there on the scene - I remember in the 80s sitting around and being depressed 
because we'd missed Punk y'know? [uh-huh] And this is happening now and I just 
think this is my culture, this is the only thing that I have that I can call home, I'm 
not English in the normal sense of the word English, I'm not Indian ... by any 
means, ummmm ... I've just been dumped into this urban nightmare scenario with a 
blank sheet of paper [right] and I just , I just love it - it's my culture, it's my home, 
umm ... to me that's the nearest I have to a ... well, it is, it's my culture, it's how I 
choose to spend my time ummm ... I just think it's ... Julie Burchill once said 
"Western civilisation is the only culture where life isn't a toss up between horror and 
boredom" and I really like that. I like Western Twentieth Century flash, tacky 
materialist culture because it's just so fast and so quick and always moving and it 
just keeps me, my head, active [ummm] and it gives me something to do and I really 
 enjoy it [ummm]. Y'know it's .... I think actually that sheer hedonism is actually in a 
way more profound than y'know poetry and literature and art and philosophy and 
mathematics and all that stuff [right]. To me this is the fucking point, this is the life, 
y'know? [ummmm] I mean, my parents came over from India because, y'know, 
despite them not knowing anything about the West they knew that people had a 
better life there, they did have a fucking better life, y'know - in India, people my age 
are just working their butts off and no joy! And they're aiming for something and 
this is it [ummm]. And I figure, I'm young, I'm rich, I'm in the middle of London 
when it's really happening - I mean jungle is just suddenly ... ramped up the notches 
so high [ummm] ... and fuck it, I'm going to do it! Yeah! And when I'm 30 maybe 
I'll settle down and have kids and at least I'll have something to tell them, y'know, I 
was there ...

21 From the first interview with Sun. Jungle music was, at the time of interview, a relatively new 
genre of dance music involving hyper-syncopated beats that can run anywhere up to 160bpm 
(Wright, 1995) and, although initially dismissed as a passing fad, has subsequently influenced most 
other genre of dance music (Bat, 1997; James, 1997).
This passionately nuanced extract raises a plethora of issues. I draw out just five related points. First, for Sun clubbing is a form of trashy hedonism that he equates with the West. Second, this trashy hedonism - just doing something for the sake of it - is what Sun believes life is, or should be, about ("just going out to have a good time for the sake of it") - it is what he wants to do. Third, Sun specifically highlights a 'youth subculture' from the 1970s and 1980s which he missed - Punk - picking out meeting other people and "just being there on the scene" as experiences which went with it as seeming valuable. Fourth, he therefore appears to understand jungle music as his culture in a similar way that Punk was for some of those before him. This search for a culture with which to feel belongings appears to stem both from Sun’s awareness of the nature of previous ‘youth cultures’ such as Punk but also his particular biography, involving ‘Asian’ roots and his subsequent search for a “home”: “I’m not English in the normal sense of the word English, I’m not Indian ... by any means”. Fifthly, although clearly passionate about jungle music and the senses of identification which he feels the jungle culture can provide, Sun is also already looking forward to the future. He wants to be able to say "I was there" to his children, to evoke his youthful belongings, to show how and where 'he belonged'.

This notion of belongings - of a quest for a sense of ‘home’ - which jumps out so forcefully from Sun’s story, is, I propose, at the very heart of the clubbing experience for many clubbers, although each will narrate their particular understanding of what this belonging means to them in different ways. In the "Beginnings" I introduced debates concerning the supposed changing nature of our social relationships both with ourselves and our own identities and also with others and social groupings more broadly. I now re-visit and deepen these points specifically in relation to clubbing in suggesting that clubbing is partially constituted through this search for belongings.

identity & identifications

It is relatively widely accepted that, although still partially effective - for example, politically and economically - the pre-eminence of the logic of identity as the structuring feature of society has been shattered by the increasing cultural fragmentation (Featherstone, 1995) of the world. This fragmentation is what Marcus (1992: 311) refers to as “global creolization processes”. Increasingly, ‘micro-structurings’ of shared sentiments, experiences and emotions appear to be playing a more important part in people’s everyday experiences, particularly in relation to the social groupings and affiliations through which individuals constitute themselves (Maffesoli, 1995).
Stuart Hall (1991: 44) describes these historical transformations which have disturbed the “settled logic of identity” as “theoretical decentrings”, giving examples such as the instability of the nation-state, the changing fortunes of nation’s economies, and the consequent challenges to notions of nationhood and national identity as well as to the “fragmentation and erosion of collective social identity”. By the latter, Hall means the “large-scale, all-encompassing, homogenous [...] great collective social identities of class, of race, of nation, of gender, and of the West” (ibid: 44). Although, as Hall contends, these great collective social identities have not disappeared altogether, their disrupted location within our conceptions of the world suggests that they cannot be thought of in the “same homogenous form” (ibid: 45). In short, these ascribed collective identities “do not give us the code of identity as [...] they did in the past” (ibid: 45-46). New formations of identities and identifications have taken their place, new formations which prompt Hall into making a number of crucial points about the changing nature and role of identities in contemporary society. Firstly, Hall suggests, it is clear from the “new theoretical spaces” that are opened up by these changes that identities are never completed, never finished - “identity is always in the process of formation” (ibid: 47) and our sense of identity “can never be resolved” (Chambers, 1994: 25). Second, identity “means, or connotes, the process of identification, of saying that this here is the same as that, or we are the same together” (ibid: 47; emphasis added). Thirdly, this notion of identification is always constructed through ambivalence; that is, it is always constructed in terms of belongings and outsiders (Chambers, 1994), between “those who belong and those who do not” (Hall, 1991: 48).

On a more everyday, experiential level, the notion of identifications which Hall presents here highlights the empathy that we can - though do not all, nor always - feel with others when we are in a group situation (Maffesoli, 1995; Hall, 1991; 1992). The process of identification is one in which “people come to feel that some other human beings are much ‘the same’ as they are and still others are more ‘unlike’ them” (de Swaan, 1995: 25). Certain social situations, and I suggest that clubbing is one of these social situations, foster a going-beyond of individual identities, an experience of being both within yet in some way outside of oneself at once: in extreme circumstances this experience of ambivalence through identification can be referred to as a sensation of ecstasy or extasis.

It is a moot point as to whether these great collective social identities ever gave us the code of identity in any case - this may be just what we told ourselves about ourselves (Hall, 1991).

The term ecstasy derives from the Greek term, ekstasis: a displacement, a trance, a going beyond. Thanks to Antonia Noussia for first drawing this to my attention. I discuss these vital points about the
Furthermore, while proximity to others is not a necessary condition for these identifications, physical co-presence is often actively sought in the establishment of identifications. This is a search for togetherness that Boden & Molotch (1994: 258) refer to as “the compulsion of proximity”.

BEN: How does clubbing fit into your overall lifestyle at the moment?
LUKE: I hate to admit it, but clubbin’ gives you sort of an identity. You belong to a relative small group of people, with very different interests and skills, but there is something that connects you. I like being in a city because it’s quite anonymous, but it feels very good to find steady points in the city. Clubbin’ makes me feel at home in a city, ‘cause you meet lots of people. First in the club, and later you’ll meet them in the streets occasionally. I’ve been in other scenes for a short time as well (a bit of skate and grunge), but I always got bored with them. House seems to be the only thing that comes back. Maybe it’s very easy to get in. Comparing to my ‘adventures’ in other scenes, it seems to be very easy to get into a club-scene. In shorter time and with less effort, I meet more people there. I don’t know whether that says something about the scene of more about myself. I’ll think about it... (It just popped up, you know... ;-)  

While he “hates to admit it”, Luke does see clubbing as providing him with “an identity” - “you belong to a relative small group of people, with very different interests and skills, but there is something that connects you”. This is a great evocation of the notion of identification. Luke then builds on this evocation by expressly linking it to his experiences both of living in the city generally - clubbing makes him feel “at home” in the city - and to his own history of other “scenes” such as “skate and grunge”.

Identifications, then, might be understood as elective forms of identity (Scheler, 1954); they are “the rendering to someone of identity” (Friedman, 1992: 332). Identifications are affectual in nature, usually small in scale, and might be premised upon an affiliation with a flux between self and crowd in more detail in later Chapters. For the moment, it is interesting to note in terms of the current discussion about belongings and identifications that the drug ecstasy - also known as MDMA, it’s chemical abbreviation - was originally labelled ‘empathy’. The ‘brand name’ was only changed to ‘ecstasy’ because it was thought that it would sell better (Collin, 1997).

24 From the first interview with Luke.
charismatic leader, a totemic or tribal symbol or (and) a shared emotional experience - for example, a shared appreciation of music - and a shared site (Hetherington, 1996).^25\footnote{In these respects identifications have been likened to Bünde, or communion - a notion first developed by the German sociologist Herman Schmalenbach in the 1920s (see Hetherington, 1994; 1996).}

The importance of tactility and proximity - in short, of a sharing of a bounded space - to most identifications restricts their size - relative to slightly less tight concepts and notions of ‘lifestyles’ - to a smaller scale, and this usually means a heightened prominence for the practices of face-to-face interaction (Chaney, 1996; de Swaan, 1995). Through participation within an identification, individuals may define themselves according to the others who they also see as constituting that identification. Identifications can, in this sense, be constructed as virtual ‘mirrors of identity’ - you see what you are or want to think you are (Goffman, 1963).

Identifications do not replace identities, for an identification, once established, “does not obliterate difference” (Hall 1996: 3). Identity retains a powerful significance. What is being proposed is that at certain times and in certain places aspects of our identity - or elements that constitute it - are submerged beneath a usually transitory feeling of social identification. In these situations, notions which are central to our personal biographies - our understandings of our own and others’ gender, ethnicity, social class - can become temporarily eclipsed by what it is that we share with those with whom we are co-present. First and foremost this is usually our occupation of (a) space. More important than what divides or what distinguishes us as individuals is what unites us or what we share, even if this is only the space and time which we temporarily co-inhabit. The submerged aspects of our identity - our personal biographies - may still be resonant, yet in a muted, almost subconscious fashion. This construction of identifications thus challenges the predominant sociological focus upon the individual without dismissing it. The contexts and forms of our focused group or social interactions become central to our sense of our selves (Goffman, 1959). In contradistinction to some notions of self-identity then, in which increasing formalisation and individualisation of consumption practices are deemed to produce a weakening uniformity of consumption choices and experiences, and in which the constant amendment of the self is achieved through a “parading of its ‘identity’” (Warde, 1994a: 882), identifications cast the practices of consuming as being both generated by, yet also contributing toward, the sharing of styles, of spaces and even of emotions and sentiments.
Sun and Luke's stories about their desires for a sense of belonging and identification through clubbing are examples of the shared emotional understandings which clubbing can provide. An understanding of the practical constitution of these identifications is deepened in the following stages of the Night Out. However, establishing these identifications is about much more than merely displaying the correct clothing or demonstrating a knowledge of the musical forms involved in a clubbing genre. Issues of distinction and stylisation are more complex than this, and it is to these practices of being 'cool' and demonstrating 'style' that I now turn.

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**2 Clubbing and Coolness - Distinctions and Belongings**

The sensations of belonging that appear so central to clubbing are partly constituted through the processes, practices and experience of being cool (or not) while clubbing. Styles of dress, of speech, of dancing, choices about which beer to drink, clubbing venues, or about drugs - these can all be central to the notion of belongings through which clubbers can experience clubbing as part of a collectivity (a crowd) as opposed to individually (or atomistically).

When sharing a style, which, in one sense, might be understood as a more everyday way of describing a facet of sociality, people can - though do not always - identify themselves as a group, as having something in common. What is shared may temporarily become more significant than what is distinct. Further, this sense of identification may also be perceived from the 'outside' - the group may be identifiable as such by those that are not, whether through choice or exclusion, part of that group.

**BEN:** Tell me more about this word “trendy” that you use?

**SIMON:** Ummm ... clothes, movements, the way that people look at you, ummm ...

**BEN:** What do you mean?

**SIMON:** Umm, trendy was Martin's word firstly, secondly umm, it may not be whether people are trendy whatever that is, as in they're following a trend or...
they're setting a trend of whatever but more importantly whether they think they're trendy [yeah] and I think that's something that you can see in people's eyes, especially women because I'm more used to ... well there's definitely a difference in the way that men and women look at each other in social circumstances like bars and clubs.

BEN: So, to carry on using the word for a minute it was a trendy night ... or ...
SIMON: Yeah that's why people feel justified in looking at you and you get the sort of raised eyebrow or they just check you out. They check you out to see if you're as cool as them. It's a process that I don't really go through but this is what I've picked up from other people looking at me. In places - not all the time, this is going to sound ridiculous - but I actually I find it more in pubs in Soho at 6 o'clock on a Friday evening when everyone's sort of drinking their heads off and all the fucking media types from Soho are there checking each other out and you come along, a fucking yokel from the sticks and order a couple of pints of cider and they look across at you with their cappuccino's and gin and tonics and you wonder what they are thinking. I don't think that this is entirely in my head, I actually think that some people in London are quite good at giving you these looks. It's self-defence for them maybe but erm ....

BEN: So you can feel them looking you up and down?
SIMON: I feel that "checking you out" is a better phrase.

BEN: Do you do it?
SIMON: No, not as much. I really don't think that I do. It's all suddenly turned into something that sounds ridiculously paranoid fantasy, but ummm, I suppose I'm definitely ... I don't want people to think that I'm a fucking joke when I go out in any social thing and so I'm always slightly worried that people are thinking like that, and ummm, because London is such a ridiculously ambitious social-climbing money-grabbing tight-arse place people are good at checking each other out in this way. It's just a kind of showing their feathers, it's posture. You know "are you a stranger ... are you some kind of big mover and shaker or are you a punter ... are you likely to come over and fucking elbow someone in the face?", I mean these are all questions that go through your mind, although less so last night. I think what you said about feeling comfortable in the crowd, I can't deny that I felt that I wasn't in any way in any physical danger at all in that club last night. It seems odd to bring it up but there have been times in the past when I've been in clubs and I've been worried about that slightly. There are people in clubs who will go up to you and try and
get you to go to an after-party party and they'll tell you where it is and it will be in some fucking no-go area of London [uh-huh], some really rough place, and you'll think “oh that sounds cool. I'll check that out” and then you get there and you realise that someone's been pulling your leg.26

It is apparent from this extract that Simon spends a considerable amount of time on thinking about how he and others in the clubbing crowd are presenting themselves to each other as part of, as well as before and subsequent to, their clubbing experiences. Of particular significance is Simon's notion that it is less important whether you actually are cool than whether you think you are cool. This would seem to confirm the suggestion that 'coolness', for some, is about more than the display of certain clothing or techniques. In experiencing oneself as cool (or not) and judging others as cool (or not), complex processes of 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984) and differentiation are involved as well as learned or acquired practices and techniques of 'belonging'. In this second part of the Chapter, I look in detail at the notion of coolness and discuss its centrality to understandings of belongings in the clubbing experience.

I make four brief points. First I briefly discuss the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) on 'distinction' - his sociology of taste has recently been used by Thornton (1995) in her examination of the creation of clubbing genre and “taste cultures” through various media. Second, I attempt to go beyond or 'behind' Bourdieu’s notion of distinction and the establishment of difference in suggesting that the clubber chooses the clubbing crowd as much as and probably before the stylisation which may characterise that crowd, so in the clubbing crowd there are as many concerns with stylisation and establishing affiliations as there are with establishing differences. Thirdly, I contextualise these points through addressing the different conceptions of what is cool and the hierarchies through which these conceptions are constituted, particularly in respect of notions of the ‘mainstream’. Fourthly, I attempt to bring these first three points together in suggesting that choice of club Night becomes a vital moment of self-identification and is thus entangled in processes of identity formation and amendment.

26 This is an extract from the second interview with Simon.
cool and distinctions

Consumption is [...] a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code [...]. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason.

(Bourdieu, 1984: 2)

In his analysis of the ways in which various consumer goods and the form of their consuming are used by specific groups in the process of demarcating their distinctive way of living as being different from that of ‘others’, Pierre Bourdieu (1984; originally published in 1979) sets out how different status groups in the French society of the 1960s and 1970s have differing access to various forms of capital. Bourdieu suggests that through this ‘distinction’ they distinguish themselves from those in other status groups.

Access to economic capital - money, wealth, real estate, factories, shares - provides a different form of distinction to those with access to cultural or intellectual capital - the ability to be able to talk and write about arts, culture, music, and to create new cultural products through this ability. It also provides a different form of distinction to those with social capital - who you know, and who knows you (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu, cultural distinctions are used to support class distinctions, with notions of taste - as an ideological category - functioning partly as markers of ‘class’, where ‘class’ is understood both as a socio-economic categorisation and a particular level of quality (Bocock, 1993).

Bourdieu attempts to fuse a conception of socio-economic structuring in capitalist societies with that of the structurings of cultural symbols and signs. He highlights the role of education in reproducing over time the structurings of society in cultural (symbolic) and socio-economic terms. In this way Bourdieu establishes a link between consuming practices and symbolic or imaginary cultural meanings (cultural capital). Thus consumption is not merely, or not only, about the satisfaction of biological needs such as eating and staying warm but is also about the creation of, and affiliations with, status groups. Acquired tastes for specific sporting, musical or other aesthetic forms are cultivated and developed into ‘good’ tastes through both formal and informal educational settings as well
as within the status groups themselves. Differences in taste are used in this way as forms of distinction.

Building upon Bourdieu’s notions of taste and cultural capital, Sarah Thornton (1995) opens out an understanding of the ways in which coolness, or what she refers to as “hipness” (ibid: 11), works in clubbing cultures. Thornton conceives of coolness as being a form of subcultural capital:

Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. In many ways it affects the standing of the young like its adult equivalent. Subcultural capital can be objectified or embodied. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections [...]. Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles.

(Thornton, 1995: 11-12; emphasis in original)

This is an effective approach to developing understandings of the ways in which clubbers define, locate and affiliate themselves with larger social formations within wider clubbing cultures. In this way Thornton infers that deficiencies in the subcultural capital required to decipher the ‘codes’ of clubbing can lead to exclusion through the “condescension” and derision of those that have acquired the necessary codes (Bourdieu, 1984: 57). Thornton goes on to discuss in detail the distinctions that characterised early-1990s clubbing in terms of media constructions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste, and in particular focuses on the distinction between the mainstream and the ‘hip’. I want to branch out on a tangent and consider the crowd context of these processes of distinction. Thus, turning more to the identifications produced through these distinctions themselves, I flip these processes of distinction over and look instead at the relationships between stylisations or shared notions of what is cool, and belongings.

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27 See Peterson & Simkus (1992) for a more detailed discussion of some of the ways in which occupational status can be linked to tastes in music.

28 For Thornton (1995: 14; emphasis in original) “... the difference between being in or out of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure”.
cool and belongings

Simon’s story about trendiness, coolness and “checking people out”, presented at the beginning of this section, is indicative of the intensive monitoring of self and others that is an important part of the clubbing experience, and, indeed, of social life more generally. Clubbers distinguish themselves from others through their tastes in clothing, music, dancing techniques, clubbing genre and so on. These tastes are trained and refined and constantly monitored not only in order to distinguish oneself from another but also in identifying with those that share one’s distinctive styles and preferences - two subtly different aspects of the same processes.

Dwayne openly admits to being “elitist, to having “trained his tastes” - a process which he appears to see as inevitable and, he infers, almost obligatory. This point appears to offer support to the Bourdieuan thesis of distinction, as well as to Thornton’s theorisation of

29 From the second interview with Dwayne.
"subcultural capital". Dwayne clearly differentiates himself from other clubbers who, "because they don't have time, perhaps because they don't have the resources", "cannot understand these different styles", but who, instead, "get it later, when it's mainstream". However, in addition to these important points about differentiation from others are a further set of points about Dwayne's relationship with the crowd around him and his enjoyment of being within that crowd. He holds strong feelings about with whom he desires to identify - feelings so strong that they can result in Dwayne being put off certain music that he would otherwise enjoy purely because clubbers he perceives as less cool than himself appear to like that music: "if people I didn't like liked the music I like, it would spoil the music". When Dwayne goes clubbing he wants to find himself - in both senses of the term - amongst other clubbers whom he perceives as being much cooler than himself. Dwayne wants to identify, and be identified with, clubbers who move, dress and occasionally talk in ways which are cooler than how he perceives himself - "body language, dress and probably a lot of what I fantasize into these people" are all important.

Yet, despite actively wanting to identify with those whom he perceives as cooler than he is, Dwayne openly admits that he has no way of knowing whether they are actually cooler than he believes himself to be because he does not talk to them. Vitally, this appears not to matter to Dwayne, although it is, again, indicative of the alternate interactional orderings that can characterise clubbing. As Simon suggested earlier, in one sense it is less important whether people are cool than whether they think they are cool. In a similar way, it appears that, for Dwayne at least, it is less important whether those around him are actually cooler than him than they are identified by him as being cooler than himself. This leads to the possibility that the clubbers whom Dwayne thinks are not cool may well understand themselves as being cool, and may even perceive Dwayne as un-cool. Thus coolness is not just a quality that is ascribed and seen to be possessed but also a hierarchically-based and contextual sensation that is produced through mental–physical processes of striving, desire, fantasy and imagination.

The crucial point here is that other clubbers within the clubbing crowd of which he is a constitutive member are central to Dwayne's understandings of both what is cool and what is not, as well as to his construction of himself and his identifications with that crowd. Thus, processes of distinction and questions of taste constructed in advance certainly run through the constitution of the Night for Dwayne. Yet so also do imaginings and fantasies.

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30 These sentiments chime with those of Sarah in the earlier extract in which she discusses her desire to be amongst famous pop stars when she goes clubbing - "I'm happy, I've had a dose - I can go home".
his fantasies - about the coolness of those with whom he might be associating - and thus how he in turn might be perceived by others - and about his belongings within that clubbing crowd. Identifications and concerns about stylisation and belonging might thus be understood as complementary and equally important processes to those of distinction. These notions of belonging clearly foreground the proximity and tactile quality of being within the clubbing crowd itself.

Clubbing groups and the social formations constituting club Nights might thus be better understood in similar terms to Maffesoli’s (1988b; 1995) “neo-tribes”: micro-groupings that develop as a result of the constant coming and going between social situations that occurs in society and which are premised upon a superseding or submerging of identities (Maffesoli, 1988b). For Maffesoli, these “tribal formations” foreground the immediate and the affectual and are marked more by their practices and spacings of inclusion and exclusion and their shared styles than by more formalised memberships and contractual codes of behaviour - the latter being more reminiscent of notions of lifestyle (Shields, 1992c). Although I have certain reservations about the supposed newness (the ‘neo-’) of these social groupings, the conception of “neo-tribes” outlined by Maffesoli does appear to recognise the centrality of, for example, the sense of emotional community, the ephemerality, the importance of atmosphere, and the key notion of emergent identifications that characterise the belongings of clubbing in contrast to more rigid notions of lifestyle.

In short, the processes of identification that I have been outlining are suggestive of how, in clubbing, belongings can come before and at times supersede identities (Warde, 1994b). That is, clubbers seek to identify with others not just through the physical display of the insignia of clubbing, for group identification requires subtly more than the accoutrements of specialized language, certain techniques of interaction, shared tastes and familiarity

Maffesoli (1995) differentiates these relatively unstable and multiple “tribal formations” from those associated with notions of more conventional ‘lifestyles’ by proposing that it is less membership per se that is important than the fluid movement between different temporary memberships. Thus, “neo-tribes” prioritise the here and now, the affectual and the tactile. These extensive and on-going debates over the nature and role of lifestyles in contemporary consumer society require a fuller treatment than is possible here. For further discussion see: Campbell (1995), for his sizzling attack on the sociological relevance and construction of lifestyles; Chaney (1996), for a comprehensive review of many different theorisations; Hetherington (1994), who argues that the social centrality of certain sites in lifestyles suggests that they might be better understood in terms of “communions” or (after Schmalenbach, 1922) as Bünde; Shields (1992a: 2; citing Tomlinson, 1990), who proposes that lifestyles might be defined as “the emergence of new identifications”; and, Sobel (1981), who constructs lifestyles as “modes of living” (ibid: 3).
(Warde, 1994b). The belongings constituted through shared membership of the clubbing crowd can only be experienced in that form and to that intensity in the clubbing crowd in which a sharing of space is possible, and socially so powerful. The individual clubbers’ imaginings and constructions of their own styles thus take on their most powerful meanings in the presence of others whom they perceive to be similar to, or even cooler than, how they perceive themselves.

Given this prominence for co-presence, tactility and the affectual in the development of identifications, it follows that the perceptions and practices of belonging are both reflexive and embodied. They are constituted through the languages of the body such as gesturings and accepted practices such as dancing techniques as well as through elements of dress and fashion, and are premised upon a clubber’s understanding of what is cool and what is not cool at varying times and in differing situations. Furthermore, the nature and extent of these perceptions and practices also depend upon whether a clubber feels that they themselves are cool, and if they do, how cool.

Understood one way, the management of cool in the achievement of belongings can be approached through the inversion of Erving Goffman’s (1968) study of Stigma. Goffman looks at the management of tension for the discredited, and of information control for the discreditable. I am looking at the notion of style as used and practiced by clubbers and am interested in the management of attention for the stylish and those who perceive themselves as cool, and the management of information control for the potentially stylish - those who aspire to be seen or understood as being cool. Goffman looks at those individuals who are in possession of “attributes which may be deeply discrediting”; I am looking at a situation where individuals may be, or may aspire to be, in possession of attributes which may be socially desirable or attractive. Where Goffman concentrates upon the management of a “spoiled identity”, I am instead interested in the management of what might be the opposite - a ‘cool identity’. Where Goffman is explicitly concerned with notions of stigma as expressed or controlled (suppressed), I am interested rather more in expressions of coolness. Apart from an explicit recognition of the multiple hierarchies which operate within notions of coolness - what is cool to one may be un-cool to another - what this Goffmanian reading of ‘coolness’ adds to my unfolding conception, above all, is

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32 Warde (1994b) criticises Bauman for suggesting that lifestyle membership is easy to attain, there being “no more, or almost no more, to my making myself a member of that group than sporting [...] signs: wearing the group-specific dress, buying the group-specific records” (Bauman, 1990: 206).
33 I set out this parallel discussion of stigma and style in more detail in an earlier paper (Malbon, 1997). I further address the practices and spacings of the clubbing crowd through this performative lens - especially in terms of its prioritisation of music and dancing - in Chapter Two.
an emphasis upon on-going, contextual and embodied practices. Belongings are about much more than choosing the ‘right’ clothes, although this can also be important. Belongings are also practiced through the techniques of sociality on a more embodied level and with an awareness to the continually changing social demands of the encounter\(^{34}\).

**cool and COOL**

It follows from the above that while group belongings can be established through shared conceptions of what is cool, then notions of not belonging can also arise through a disparity between these conceptions, as Dwayne’s story demonstrates. There is no fixed notion of what is cool and what is not, for not only will each individual clubber understand coolness in different ways, but within the identifications and hierarchies of belonging that notions of style partially constitute there will always be sub-hierarchies and sub-sub-hierarchies. Where one clubber sees cool another will see non-cool.

What is cool (or ‘hip’) is often contrasted with ‘the mainstream’ (see Thornton, 1995)\(^{35}\). The actual meaning of the word ‘mainstream’ is difficult to ascertain and few people appear to define themselves as ‘mainstream’ clubbers - I have yet to meet anyone who has done so - yet an awareness of what the term appears to represent is widespread.

MARK: ... I’m trying to make a structured argument here!!! [we laugh]. Basically you have, I mean it’s quite easy, basically you have your like your out of town suburban pick-up joint type of place [okay], which are your, like where I live, The Regal, and ... then you’ve got like your normal clubs in central London which attract people from all over this place, as opposed to just the suburb where they’re in [right] say, Leisure Lounge or something like that ... Now, what you’ve got in London which you haven’t got in most other places - you’ve got the Super-Club phenomenon where you’ve got your Temple, your Club UK arguably, things like

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\(^{34}\) Vittally, these practices are not conceptualised in the Maussian (1979) sense of “body techniques”, which were conceived of as “independent of their situations and conditions of exercise” (Crossley, 1995: 135), nor in the Bourdieuan (1984) sense of being an embodied expression of pre-existing (especially class-originating) practices in the form of the “habitus”. Rather, Goffman conceived of practices as more self-conscious, if, at times, also heavily routinized, forms of identity-management which were always oriented to the social situations of the moment. Goffman approaches practical embodied action as being “interwoven with the perceptual field of the agent” (Crossley, 1995: 136) and thus varying temporally and spatially across and within social settings and the encounters occurring within them.

\(^{35}\) The ‘mainstream’ in clubbing is usually used to refer to what the clubber is not, whatever their preferences and resources of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Again, Thornton deals with these relationships between the ‘hip’ and the ‘mainstream’ in extensive detail.
that, places like that. They’re on every tourist’s map [I laugh] - some people adore them, some people hate them, I mean I’ve got a friend who goes down to the Temple every single week. They absolutely love them. Now you see I would absolutely... I’ve never been there, actually, but... let’s put it like this, every time I say I want to go there, I want to experience it so I can write it off, okay [right], my friends who are going to take me go “oh I had such a bad time last week, let’s not bother, okay?”, and it’s like that kind of club phenomenon where you have VIP rooms and things like that, which just doesn’t interest me at all. Then, which leads me on to the places like what I call “underground clubs” which is like most of the places I go to, not Parallel YOUniversity - most of the places I go to, ummm... where, there’s no security, there’s no dress code, you’re going to get in whatever you’re wearing basically [okay] and it’s cheap and it’s all on a fairly communal basis really...

Mark draws out a number of distinctions between his preferences in clubbing and ‘other’ forms or genre of clubbing. First, he suggests that suburban clubbing is, for him, qualitatively different to clubbing in central London in terms of the constitution of the crowd. Second, within central London he distinguishes between “super-clubs” - clubs which “are on every tourist’s map” - and “underground clubs”, in which, and contrasting with the former, “there’s no security, there’s no dress code, you’re going to get in whatever you’re wearing [...] it’s cheap and it’s all on a fairly communal basis”. Mark’s preferences are clearly contrasted against and defined in terms of his perception of other clubs which he sees as un-cool, despite having “never actually been” to these other clubs. Thus for Mark, the “super-clubs” such as the Temple - which other clubbers whom I interviewed, such as John and Sun, saw as cool - are the equivalent of the ‘mainstream’.

The ‘mainstream’ plays the role of the ‘other’ for clubbers; the ‘mainstream’ is everything which they stand against, everything which their choice of clubbing experience is not about (Thornton, 1995). The description ‘mainstream’ is applied to club Nights, clothing, musics and attitudes which are, in some way, the antithesis of what clubbers perceive as clubbing’s raison d’être, at least as far as they are concerned. By inference, this is also the antithesis of how they see themselves, at least whilst clubbing. There are many scenes and musical genres of club Nights in London, yet the one which most clubbers see themselves as outside, and even in opposition to, are those constituted by the chains of

36 From the first interview with Mark.
37 During our two clubbing Nights Out, Mark repeatedly referred to his ‘other life’ as a consultant for a large London-based consultancy - he contrasted this ‘mainstream’ (because ‘normal’ and popular) aspect of his personality with his ‘underground’ tastes in clubbing.
Mecca and Ritzy discotheques, of which The Regal that Mark discusses is one example, and Zen, which Kim and Valerie mention, is another. These are "the site[s] that [have] been consistently identified as the location of the mainstream by dance crowds and academics alike" (Thornton, 1995: 106).

As an attitude, against which other attitudes can be constructed and identified with, the 'mainstream' plays an important role in the construction of some semblance of exclusivity and a feeling of belonging, whatever the clubbing genre concerned. Different clubbers voice their concerns with style, with what they see as cool, and with the presentation of themselves as cool, in different ways - for some these concerns are foregrounded, for others they appear unimportant. The selection of a particular Night Out from the huge number on offer provides an apposite and timely example of these dual processes of distinction and identification.

cool crowds - selecting a Night

Choice of club Night is potentially confusing, given the huge and growing number of club Nights on offer. Yet somehow individual clubbers select a Night week after week. The choice of clubbing experience is tied in with a set of issues about how one sees oneself in relation to the clubbing crowd with which one wishes to identify. Thus, the processes through which clubbers whittle down the vast set of choices to a number of selections, often returned to time after time, provide insights into the construction and handling of the identifications that can be achieved through clubbing. The complex and volatile hierarchies of cool which I have started to sketch out above are most obviously in operation in terms of decisions about where to go and with whom. Nights appear to be selected as much in terms of where and with whom the clubbers wish to be seen and be associated as what the club Nights will consist of in terms of music and DJs, as Dwayne's story, above, exemplified. The belongings achievable through clubbing thus pervade even processes of pre-clubbing choice. In many cases the belongings of clubbing are in this way being forged even before the clubber gets into the clubbing crowd and are merely reinforced and consolidated once entry has been achieved.

Clubbers will have at their disposal a multitude of available sources which may assist them in their choices - choices which, given the potentially damaging outcome of 'wrong' choice,
take on a central significance. The weekly London listings magazine *Time Out*, for example, breaks down the vast choice of listed club Nights into various musically-based genres in an apparent attempt to ease the selection procedures of the clubbers. Most commonly, clubbers identify various Nights and clubs as potentially suitable for them through a mixture of media - listings such as *Time Out*, flyers, and to a lesser extent fly-posters and very occasionally television. Carrying most weight are the recommendations of friends and of course previous personal experiences. While listings sources are used by many clubbers in their club selection process, not all clubbers use listings in a conventional manner with the intended purpose of the listing occasionally being subverted as clubbers choose not to go to a Night that they might have attended purely because it is listed.

BEN: Yeah ... so how do you find out about these nights then?
MARK: Ummm, typically either from friends who hear from other people who are organising it or from flyers for particular events.
BEN: And where do you pick the flyers up?
MARK: Usually on the way out of events, because as you know, basically as you go out of an event you’ll get flyers for similar events [yeah] and it all works like that really. Sometimes there’s other parties and you don’t get to hear about them and someone will phone you up and say “Hey!, don’t go there, come to this one instead, it’ll be a lot better” and it usually is. So ... a lot of the things that I go to are not one-offs but are irregular events, I mean things ... there’s one night you might have heard of called *Polypresence* [yeah I’ve heard of it] and that’s changed it’s venue ... I think it’s been in three different venues so ... and it’s really quite small. There’s another night called *Eutopia* [oh yeah] which takes place at Thyssen Street [right] but they just seem to do it when they like it and I like things like that.
BEN: How else do you get to know about these parties?
MARK: Flyers mostly [really?], cos I put things on my web-site and I get those mainly through flyers, so ... and that accounts for maybe 90% of the parties that I’m aiming at [ummm], and the other ones are either semi-private parties, cos there’s all these type of semi-private parties where record labels put on their own parties and

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38 For further discussion and debate about the potentially anxiety-provoking consequences of consuming see Bauman (1988; 1990) for his elaboration of the ‘freedom thesis’ (that consumer choice is free choice because advertising and lifestyles assuage the anxiety involved in choosing), and Warde (1994a; 1994b) for his critique of this ‘freedom thesis’ (as well as the reflexive modernisation thesis of which it is one strand) in which he highlights Bauman’s neglect of processes of stylisation and the role of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983).
just invite their friends, effectively [right] ... things like that I usually find out about, but I usually don’t bother going as I wouldn’t know enough people [right].

BEN: What about nights like Sahara or Parallel, is that Time Out or flyers or ... ?

MARK: It’s funny you should say Time Out- if things are in Time Out then I usually won’t go to them [really?]. I know ... it’s really changed actually. Back to the Origins is probably the best example because I really liked Back to the Origins - I still do, I mean, to be honest - but since it’s been put in Time Out it’s basically become really popular. It’s on every tourist’s, every young clubbing tourist’s map of London, okay. It’s like, if it appears in Time Out I won’t go. It’s on tomorrow for example, and I’ll go into a newsagents and check it out and if it’s there I won’t go, and if it isn’t I’ll consider it ...

Some of the subtle distinctions which are involved in choosing between different Nights and the relatively complex construction of Mark’s notion of ‘coolness’ are evident in this extract. Immediately apparent is Mark’s inferred distinction between “parties” and club Nights. He repeatedly refers to the Nights he likes as “parties” which suggests their relative lack of organisation (and often a licence as well) compared to the club Nights which feature in Time Out and are accessible to all. Second, Mark uses Time Out to decide what NOT to go to, and thus he relies on flyers and the internet (he has his own website) for information about where to go. Third, friends are important - Mark will listen to friends’ recommendations about club Nights and the presence of friends at the parties that Mark attends is important enough for him to not go to a party that sounds as though it might be good if he finds that his friends won’t be there. Finally, Mark again refers to “every tourist’s map” as being something on which his choice of clubs would not appear; he would appear to group “tourists” firmly within his non-cool category!

The majority of club Nights that are organised to the extent that they appear in listings sources such as Time Out also produce and distribute flyers to other clubs and, more usually, specifically selected youth-based clothing and music shops, bars and restaurants. Club selection can also be based upon information disseminated through specially produced ‘guides’, clubbing magazines, internet mailing and discussion lists and local radio advertisements. Finally, as the stories of, Dwayne, Simon, and Sarah suggest, the likely constitution of the clubbing crowd at any given Night is often an important factor in any decision. Attendance is premised at least partly in terms of a process of self-identification -

39 An extract from the first interview with Mark.
40 Guides include the bi-annually produced “UK Club Guide".
Part Two: Chapter 1 - Getting Into It, Feeling Part Of It

'are the others present likely to be like, or cooler than, me?'. While the numerous guides and clubbing listings can provide an indication of what the clubbing crowd might be like at a club Night, it is not until the clubber gains physical access to the club Night that they find out what the crowd is like and whether they feel that they belong there. However, the negotiation of entry to the club and the experience of queuing can provide an early indication of the general style of the clubbing crowd - what people are wearing, whether there are dress restrictions of a set 'dress code', the broad age, gender and ethnic constitution of the crowd. The door can also provide the clubber with the first real test of their claim to belong.

* * * *

3 Getting Into The Club

It is not possible to imagine a society that does not make extensive use of ground rules.

(Goffman, 1971: xiv)

EXTRACT FROM CLUBBING JOURNAL (08.03.96): What a queue!! I'd say that there were about 200 plus a totally separate queue for the guest list. The club is fenced off in an old warehouse and the queue snakes along the fence. We decided to stick it, even though it was quite late [midnight] and drizzling. About four or five coaches of 'glammed-up' clubbers arrived and they were fast-tracked straight to the front while we just carried on queuing - booked ahead I guess. We were envious. A few girls in our group were busy stuffing cling-film-wrapped E's down their bras as subtly as was possible while one of John's friends was quickly hollowing out a cigarette and using that for pill-storage. We were all a little twitchy, pensive and edgy and this was undoubtedly due to the imminent negotiation of the door - people seemed worried about getting in with their drugs, if they had them, and those that didn't were nervous about getting in anyway. John had on trainers and we all suddenly panicked a little when we saw a man walking away from the front of the queue who also had on trainers - was it the trainers that he was being rejected for? was it something else? what would we do if John got turned away? The door is one of the few places that clubbers sometimes have to literally
prove their identity both in the simple sense of age but also in the more complex sense of passing themselves off as the ‘right type of clubber’ for that club - proving their ‘social identity’. The door becomes a defining moment, the moment where you both partially take on and are partially ascribed an identification.

We arrived at the front of the queue about an hour after we had started queuing, say near 1am, after many nervous cigarettes and excitable chat about the Night ahead. I was really nervous and tried to look cool (i.e. confident) - this became even harder when the two guys in front of us didn’t get in. This intimidatingly beautiful girl with the bouncers at the front of the queue seemed to be choosing who was in and who was not, and she asked these two guys in front who they were with (meaning, I suppose, “where are your partners?”) and when they said that they were by themselves she just said “Sorry boys, you’re not going to be getting in tonight”. Scary - in front of all those people! After an hour of rainy queuing I know I would have been totally destroyed by this, although of course you can’t say anything with six or seven massive bouncers next to you. We were waved straight through, and John even managed to crack a gag with the ‘picker’ girl. I was relieved although I felt a little sorry for the two in front who were wandering off home in the rain, dejected. But my thoughts quickly turned to the scenes inside. The crowd were already going berserk.

Getting into a club - joining a clubbing crowd - can be a mere formality, yet it can be also be an anxiety-provoking experience, with some clubbers comparing club entry to passing an exam: “one needs to study the look, prepare the body and stay cool under pressure” (Thornton, 1995: 114). Negotiating entry can certainly demand the display of a ‘correct’ style, the deployment of a very specific set of practices, and a successfully employed “personal front” - “the complex of clothing, make-up, hairdo, and other surface decorations he [sic] carries about on his person” (Goffman, 1963: 25). However, it would be a distortion to pretend that a clubber keen to gain entry can access any club given careful observation of what is required - as I suggested above, “the sharing of paraphernalia is a weak basis for membership or solidarity” (Warde, 1994b: 71). Not only does the development of this ‘personal front’ require practice, but the social identity of the clubber needs to qualify in certain other ways as well. Like most other social settings, clubs have

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41 This is an extract from my clubbing journal for my first Night Out with John (08.03.96).
“entry qualifications” (Goffman, 1963: 9) which must be met, and these entry qualifications extend beyond wearing the ‘correct’ clothing (although exclusion is almost always explained in terms of the ‘wrong’ clothing) and the ‘correct’ deployment of body techniques (Mauss, 1979). In addition to enforcing judgements about coolness, bouncers on ‘the door’ at clubs can also reinforce wider societal prejudices in respect of ethnicity, gender and ‘good looks’ - some clubbers find entry more problematic than others, and not everything is as always as ‘PLUR’ (peace, love, unity and respect) as many clubs and clubbers would suggest.

SUN: I’m a hypocrite about this in that if I get in [to the club] I’m less fussed, but I’m less of a hypocrite about it than some people I know. I don’t like clubs with dress policies [right] - there was a time when ... okay I’ll give you a little anecdote ... [uh-huh]. I’d been to Temple the previous week cos a friend of mine had gotten in on the guest list and it was y’know, a very nice club inside. Can’t fault it in terms of its architecture and the sound system and what have you ... But I noticed like, y’know, me getting fast-tracked in on the guest list queue and seeing all the poor punters waiting in the queue outside and like looking at the looks they got and remembering the times I’d been on that side of the fence and remembering the looks I’d given the guest list queue, and anyway, I sort of forgot about it, and I got in, and I noticed that the proportion of white people inside was like a lot higher than the proportion of white people in the queue. Ummm ... and I noticed things like, even though I was bollocksed on an E, and everything was really happy and friendly, there was just something about it y’know? Guilty feet have no rhythm? Next week me and an Asian friend of mine, another bloke, we queued for ages, and we got to the front and what happened was they let us wait there at the front and then they opened the gate up as if to let us in and then out of the blue they said “Right this way gentleman you’re not getting in tonight” ... now I know what the Temple bouncers are like so we didn’t fucking complain, we just walked off totally quiet and gave them no shit at all. And as we walked off they called out “You don’t have a clue do you?” and I thought that was out of order. And me and Roger both smelled

42 A widely-used clubbing maxim, often tagged on to the signature of an e-mail, for example. 43 The following extract would appear to support Sarah Thornton’s proposal that, while clubs may accommodate alternative cultures they “tend to duplicate structures of exclusion and stratification found elsewhere. ‘Black’ men in particular, find themselves barred, or, more usually, subject to maximum quotas. This ongoing fact should not be forgotten in the face of the utopian ‘everybody welcome’ discourses in which dance clubs are intermittently enveloped” (ibid: 25). I return to these vital points in the final Chapter of the Night. 44 A world-famous club in South London, often attracting in excess of 2000 clubbers on a Friday and Saturday evening.
ourselves, it wasn’t our clothes, y’know we were dressed right, it was cos we were two Asian men and they don’t want too many Paki’s in the club - they don’t want ANY Paki’s in the club. What we did was we jumped in a cab and we went to The Tunnel which has got a reputation for having a really strict door policy and we got there about two a.m., and there were a couple of beautiful people types trying to blag their way in saying “Nah - we’re on the guest list” and the bouncers weren’t having anything of it and we were like waiting for them to like sort themselves out and eventually my mate called out y’know “YO! look are you like going to let us in?” and the bouncer said “are you going to pay?” and I said “well, yeah, that’s traditional!”, and they let us in - bang! And that was cool. I think it’s possible to have a dressed-up club without a dress code. I think you could just say to people can you make an effort to dress up and let them in first come first served. I don’t like the elitism, I don’t like guest lists, I don’t like any of that shit - it’s just an excuse for all the standard prejudices that you see in society to rear their ugly head in a scene I really like. So I try and avoid places with door policies.

In this extract, Sun is narrating the trials of gaining access to the same club (the Temple) to which I accompanied John in the extract from my research journal, above. In fact, Sun and his friend Roger could quite easily have been the two who were excluded in front of us, except that they were white. Sun’s experiences are extraordinary in terms of the other clubbers whom I interviewed, although others did mention instances of ‘problems’ at the door, in that Sun’s identity as “Asian” seemed to him to supersede his credentials of coolness. His ‘belongings’ were always about much more than just passing as ‘cool’. Sun experiences the Temple in very different ways during separate visits - initially, he is fast-tracked in on the guest list, then, a second time, he and his friend Roger are point-blank refused entry. Secondly, Sun obviously blames his exclusion from the Temple on his “Asian” identity, proposing that door policies are often “just an excuse for all the standard prejudices that you see in society to rear their ugly head in a scene [he] really like[s]”. How far this is actually the case is not clear from my clubbing visits and interviews, given the narrow range of social identities which the clubbers whom I interviewed displayed.

What is apparent from this extract, however, is that experiences of door policies and of gaining entry to clubs differ, even for the same clubber, and from club to club, and Night to Night. The identities of the clubbers attempting to gain entry to the club, and thus also to sensations of crowd belongings beyond the door, are strongly implicated in the processes

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45 From the first interview with Sun.
of distinction which the door staff and ‘pickers’ exercise at the moment of entry. These door staff act as a “last measure” in the processes of self-selection and self-identification that clubbers go through (Thornton, 1995: 22).

If access to information about the club and taste in music fail to segregate the crowd, the bouncers will ensure the semi-private nature of these public spaces by refusing admission to ‘those who don’t belong’.

(Thornton, 1995: 22-24)

The explicit use of supposedly ‘inappropriate clothing’ as an excuse to exclude someone from admittance to a club is common, whether or not that is the genuine reason. While, as Sun outlines above and as I record in the extract from my research diary, exclusion for not displaying the correct identity can be based upon crude notions of ethnicity and gender as well as upon the more obvious criteria of age, there are also instances where clothing really does appear to be a measure of distinction for the door staff.

BEN: Have you ever been told that you couldn’t come in for any reason?

MARIA: Yeah, actually .. about two months ago, yeah I was very upset [really?]. We went down to The Studio, and ummm ... it was, I’m disgusted actually, I had nice shiny trousers on, I had my hair nice, with a bit of make up on, and I’ve got a pair of Vans [trainers], they were a bit dirty but they’re “fashion trainers”, they’re not “trainers” and my friend was wearing a shitty old pair of jeans, a pair of fucked up old Cats [shoes], a t-shirt with blim-burns in and we got to the door and the blokes like looked at me and said “Oh, I don’t know if you can come in you’ve got trainers on”. I went “oh, hello?” and he said “well he can come in but I’m not sure that you can - I’ll get the woman over” and she came over and she looked me up and down and she said “no, you’re too scruffy” and my friend was tidy enough and better presented because he had his Cats [boots] on and they weren’t trainers, that he was allowed to go in, and then while we were deciding whether we really wanted to go back to get into some shoes so that we could get in here were we really didn’t like the door policy, they let a little girl in, I say a little girl - 1 don’t know how old she was but do you know what I mean - a pathetic little girl with a little dress and

46 “Blim burns” are the result of burning fragments of cannabis falling out of ‘joints’ onto a reclining smoker’s chest - in this extract Maria possibly mentions them to stress the apparently dishevelled appearance of her friend in contrast to the “office workers”.
she was wearing trainers right in front of me and I was like, well if you’re going to have a door policy like that then stick to it. They didn’t advertise anywhere that they had a no trainers policy which I think was quite bad. You know, in the end I don’t like that door policy, it’s uhhh ... basically the woman didn’t like the look of me, I don’t know why. It’s like there were people behind us who were like office workers, out on the piss, not clubbey types at all [right] but they were let in, and it’s like what do you want for your club - do you want people that like music and enjoy themselves, or do you want people that are going to get smashed? I wouldn’t ever go back there. It’s a difficult one, door policies, because obviously if people don’t like the look of you then obviously they’re not going to let you in. I do find it quite difficult because I’m sort of ... a lot of clubs do suffer from a male-only, sort of clubber type thing, and ummm ... I’m not an unattractive woman and I’m very keen on having a good time and I think that most of the time I think I’m quite a useful asset to their club.47

Rejection hurts, whatever the excuses given by the door staff. The negotiation of the door is a very explicit form of ‘identity-exposure’ in which clubbers attempt to pass a test. Many clubs have no dress codes, no restrictions in terms of the identities of those that may enter, with the exception of the legal age limit, which is difficult to enforce in any case, and getting into these clubs presents few problems other than finding the cost of admission. An example of this type of experience would be Bruce’s story of getting into Che Guevara, at the start of the Chapter. Other clubs, such as The Studio, to which Maria failed to gain entry and the Temple from which Sun was excluded, do discriminate in terms of dress, gender and even notions of how much a clubber might spend once in the club.

One of the clearest points that Maria makes in recounting her failure to get into The Studio is that she distinguishes between “office workers, out on the piss, not clubbey types at all [...] people that are going to get smashed”, and those like herself - “people that like music and enjoy themselves” and yet cannot understand why those who run The Studio do not make a similar distinction. This distinction parallels that made by Mark when he repeatedly refers to the “tourist map” of clubbing in London, and how he does not want to go to the same clubs as these “tourists”. Likewise, Maria infers that these are not the ‘real’ clubbers, and yet they are allowed in - quite likely because they are more likely to spend more money at the bar - and she is turned away. Maria is suddenly not very keen on The Studio when she sees who is being turned away and who is being allowed entry: “they let a little

47 An extract from the first interview with Maria.
girl in ...”. Furthermore, this rejection leads Maria to look at herself, to wonder why she was not admitted and how she might not have fitted - there is a palpable feeling of distress in what Maria says towards the end of this extract.

**clubbing crowds and belongings**

As a semi-private, musical environment which adapts to diverse fashions, proffers escape (sometimes with added transgressional thrills) and regulates who’s in and who’s out of the crowd, the dance club fulfils many youth cultural agendas.

(Thornton, 1995: 25)

These negotiations of the door, then, are indicative of the wider relationships and tensions between belongings and distinctions, identifications and exclusions, the cool and the ‘mainstream’, and inside(rs) and outside(rs), that have surfaced throughout this first stage of the Night Out. The door becomes merely the last of many pre-clubbing tests of belonging, most of which are self-posed. From first going clubbing, through choosing a style, identifying with a certain crowd, defining a ‘mainstream’, selecting a Night or Nights, to queuing and passing through into the club, the clubber is engaged in reflexive processes of self-selection and self-identification. For some these processes apparently become unnecessary - they know where they like, they like how they see themselves and the crowd of which they form a part, they know they are guaranteed a ‘safe night’, as Bruce described at the start of the Chapter. For others they provide moments of uncertainty and the risk of a public embarrassment, as exemplified in Maria’s story.

Yet the trials of the door appear worth paying. A clubber queuing to enter a club has already decided that they are ‘right’ for the club and that think that they could belong. The door becomes the moment when certain facets of the identity that a clubber has constructed for himrself or herself are used to gain access to a social situation in which other facets of that clubber’s identity may be - relatively speaking - submerged or unshackled. Thus these early and pre-clubbing stages of the Night are significant because they provide a test of identity, and the passing of this test - the validation of a clubber’s identity on the way through the door - can act to establish and reinforce the emergent belongings through which the clubbing crowd inside is bound together.
Notions and sensations of belonging - of the relationships between identities and identifications - are central to clubbing. The consuming crowds of clubbing are constituted, even in advance of their coming together, through concerns with shared styles, notions of the cool and the 'mainstream', and notions of belonging and exclusion. It is to the apparently chaotic yet intricately ordered interactions of the clubbing crowd once inside the club, through which these belongings are most powerful experienced, that I now turn.

SEB’S CLUBBING JOURNAL (06.05.95): It’s strange that while everybody’s happy to chill in Bello [a bar] and kill some time discussing last week, last night and how good tonight will be, really we’re all desperate to get in the Q. It’s struck me that the Party Posse are an extraordinary bunch indeed (this we already know - I’ve said it many times before). But what makes us special is our approach to life (speaking for myself, clubbing [...] is my life - and I’m sure the same is true for you). Cast your mind back to a time not so long ago, before all this started - when you’d go out for a night, I suspect that’s all you did ... not any more. Now we don’t just go out for a good time, nor even the best of times - we go out to put on a show. Tonight, just like every Saturday night, the curtain was set to go up on another superb performance ...

* * * *
Chapter 2

The Dancer From the Dance: Musical and Dancing Crowds

Every part of a man [sic] which can move gains a life of its own and acts as if independent, but the movements are all parallel, the limbs appear superimposed on one another, and thus density is added to their state of equivalence. Density and equality become one and the same. In the end, there appears to be a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose. When their excitement is at its height, these people really feel as one, and nothing but physical exhaustion can stop them.

(Canetti [1973] Crowds and Power: 35-36)
... you HAVE to dance!¹

The previous stage of the Night Out inferred that notions of belongings and identifications are important features in clubbers’ enjoyment of clubbing. In this second stage of the Night Out this focus upon belongings is progressed through an introduction to - and a critical understanding of - the clubbing crowd. Specifically, I am interested in the practices and spacings constituting the dancing crowd which lies at the heart of clubbing. I first briefly highlight the emotional and empathic quality of many contemporary consuming crowds, and propose that the experiencing of these crowds can provide sensations of ‘in-betweenness’ as consumers flux between notions of identity and identifications.

Secondly, I turn explicitly to the partially musically-constituted nature of the clubbing crowd. I note the relative neglect of our musical experiences by the social sciences, the centrality of music to the practices and spacings of clubbing, and the notion that the listeners also partly create the experience of that music.

Thirdly, I pick up these points in directly addressing the dancing crowds of clubbing. Again, I note the reticence and / or inability of both clubbers and academics to discuss dancing. I return to the sociality and performativity outlined in the Beginnings in stressing the social and technical practices that constitute dancing. I then elaborate upon this by suggesting that the spacings of dancing provide one approach to understanding the simultaneously imaginative and emotional, yet also practical, nature of dancing.

¹ A quote from a much longer story of Valerie’s in which she recounts the sensation of being compelled to dance by the music (see below).
1  **Crowds and Togetherness**

There is nothing man [sic] fears more than the touch of the unknown .... it is only in a crowd that a man can become free of this fear of being touched ... as soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch.

(Canetti, 1973: 15-16)

[T]he age that we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS.

(Le Bon, 1930: 15, emphasis in original)

The individual clubbers' relationships to the clubbing crowds of which they are a part, to the music, and perhaps most of all, to themselves, and the role of the micro-spacings of clubbing within these relationships, are of paramount importance to both the clubbers' enjoyment of the experience and the wider issue of the role of clubbing within the times and spaces of their wider everyday lives. The crowd-based nature of the clubbing experience appears critical in any understanding of its constitutive practices and spacings.

The notion of the crowd as in some way superseding the individual, as enabling the widespread experience of loss of self (or *exstasis*) amongst those within and of it, is the point of departure of Canetti's (1973) discussion of crowds and power. For Canetti, crowds are about belonging and the power that this belonging can provide and instil. The boundaries around and between crowds - real and/or imagined - are crucial to feelings of belonging and identification. Canetti suggests that those "standing outside do not really belong" (ibid: 17), while for those inside sensations of belonging can be prolonged even beyond the physical experience of the crowd:

[The crowd] is protected from outside influences which could become hostile and dangerous and it sets its hopes on repetition. It is the expectation of reassembly which enables its members to accept its dispersal. The building is waiting for them; it exists for their sake and, so long as it is there, they will be able to meet in the same manner. The space is theirs, even during the ebb, and in its emptiness it reminds them of the flood (ibid: 18).
The punctuated and at times almost ritual nature of first the integration then the fragmentation of crowds is itself partly constitutive of the bond through which members of that crowd may consolidate their attachments and identifications. Even whilst not physically within the crowd, members of a crowd may identify with certain spaces or sites central to the crowd (see Hetherington, 1996; 1997), specific times, memories, paraphernalia, and even others of - but not at that moment within - that crowd. Crowds can thus linger even after their dispersal.

Through opening out a complex and at times rambling typology of crowd forms, Canetti (1973) offers an understanding of crowds which he himself admits illuminates little of the individual feelings or practices of those within any particular crowd. Despite not dwelling upon the constitution of crowds at an individual scale, however, throughout his "classification of crowds" Canetti weaves a common thread - the overall domination of all crowds by emotion. It is through the sharing of emotion - or to put it differently the evolution of a group ethos or "we-rationale" (Goffman, 1963: 96) - that the disparate individuals forming a gathering can become bound into a crowd, a “single being” in which a collective mind, albeit transitory, is tangible (Le Bon, 1930: 26). As Simmel proposes, this crowd ethos can exert powerful emotional effects upon the constitutive members of that crowd, when, at certain times and in specific situations,

... the individual feels himself [sic] pulled along by ‘the quivering ambiance’ of the mass as if by a force to which he is exterior, a force indifferent to his individual being and will, even though this mass is constituted exclusively of such individuals.

(Simmel, 1981: 116; cited in Maffesoli, 1993a: xiv)

The crowd and the experience of the crowd facilitates and also partially constitutes many forms of contemporary consuming. Michel Maffesoli (1995) suggests that contemporary social life is increasingly marked by memberships of a multiplicity of social groupings, gatherings and other coalescences, all of which overlap and in some way contribute toward notions of our own and others’ identities.

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2 As the title of his text infers, Canetti (1973) is more concerned with the power of crowds as crowd formations than with the constitutive practices of those crowds on an individual scale.
In all these instances ... a form of being-togetherness is lived out that is no longer oriented to the faraway, toward the realization of a perfect society in the future, but rather is engaged in managing the present, which one tries to make as hedonistic as possible.

(Maffesoli, 1996b: xiii)

Empathetic feelings resulting from and concurrently also constituting these instances of being-together take on a new prominence as a collective sensibility temporarily - and only at certain times and given the ‘right’ contextual conditions - supersedes the atomized individual. This communal ethic, which foregrounds notions of proximity and the sharing of times, spaces and symbols (Maffesoli, 1995) is, I propose, particularly prominent in instances of the experiential consuming which I introduced in the ‘Beginnings’. The group condensations may be based within work affiliations, hobby groups, campaign groups, sporting events, consumer lobbies, musical and performance crowds or youth cultures (Maffesoli, 1995); in short, in any social situations where the behavioural codes implicit in civil interaction may be transgressed or temporarily superseded with those based upon an empathetic and more subtle sociality. I am interested in a specific form of group condensation which acts as a context for consuming but which is also a “manifest togetherness” (Bauman, 1995b):

[t]he purpose of this togetherness is being together, and being together in large numbers ... the higher-than-usual physical density gestates a similar density of sensual impressions: the overflow of sights and sounds, a higher-than-usual level of sensual stimulation, but more importantly yet a condensed, concentrated stimulation - reaching the elsewhere unreachable pitch thanks not only to the massive volume, but also to the monotonous homogeneity of stimuli: the same colour scarves wrapped around a thousand necks, the same jingle or ditty chanted, the same words shouted out rhythmically by thousands of breasts, the same twists and turns gone through by thousands of bodies ... togetherness of this kind is mostly about the unloading of the burden of individuality.

(Bauman, 1995b: 46-47)

3 It should be made clear that Maffesoli is concerned here (and in his 1995 text) with the “liberatory” nature of these social forms. Other of his texts (1978 & 1979, as yet un-translated, and both of which come out of his Doctoral thesis on the nature of conflict in society) cover more destructive facets of tribalism such as forms of ethnic nationalisms.

4 Bauman gives as examples of this “manifest togetherness” protest marches, football matches and discos! I explicitly return to this notion in Chapter Four where I discuss ‘playful vitality’.
Clubbing is one example of this form of collective experience in which “common sense, the present and empathy” are dominant (Maffesoli, 1989: 11; emphasis in original).

Furthermore, throughout the Night Out I argue that the clubbing experience can be understood as a form of togetherness in which a central sensation is one of ‘in-betweeness’ (or exstasis) - this is the flux between identity and identification to which Bauman refers above. On one hand clubbing crowds anonymise due to the sheer quantity of co-present clubbers and the sensuous overload which can make sight, recognition and communication problematic. Yet at the same time clubbing crowds can also individualise - something that Bauman does not mention in opening out his notion of “manifest togetherness”. Through, above all, dancing, clubbers can trace unique paths through the clubbing experience, distinguishing themselves as individuals. Yet these practices and spacings of dancing (see below) are overwhelmingly crowd-based⁵. Through movement, proximity to and at times the touching of others, and - crucially - a positive identification with both the music and the other clubbers in the crowd, those within the clubbing and especially the dancing crowd can slip between consciousness of self and consciousness of being part of something much larger than themself. The social constitution of the crowd, the clubber’s understanding of that social constitution, and the mental and emotional approach of the clubber to that crowd, are of central importance in catalysing this in-betweeness. Furthermore, it appears that individualising impulses are not always founded upon positive and pleasurable notions of bodily expression.

DWAYNE: At Eutopia the people were much better than The Shed, so I didn’t really have a problem with the people ... in the first interview I mentioned that it’s a couple of singular things or events that [yeah] make a night good or bad and at that particular Shed night, I came in and this bloke from my college - whom I consider, just from the way he looks and walks and acts, to be a COMPLETE arsehole - was there [I laugh] and I thought “fucking hell, I cannot go to the same club that this bloke is at” ... That, in the first place changed my conception of the place completely, I mean I was with my friends and everything was going right and we had taken some drugs but that just flipped my mental state from feeling well... to feeling really miserable and then I looked at all the other people and I thought “yeah, these are real West End

⁵ Of course, not all forms of dancing practices privilege the crowd in quite this way. In her study of “Contra dancing” (a form of country / line dancing) in New York, Levine (1987: 196) notes how “Contra dancing is not the dancer within a crowd; rather it is the dancer in a series of constantly shifting one-on-one dancing relationships”; yet Contra dancing is very much a “group experience” in which “you are constantly meeting new people and dancing with them” (ibid: 197).
Saturday clubbers” and they were really boring and .... then I contemplated on the music and then I realised that it’s such and such music that I really like and now it’s mainstream so much, and look what kind of crowd that it draws .... it was a self-amplifying process, and the music is ... umm ... the key, but people are very important and I think ever since that night I haven’t really been to a techno club, I think that was like the closing of the techno chapter for me in some ways, so I’m going to Lost next Saturday ... that was a very bad experience. It’s very close to Banana Split in the arches where No Room For Squares is.

BEN: Right, so it’s people and music ... what about the certain aspects of the atmosphere, such as ... I remember you saying a while back that ummm ... music sometimes made it so difficult to talk ... that you could only talk to the person next to you ... that’s a strange thing ...?

DWAYNE: Yeah, that’s the way I like to be with people, I generally ... the more people that I have to communicate with, verbally, then the less comfortable I feel, so one-to-one conversations or one-to-two conversations are my ideal form of communication really [yeah]. That’s what for me makes clubs much better than bars ... even if you would go to a bar with one person, particularly if you did not know them too well, yeah, in a club it’s totally okay to umm .. to not talk for ten minutes and then do something else, but you can’t just sit at a bar with someone and not do something [no, that’s right - that’s a good point], and so it makes communication, at least for me, much easier.6

It starts to become clear in this extract how deeply Dwayne thinks about clubbing, what it means to him and how it works for him. First, the people in the clubbing crowd matter - clubbing is not simply about selecting a musical genre and a club that plays it and automatically getting a good night. It seems possible that potentially good nights can be spoilt by, to use a ‘British Rail-ism’, the ‘wrong type of crowd’. Second, Dwayne draws out direct links between the music and the crowd, particularly in terms of the mainstream / underground debate / tension. Third, a great deal of reflection is undertaken by Dwayne, both during the night and at a later stage, although my suspicions that this may have been partly affected by the fact that Dwayne knew he was to be interviewed a second time were confirmed by him in the second interview. Fourth, the crowd and the music combine to create the ‘coolness’ of a place. This coolness is critical to Dwayne’s enjoyment, a crowd

6 From the first interview with Dwayne.
that is in some way 'cooler than him' seems essential for an enjoyable night in which Dwayne can lose himself in the crowd, can temporarily anonymise himself. Fifth, the density of the crowd paradoxically constitutes a more comfortable setting for one-to-one conversations. The notion that to talk in clubs is not always necessary - and is not always possible - is a feature that appeals to Dwayne. To talk becomes a choice rather than a social obligation. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, for Dwayne, the 'wrong' type or style of crowd can lead to a dis-identification, a strongly individualising sensation that Dwayne is not - and is not able to feel - part of the crowd around him. This contrasts with the crowd practices of many of the other clubbers, particularly in respect of dancing (see below).

I now examine in some detail two linked and major facets of clubbing crowds that are especially significant in the establishment of these sensations of in-betweeness and which also build upon and progress the notions of belongings and sociality that I introduced earlier. In particular, I am interested in unpacking notions of identification through concentrating upon their practical and spatial constitution. In doing this, I discuss clubbing crowds first as musical crowds and second as dancing crowds.

* * * *

2 Musical Crowds

As long as we choose to consider sounds only through the commotion they stir in our nerves, we will never have the true principles of music and of its power over our hearts.


MARK: Trance is central and I'm going to give you the whole spiel now [we laugh] .... basically, I've always liked dance music, but it never quite hit it [um-hum], until I discovered trance, or psychedelic trance ... I should be more specific here as that is the proper term for it, or Goa trance which is the normal, the normal generic term for it, okay ... and there's various reasons for that. One, for me, is that it sounds 'epic' ... I think is probably the best description .... [right] I've always liked things like, I mean all the way through, like a) film soundtrack music, very groovy music,
big tunes, like Westerns and stuff, and Goa trance is like that - it just has an important feeling about it, which really is quite hard to describe but you just get a feel for it [um-hum] okay? Ummm ... it's also, unlike house which is fairly thumping, and I think this is a key distinction here, house is basically bass-led [right] ... errr ... trance doesn't just excite the body, it excites the brain as well, okay, as you'll see in glorious detail later [we laugh]! It's like you're standing there and you get into the music and you get into the whole bodily thing, and you've got treble, it's definitely treble, good trance I think is definitely treble, effectively treble-led [right] okay, which effectively gives something for your brain to work on, okay ... especially if it's on a bit of LSD.7

the sound of silence - the neglect of sonic worlds

Music evokes different reactions from different people in different contexts, not just in the sense of value judgments about whether a piece of music or a musical experience is 'good' or 'not' but also - and perhaps more interestingly, yet also more subtly - in the very way that different people set about listening to and in a sense understanding music in varying contexts. Music has a quality inherent in its performance and consuming, and often mediated through technologies of (re)production, that enables its presence to transform and even create social spaces (Cohen, 1995; Frith, 1978; Valentine, 1995). For many people, music is a very important element within their lives - it is literally the soundtrack to their everyday living. Music - in its countless forms - provides both aural backdrops and foci for many aspects of social interaction, particularly those based in leisure, pleasure, entertainment and play. Yet music as an object of intellectual enquiry has been neglected, with academics (including geographers) being peculiarly silent on music®. Our sonic

7 The vital importance of music within his clubbing experiences, and the subtle yet crucial processes of distinction that operate through musical tastes are suggested in this extract from the first interview with Mark.
8 Noteworthy exceptions to this general silence include: Blacking’s (1973; 1987) now classic anthropological studies; Canon’s (1993) short paper on so-called ‘world’ music; Chamber’s (1985) glide through the pop music and pop cultures of a youthful post-war Britain; Cohen’s (1991a; 1991b; 1995) work on relationships between the city, local music cultures and regeneration; Finnegans’s (1989) similar work on the myriad of musical cultures in a single town; the connections between music and notions of utopia drawn out by Flinn (1992); Frith’s (1978; 1987; 1988; 1992; 1995; 1996) hugely influential and still-expanding oeuvre; Gibson & Zagora’s (1997) and Halfacree & Kitchen’s (1996) analysis of local music scenes through a geographical lens; Hollows & Milestone (1998), who very specifically set out to spatialise and contextualise the links between musical cultures, identities and places; work on music and regeneration in Northern England by Hudson (1995); Lily Kong’s (1995a; 1995b) cultural politics of music in Singapore; notions of youth and identity through music in Kruse (1993); Leppert & McClary’s (1987) edited collection which covers a broad spectrum of themes relating music to society; Leyshon, Matless & Revill’s (1998) collection of essays examining the relationships between music and notions of place and identity; Norris’ (1989) edited collection of...
scapes remain overwhelmingly unknown let alone mapped, with what Smith (1994: 233) calls the “ideology of the visual” being afforded an epistemological privilege in social research. This neglect has been due to the comparative difficulty of the translation, notation and representation of music, musical experiences and musical understandings. While drawing, painting and even photography and film are relatively easily transferred, copied, translated and discussed, music exists only in the continual present of its unfolding. Thus while the ‘art’ of music is in its making and the moment of its experiencing - whether producing or consuming, or both - the ‘language’ of music is usually found only in formal notation and the written musical text.

A further and associated reason for the neglect of musical forms in intellectual enquiry has resulted from the attitude that music is not worth studying because it is less explicitly representational than literature, painting and the other visual arts. Music is not, or can appear not to be, propositional, but just is (Storr, 1992). In one sense, music ‘disappears’ in the moment of its manifestation - it does not linger, but exists only in its being (Storr, 1992).

While peculiar intellectually, given that music is clearly so important to so many people, this silence on sound is thus not surprising in practical terms and is reflective of wider societal attitudes. The rationalist impulse which has dominated science and art in Western culture, arguably until relatively recently, has resulted in a failure to fully recognise the significance of the emotional within social and cultural life, especially where the emotional has an instinctive, ephemeral and at times elusive quality to it, as in reactions to music. The idealised and hypothetical notion of a rational thinking, yet somehow not feeling, subject that has prevailed has resulted in rationality taking precedence over the emotions, idealism over materialism, culture over nature and objectivity over subjectivity, with the mind and body often situated in binary opposition (Thomas, 1995). Whereas the spoken word has evolved into the dominant form of rational communicative action, music -

work on music and culture; the innovative and diverse edited collection of cultural studies of music and youth found in Ross & Rose (1994); Rouget’s (1985) seminal work on music and the trance state; Said’s (1991) thesis on connections between music, politics and culture; work on the relationships between music and society in Shepherd (1991); Smith’s (1994; 1997) arguments in favour of a geographical and cultural approach to understanding music; Storr’s (1992) philosophical and psychological study; Toop’s analyses (1991; 1995) of rap and ambient music, and Whiteley’s (1997) edited collection exploring the connections between sexuality, gender and forms of popular music.

9 “(T)he majority of human geography remains devoted to seeing the world, or speaking about it, rather than to listening or hearing” (Smith, 1994: 233). On the neglect of the aural within the social sciences see also Fornäs (1997), Jackson, M. (1989), Polhemus (1993), and Stoller (1989).

10 Recent attempts to re-address this paucity of work on emotion include Cogan (1994), Maffesoli (1995; 1996a), Oatley (1992), Scheff (1990), and Shilling (1997).
originally an accompaniment to spoken communication (see Storr, 1992) - and its embodiment through dancing, have come to be associated with the unconscious, the symbolic, the fleeting and the emotional, and thus largely ignored. Susan Smith (1994) notes how the value of music was not recognised, even in Raymond Williams (1982) study of culture and society, yet she adds that the benefits of an awareness to music for sound research lie precisely in the fact that it lacks “the concreteness that so appeals to empiricism, [and] is more allied than vision to those emotional or intuitive qualities on which the interpretative project rests” (Flinn, 1992; cited in Smith, 1994: 232).

music matters

The level and intensity of meanings invested in music by young people is unmatched by any other organized activity in society, including religion (Ross, 1994). Music exhibits strong relationships to social structures, “not only representing social relations [but also] simultaneously enacting them” (van Leeuwen, 1988). Music plays a central role in the constitution of identities and communities (Frith, 1996) with especially young people using music to situate themselves historically, culturally and politically (Frith, 1992), and, I would add, stylistically. Simon Frith suggests that music “provides us with an intensely subjective sense of being sociable ... it both articulates and offers the immediate experience of collective identity” (1996: 273; emphasis in original). Music regularly soundtracks our search for ourselves and for spaces in which we can feel at home, through, for example, the use of ‘Walkman’ personal stereos in “self-produ[cing] [our] own space” (Valentine, 1995: 481)\(^{11}\). Yet music also assists us in ‘getting out of ourselves’, in experiencing exstasis and momentary loss of self through musically-supported social interactions such as clubbing. Music can assist in our construction of identities and identifications through the experiences it offers us of our own and others’ bodies, of times and spaces, of sounds and images, of sociability - all experiences through which we are able to “place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith, 1996: 275). On the other hand, music can also have the effect of intensifying shared experiences through magnifying an emotion or set of emotions which

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\(^{11}\) The potential of the Walkman in permitting, “the possibility, however fragile and however transitory, of imposing your soundscape on the surrounding aural environment and thereby domesticating the external world” (Chambers, 1994: 51) has also been noted elsewhere by Chambers (1990), and Chow (1993; 1994), who suggests that “[i]n the age of the Walkman [...] the emotions have become portable” (Chow, 1993: 397). See also the recent Open University text entirely devoted to cultural studies of the Walkman and in which the above contributions are discussed and extracts re-printed (du Gay et al, 1997).
Part Two: Chapter 2 - The Dancer From the Dance: Musical and Dancing Crowds

an event or social interaction brings forth by simultaneously evoking similar emotional and physical responses amongst a group of co-present people (Storr, 1992). Musical memories can be some of the strongest, most personal and most easily evoked\(^\text{12}\).

When Laura was here I had the records arranged alphabetically; before that I had them filed in chronological order, beginning with Robert Johnson, and ending with, I don’t know, Wham!, or somebody African, or whatever else I was listening to when Laura and I met. Tonight, though, I fancy something different, so I try to remember the order I bought them in: that way I hope to write my own autobiography, without having to do anything like pick up a pen. I pull the records off the shelves, put them in piles all over the sitting room floor, look for *Revolver*, and go on from there, and when I’ve finished I’m flushed with a sense of self, because this, after all, is who I am. I like being able to see how I got from Deep Purple to Howling Wolf in twenty-five moves; I am no longer pained by the memory of listening to *Sexual Healing* all the way through a period of enforced celibacy, or embarrassed by the reminder of forming a rock club at school, so that I and my fellow fifth-formers could get together and talk about Ziggy Stardust and *Tommy*.

(extract from *High Fidelity*, by Nick Hornby, 1995: 52)

Music also assists in the constitution of bounded places through, for example, national anthems (Kong, 1995) by “using sound to communicate what cannot be spoken” (Smith, 1997: 517) and solidifying senses of the self and of others. Music can be a way of telling stories about oneself, often to oneself. Music also assists in more dynamic and explicitly process-constituted senses of spacings and histories. The presence or absence of music can totally transform spaces, and the memories and imaginaries of music can mark out a past history in extraordinarily powerful ways, for example in Nick Hornby’s notion of his changing and developing self over time.

Furthermore, the social nature of music - the emphatically empathic impulse which it can instil - led Nietzsche to propose that of the arts music was one which “so sharpened our sense of participation within life that it gave meaning to life and made it worth living”

\(^\text{12}\) Sara Cohen (1995) explores the relationship between music, memories and places in her study of the biography of just one Liverpuddlian, 88-year-old Jack Levy. Arguing that music not only reflects but also creates places, Cohen proposes that in playing a “unique and often hidden role in the social and cultural production of place\(^\text{2}\)”, music foregrounds the senses through “action and motion” (ibid: 445).
Part Two; Chapter 2 - The Dancer From the Dance; Musical and Dancing Crowds

(Storr, 1992: 150). Participation in producing, reproducing and consuming music can act to re-state our sense of vitality, our thirst and enthusiasm for living, despite other aspects outside of the musical experience being sources of anxiety or uncertainty. One flip side to the commercialized and commodified global culture of music, of which Adorno (1973; 1976) is perhaps the best known and most vehement critic, is the potential that music offers for a localized and popular sense of resistance, through the numerous contexts of both its production and consumption.\(^\text{13}\)

The work of Will Straw (1991; 1993) on local rock scenes in the USA, Ruth Finnegan’s (1989) study of amateur music-making in Milton Keynes and Halfacree & Kitchen’s (1996) retrospective on the Manchester music scene of the early-1990s all intersect in their recognition of the very local sense of musical production that is in operation. They also recognise that this sense of locality and of being ‘unique’ can enable predominantly white, youthful and insular audiences to assert their differences from a hegemonic mainstream.\(^\text{14}\) This expressly musical experience of locality and the key role that music plays in the social and cultural lives of the young people concerned are indicative of the important ways in which young people’s identities and identifications are linked to the modes, practices and spacings of their leisure activities.\(^\text{15}\) How, then, do the musics of clubbing work within the context of the clubbing crowd?

**the social centrality of music to the practices of clubbing**

The clubbing experience is primarily about music and the clubbers’ understandings of that music. These understandings are largely expressed and addressed through dancing, to which I turn in detail below. In the ‘Beginnings’ I noted how clubbing is an overwhelmingly urban and predominately youthful experience. However, what characterises clubbing above even these qualities is its musical nature. Music is central to the clubbers’ enjoyment of their clubbing experiences - a point which presents itself forcefully in the

\(^{13}\) For critiques of Adorno’s approach see Gendron (1986), Malm & Wallis (1993) and Said (1991).

\(^{14}\) For further discussion of the relationships between musical cultures and identities see Smith (1994; 1997). Smith places the musical at the centre of the geographical imagination, and illustrates her argument with examples of the role of music in empire building, and in the creation of local identities and identifications in the midst of local-global tensions. See also Cohen (1991a; 1991b) on rock cultures in Liverpool, Grossberg (1984) on rock and notions of resistance; Kruse (1993) on subcultural identities and music; Malcolmson (1995) on links between “disco dancing”, local identities and ethnic tensions in Bulgaria; and, Regev (1997) on world music, globalisation and fields of cultural production.

\(^{15}\) The role that participation in musical communities offers for the development and consolidation of a sense of (micro)resistance or what I refer to as ‘playful vitality’ is discussed further in Chapter Four of the Night Out.
accounts of clubbing which I have collated. Furthermore, through the identificatory power that very loud music exerts over the clubbing crowd an emotional bond or ethos can be generated and reinforced between what is effectively a large group of strangers. This power of music to unite ostensibly disparate individuals, particularly when combined with other emotive environmental features or events such as lyrical messages, can be "terrifyingly impressive" (Storr, 1992: 46).^16^.

In one sense music can be presented as the essence of clubbing, to be what clubbing is about and what clubbers unite around or through. Revisiting and revising Shields' (1992) and Hetherington's (1996) notion of the social centrality of place, it could be suggested that in the clubbing experience, rather than a fixed notion of a place or a site being focal, clubbers come together around the musics of clubbing. These musics acts as a focus for the articulation of identities, the development of a sense of belonging, and ultimately facilitate an identification for many of those within the clubbing crowd. Clubbers often define themselves in terms of their preferred music(s) and the associated crowds of those musics - 'do I want to be like them?'; 'do I want to be associated with that crowd?' - and the stories of Dwayne and Mark earlier in this Chapter subtly and differently illustrate this point. Blacking (1973) and Spencer (1985) also note this totemic aspect of music, particularly when combined with dancing. Music can be seen - or rather, heard and experienced as,

... a visible (in this case danceable) [...] symbol of the invisible force of the collectivity [...] active within the group as a whole, an expression of sentiments that well up in the individual in response to the established collective symbols of his [sic] society.

(Spencer, 1985: 15)

SEB: It's not the drugs, it's not the party scene, it's the music and like I've said to you before, the club is just an environment that allows you to listen to it the way that it should be listened to - LOUD music. Like-minded people and loud music equals a good atmosphere, but I buzz off the music in the car, wherever, and it influences me so much, like I said, in the clothes that I buy, in the way

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^16^ As an example of this power of music Storr suggests the Nuremberg rally of 1936 where the vast crowds faced the dual onslaught of the massed Nazi bands and the self-dramatization of Hitler's rhetoric. In a similar way, although in a completely non-sinister fashion, in clubbing the darkness, heat, intricate sonically-synchronised lighting systems, and close proximity of hundreds of dancing people act in tandem with music to create a situation where the sense of being immersed in a musical crowd can be equally powerful and emotive.
that I think and I think that taking drugs and going clubbing has just coincided with me adopting a ... I mean I've always been enthusiastic and passionate about things that I enjoy and I've never enjoyed anything more than this, so I'm a very positive person and I think taking drugs has opened my eyes to another kind of scene, a less-inhibited scene, a scene away from the aggression that is associated with alcohol and other such clubs, you know, what you get with alcohol. I think, again because of my personality and the way that I am, a very emotional person, a very tactile person, I think it suits me down to the ground [um-huh] ... 17

Three main points can be taken from this short extract. First, for Seb the music comes before all other aspects of the night, and in fact transcends the night to impact on other contexts of his everyday life, for example his 'travelling times'. Second, from an initial identification with the music and the crowds that are associated with the particular genre of clubbing music he likes, Seb has branched out so that the music impacts upon his style and appearance, his way of thinking more generally and especially other important aspects of his life as a consumer, such as drug consumption. Thirdly, the complex interconnectedness of the relationships between music, clubbing, drug use and lifestyle is evident; within a few sentences Seb touches on all these aspects of his life without interruptions or promptings, seamlessly snowballing from one to the next.

The blurring of the distinction between music and its context or environment and the (con)fusion of clubbing with other aspects of social life, both of which, for example, Seb talks of above, are characterised by a concomitant smudging of the distinction between the visual and the aural. Lights, lasers, mirrors, smoke, darkness, motion - these can all be important elements in clubbing, resulting in what one sees as always also being an effect of what one hears:

... space becomes movement as dance hall, club, and warehouse are shaped by the dancing bodies that fill them; when silence falls, the setting disappears. The dancers are performers, programmed by the deejay [sic]; the music stops, play time - the scene - is over.

(Frith, 1996: 156; emphasis in original)

17 An extract from the second interview with Seb.
BEN: What about music?
SUN: I was into the music first, and I'll be into the music always. What drives it is the social infrastructure. Music is like the... focus, it's what you talk about. You go to a club and the first thing you ask is "What was the music like?" [yeah]. If you look at uk-dance [an internet mailing list], there's very little about dance... it's usually about music cos that's what the clubbers, that's like the central point of reference, y'know, that people had. And it's also something that you can get into quite easily because you can buy the magazines and you can buy the records and you can have an opinion on something... it's easily shared. E's are difficult to score and cost a lot of money, but music... I've always listened to music, I used to listen to Janice Long and John Peel, used to buy Melody Maker religiously, y'know, switched to dance, converted to dance in '88, and I like all sorts of music...  

This extract evokes the centrality of music for Sun, particularly given the difficulty of talking about dancing - a point upon which I elaborate below. Further, the accessibility of music for a whole range of purposes is evident: as something that can be shared, as the foundation for social interaction, as a topic in which expertise can be gained and demonstrated in the construction of identity and identifications, and out of which a sense of belonging can be forged.

**making music together**

In his seminal anthropological text, "How Musical is Man?" (1973) - one of the first in modern Western musicology / anthropology to explore some of the relationships between musics, cultures and societies - John Blacking emphasises the musical abilities that we all have, proposing that listeners are in one sense no less talented as 'musicians' than those who have produced the music to which they are listening. The labelling of the majority of the population as 'nonmusical' while at the same time a tiny minority are afforded the status of 'musicians', is, Blacking suggests, a gross misrepresentation based upon flawed concepts of supposed expertise and a conflation of two quite separate points.

*First, the techniques of musical production should not be confused with the techniques of proficient listening.* An individual who has not been formally trained in music can display expertise in the form of recognition and knowledge of a piece of music, and further - and

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18 An extract from the first interview with Sun.
Perhaps more significantly - that individual may well enjoy the music no less than another individual who has been formally trained. Second, performed music means nothing without a musically adept audience. That is, without an audience who respond to, and distinguish between, different sounds and sequences of music, the performance of that music would be pointless. To take, as Blacking does (1973: 9), the example of a classical performance:

... the very existence of a professional performer, as well as his [sic] necessary financial support, depends on listeners who in one important respect must be no less musically proficient than he is. They must be able to distinguish and interrelate different patterns of sound.

An excellent example of Blacking’s argument - that the audience engage in the practices of what he calls “creative listening” and that the performance depends to a greater or lesser extent upon this involvement - can be found in the practices of clubbing and of the engagement of clubbers with clubbing music through dancing. The sense that the ‘audience’ at a club night are actively engaged in the production of that night as well as in its consuming is another of the essential qualities of clubbing. Dancing, in these terms, is a prominent form of creative listening, relying on shared knowledges of music, common appreciation of certain musical forms, and distinctions between the many differing forms of music on offer. It has been argued that without the ‘audience’ of clubbing - that is, the other members of the clubbing crowd - clubbing would not exist - clubs without clubbers lose their meaning (Brown, 1997).

In clubbing, while the music is usually produced elsewhere, the DJ’s reproduce it through the use of technology. Yet the music is also partly reproduced through the clubbers and their role as the ‘audience’, as an active and ‘musical’ crowd, listening to, understanding and expressing the music through themselves and their dancing. The clubbers as consumers of the music are also simultaneously the producers of the performance of that music. There is a collusion between the clubbers as audience and the clubbers as performers, a kind of knowingness between members of the crowd and their understandings of the music (Frith, 1995).

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19 A similar point is made by Schutz (1964c) in his critique of Maurice Halbwachs’ analyses of the social structure of music - analyses which formed part of Halbwachs’ wider concern with the role of “collective memory”. Schutz claims that Halbwachs was mistaken in his contentions that, firstly, music was a product of musical notation and not the other way around, and (thus) secondly, that a “layman’s” (sic) understanding of music will be different from a “musician’s” because s/he does not have access to notation only accessible to the “educated musician” (ibid: 163-164).
listening to and understanding clubbing music

Acting a part,
Living a film,
Alongside the scene
plays an inner melody ...
The Soundtrack of Life.
(The Gentle People, 1997)

Many clubbers describe a sensation experienced while clubbing of being in a state or in a place that is in some way removed from the ‘normal’ times, spaces and social relations of their everyday lives, of being in a realm of fantasy, fun and freedom. These sensations can be traced back to the ways in which the clubbers listen to and understand the music in the clubbing experience. What we feel about music is essentially what the music means to us, and so the clubbers’ emotional and physical reactions to music are integral to uncovering the meanings which they invest in music. In the context of the crowd interaction which characterises clubbing, the emotional and physical reactions of the clubbers to the music can coincide in the evolution of an ethos or identification. This can occur even in the presence of differences which might normally preclude this sharing of emotional space; for example, differences in age, ethnicity, social class or gender.

Intellectually, the emotional impacts of listening and responding to music have not been widely discussed, with more formalised and mechanical listening practices being given priority. Simon Frith (1996) suggests that there are different modes of listening - what he calls “ideologies of listening” (ibid: 142) - and the mode of listening that ‘demands’ this distanciated, almost purely aural understanding of music is a product of the rationalist approach to music and to art more generally. Arguing that any description of the performance of a piece of music should be strictly formal and neither remotely evocative nor emotional, Igor Stravinsky (1962) proposed that straying into the sphere of the emotions would be to contaminate the music in its ‘original’ and ‘pure’ form. Frith (1996) notes how this approach to listening - based upon practices of “structural cognition” - typifies the high cultural ideal of the last two hundred years or so and is far removed from

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20 Later in the Night Out (Chapters Three & Four) I explore some of these notions of ‘other places’, ‘fantasy spaces’ and ‘utopia’.
21 Again, I discuss these issues around the addressing of social differences later in the Night Out and in the Reflections which form Part Three of the thesis.
the everyday listening practices that most of us utilise in our enjoyment of music, and is thus useless in terms of developing any understanding of these everyday practices.

In musical terms, which is the odder event: a classical music concert where we expect to see musicians bodily producing the music which we listen to thoughtfully, silent and still; or a club night at which we don’t expect to see the musicians (or even the deejays) producing the sounds, but in which our physical movement is a necessary part of what it means to listen?22

(Frith, 1996: 142; emphasis in original)

Strong emotional reactions can be provoked without words or lyrics, either within the music or between co-present clubbers, although this by no means infers an absence of language on, and of, the dance floor. The techniques of bodily communication are a language in themselves, a feature of the dance floor which challenges Hemment’s (1997) assertion that the “primacy of vision” has been displaced by that of the aural in clubbing23.

In contrast to Stravinsky, I propose the foregrounding of a mode of listening which prioritises the simultaneously motional and emotional understandings of the listeners. Listening as an embodied and emotional activity takes on varying forms in various spaces. Some spaces are more suitable for a more fully embodied understanding through dancing than other spaces, and I return to these spaces below where I discuss dancing. Some sites of musical performance and entertainment actively promote a particular form of listening, whilst others discourage or even forbid ‘unsuitable’ bodily responses to the music. Still others blur the boundaries between forms of listening context24. The spaces of musical production and reproduction have always been contingent on the particular form of music and the mode of listening employed within those spaces (Frith, 1992; 1996). Musics that demands a relatively static and emotionally-restrained audience have always occupied specific places - galleries, country houses, concert halls, churches - while at the same time

22 Whilst the point he wishes to make is clear, Frith’s rather neat dichotomy between two quite different modes of listening overlooks the significance of events and situations where the boundaries between these modes are blurred; for example, the annual Proms Concerts (at the Royal Albert Hall) where ‘revellers’ (never merely ‘listeners’ at The Proms - a notion that is interesting in itself) traditionally not only stand and dance (if somewhat minimally) but even ‘dare’ to cheer, shout and sing - they actively embody the performance in many ways as much as the orchestra on the circular stage.

23 A more accurate assertion would be that the primacy of vision is submerged at certain times and in certain places and for certain people more than others.

24 I have already mentioned the examples of the Proms - ‘classical’ music where movement is, for once, allowed and even encouraged - and Easy Listening clubs: ‘dance’ music clubs where there can be, on occasion, no dancing at all.
popular musics (what Frith terms "low musics") have conventionally been associated with bodily expression, pleasures, carnality and emotions, and thus linked with sites of deviance and depravity: the jazz bar, the brothel, the gig ... even the city itself. This has certainly been the case with the musics of clubbing (Frith, 1996; Hughes, 1994; Ward, 1993; Welsh, 1993; 1996).

BEN: Why house music then?

BRUCE: Someone once said that, what was it? Talking about music is like dancing about architecture ... incredibly difficult! It’s bloody hard, umm ... I like music and umm ... I’ve got to the stage whereby I don’t really listen to music to get depressed whereas when I think you’re a teenager you sit in your room a lot with the Cowboy Junkies or whatever playing and you want to slit your wrists and I don’t want that - I like the way that it can make you feel elated, in which it can lift you, and so I like house music and the way in which it combines that with lyrics and just things that are just constantly lifting and interesting. I just find the way house music is put together to be interesting and to appeal to me and to continually appeal to me as well. I like the way that it combines disco and funk and I like all that, and I don’t know, I just like dancing, I absolutely love it ...

There are many interesting points that spin out of this extract. I felt that the initial analogy of talking about music with dancing about architecture was pre-prepared although whether or not this was specially for his chat with me I will never know - Bruce clearly thinks seriously about his own relationships to the music and is able to evoke relatively concisely what music means to him. Bruce makes a clear distinction between how he used to listen to music as a non-clubber - sitting in a room, alone - and how he listens to music now, as a clubber - as interesting, as elating, as uplifting. Third, and connecting directly with the imminent discussion of dancing, Bruce discusses his listening practices through reference to dancing. For most clubbers the role of their bodies in their understandings of music is very important, as they seek to both individualise themselves and yet attain some sense of unity with others through their dancing.

* * * *

35 An extract from Bruce’s first interview.
3 Dancing Crowds

Dance will bring the dead world to life and make it human.
(Marcuse, 1970: 132)

Dancing is the major expressive form through which music is understood and enjoyed during the clubbing experience. Together with and inseparable from the music, dancing is what clubbing is about and is largely what clubbers ‘do’ while clubbing. Through dancing to music in a crowd a high degree of individuality may be generated, while concurrently providing, if the dancer so desires, and is technically competent, opportunities for the loss of that individuality within the crowd.

But what is dancing? Why has its obvious social centrality for many people been glossed over and what are the socio-spatio-temporalities of dancing in the clubbing experience? How is dancing performed and how might we conceptualise its practices?

dancing in the dark

Dancing, where the explicit and implicit zones of socialised pleasures and individual desires entwine in the momentary rediscovery of the ‘reason of the body’ [...] is undoubtedly one of the main avenues along which pop’s ‘sense’ travels.

(Chambers, 1985: 17)

In Brazil, there are certain dances which, in effect, write their own meanings. And there is an understanding of the possibility of a corporeal intelligence. There are things I learned in Brazil with my body, and some of these things it has taken me years to learn to articulate in writing. But that is not to say that they were without meaning when I could only speak them through dance.

(Browning, 1995: xi)

Dancing is a mode of behaviour in which the relationship between movement and thought - or motion and emotion - is central, even if this relationship can be difficult to evoke for the dancer and may be problematic to define for the researcher (Hanna, 1987). As well as being a social, political, psychological, occasionally pharmaceutical, and often economic...
activity, dancing is primarily a form of communication or body language and a mode of expression - a performance in which verbal communication can be supplemented and even temporarily superseded, either intentionally or through compulsion. I agree with Boas (1972; cited in Snyder, 1974) in proposing that ordinary gestures and actions can become ‘a dance’ if a transformation takes place within the person - a transformation which takes him or her out of their ‘ordinary world’ and places them instead in a world of heightened sensitivity and altered perception of self, others and / or the environment.

I thus see dancing as a conceptual language with intrinsic and extrinsic meanings, premised upon physical movement, and with interrelated rules and notions of technique and competency guiding performances across and within different social situations. Dancing within clubbing might be conceptualised as an expressive form of thinking, sensing, feeling and processing which may be constituted through, as well as reflecting, strong relationships between a clubber and the clubbing crowd, and in turn between that clubbing crowd and the society of which it is a part. Dancing can be a form of sexualised ritual (McRobbie, 1991), a form of expression (Storr, 1992), a kind of exercise (McRobbie, 1994b), a form of individuation yet also one of unity (Frith, 1996), a language (Shepherd, 1991), yet a language that is non-textual (Frith, 1995). Dancing within clubbing can be about fun, pleasure and escape, about being together or being apart, about sexual interaction or display, about listening to the music, and even a form of embodied resistance and source of personal and social vitality (as I discuss later in the Night).

Traditionally, dancing of whatever form - ballet, modern, folk, popular - has been neglected by the social sciences which have tended to approach dancing as primitive, carnal and thus unworthy of study (Frith, 1996)^. Routinely presented as being based purely in bodily

^ These connotations of dancing with primitivism have been a recurring feature in academic accounts more widely, where bodily adornment and differentiation has been viewed as demonstrating ‘modernity’ and ‘sophistication’, while bodily expression through mimicry and group affiliation has been constructed as ‘primitive’ and of the “lower strata” in society (Simmel, 1997: 190). For example, in his 1905 paper on The Philosophy of Fashion, Georg Simmel (1997) notes that “civilized peoples” who desire social and group differentiation do so through fashion, and thus that fashion is much less prevalent amongst “primitive peoples” who, “by virtue of their social structure ... lack that danger of mixing and blurring which spurs on the classes of civilized peoples to their differentiations of clothing, manners, taste, etc. ... the pace, tempo and rhythm of gestures is fundamentally determined by clothing and similarly dressed people behave in similar ways” ... “fashions among primitive peoples will be less numerous ... because the need for newness of impressions and forms of life - quite apart from its social effects - is much less acute among them “ (Simmel, 1997: 191). To give a further example, even in the short treatment given to body techniques by Marcel Mauss (1979) he manages to contrast the “brutal, unreflected, unconscious reactions” to emotions of “so-called primitive societies” with the “more isolated, precise actions governed by a clear consciousness” of French society; for Mauss, composure is the vital ingredient, with the “emotions” being subsumed beneath “pre-prepared movements” (ibid: 121-122).
pleasures and thus as somehow depraved, dancing has also been theorised as a form of 'ritual possession' (Ramsey, 1997), as signifying an unbalanced mind (Backman, 1952; Hecker, 1970), and as in opposition to the practices of more formalised musical appreciation. Judith Lynne Hanna (1987: 9) explains this long-standing avoidance of any critical engagement with dancing by highlighting a combination of "Puritan ethics, social stratification, concepts of masculinity, and a sense of detachment from nonverbal behavior [sic]". The apparent playfulness of dancing placed it as diametrically opposed to a Puritan ethic buttressed upon the centrality of work and of grafting. Thus dancing was considered unsuitable for attention, not even in the guise of a form of deviance.

As a playful activity, then, popular dancing in particular is seen as lacking in 'serious' content. Nigel Thrift (1997: 145) paraphrases Ward (1993) in pointing out how what he calls this "peculiar invisibility of dance" is partly due to the fact that the practices of dancing lie well beyond "the rational auspices of Western societies". Interaction based upon and within verbal interaction has historically been in the ascendance in the social sciences, with sociologies of sports and other forms of leisure such as dancing seen to demand little in the way of rigour, instead being "the hobby of anti-intellectuals" (Hanna, 1987: 10). If it holds the potential for fun then it cannot sustain or be worthy of serious study.\footnote{Hanna (1987) outlines the development of the anthropology of dance, stressing both its early faltering and somewhat half-hearted nature as well as its current vibrancy. Dance and dancing are currently undergoing a revival in terms of their study within the social sciences. The collection edited by Desmond (1997) provides a broad cross-section of new and recent work on dance within cultural studies; Foster's (1996) edited collection provides a broad and extensive summary of current work in dance studies and choreography; Thomas (1995; 1997) reviews recent work and directions within sociology.}

The reasoning behind the traditional neglect of dancing goes further than its associations with play and the body - both areas of social life with which anthropologists, sociologists and especially geographers have been slow to engage. Like music, dancing is easier to demonstrate than to talk about. Dancing is difficult to define and it is inherently a non-verbal language. Thus, dancing can be tricky to describe or even evoke (Blacking, 1975). There are also problems of notation and disputes over history, aesthetics and criticism (Brinson, 1985; Ward, 1993). More generally, when dancing is considered there is usually an emphasis upon stage 'dance'.

While the intellectual barriers to developing understandings of dancing lie firmly within the bounds of academe, the perverse attitudes towards bodily pleasure of which these 'anti-
dancing' prejudices are just one facet are, again, firmly rooted within society. Despite the close association between music and dancing, it is telling that many more parents want their children to study music rather than dance (McRobbie, 1991), a bias further demonstrating the connotation of dancing with the carnality of the body (Frith, 1996; Storr, 1992). In addition to this there have also traditionally been concerns about the female display that occurs as girls dance, a sense of alarm which is rooted in a more general ambivalence over sexual display and which is largely to blame for the fact that, for example, the “early middle-class pioneers of the youth club movement discouraged dancing as a legitimate club activity” (McRobbie, 1991: 194). Further, the activities of dancing and the spaces associated with them have provided ample ammunition for moral panics about young people in society, although McRobbie notes how it is usually less the dancing itself that is to blame than the fear of associated activities such as drinking, drug use, underage sex and the possibility of violence.

SUN: ... I think that explains the male bias on uk-d^29, cos women talk a lot more about the dance scene than men, y'know [umm-huh] ... it's just a very obvious sociological observation that you don't get as many women trainspotters^30.

BEN: So what ... if people enjoy it so much why don't they talk about it?

SUN: It's even harder to write about than music. I've been toying with the idea that next time someone posts up a mail saying they can't dance to jungle posting up a sort of piss take, y'know, Sun's Beginner's Guide to dancing to jungle, y'know. Cos I've thought about this, cos I've got no fucking sense of natural rhythm - the reason I can dance is that I've been going clubbing for about eight years and I ... and people are very self-conscious about it - I am very self-conscious about it. I have been told that I can dance reasonably well. It is just practice, ummm ... and then ... uh ...

BEN: So you dance for yourself, but for others too ...?

SUN: Oh yeah, you want to look horny, and I go off dancing on my own quite happily, and then part of it is just this display thing, part of it is just like uh, a sort of martial arts sort of thing of control [ummm, yes] and the other thing is you do get an amazing rush. Basically things really took off once I learnt how to move my feet.

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^29 Chapter Seven - “Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement” (pp 189-219) of McRobbie’s (1991) text is especially interesting. For a history of the early development of dancing venues and dance halls see also Chapter Seven (pp 129-138) of Chambers (1986).

^30 The internet discussion list 'uk-dance'.

^30 A ‘trainspotter’, at least in clubbing cultures, is someone who makes a point of and gains pleasure through identifying the multifarious details of tracks being played by the DJs (artist, remix, label, date, even bpm) - a form of expertise which, while many joke about it, is much respected within certain forms and genres of clubbing.
um, and I've always said that a lot of people that are into techno, and diss garage for being slow, they don't actually know how to dance - they don't see why people like garage [no] ummm ....

BEN: Okay .... what do you think of when you dance ... if anything?

SUN: Oh, I listen to the music, I look around, I watch how other people are dancing, sometimes I just close my eyes and get basically to almost meditative, I try to cut out everything, I concentrate on how my feet move, I think a lot about my hands.31

The practices of dancing and the practicing of dancing do matter, even if clubbers, like academics, also have difficulty articulating their dancing experiences. For Sun, there are clearly tensions between expression and control and between display and meditation. In reply to the question which I posted on the internet mailing list uk-dance in February 1996, “why don't people talk about dancing on uk-dance?”, I received dozens of replies. Most of them were along the broad lines of this one:

Dancing is impossible to discuss without sounding wanky. So is music for that matter, which is why we end up talking about drugs the whole time ... really though, dancing to dance music is more-or-less un-choreographed - it's a gut-level reaction/interaction with the sound (see what I mean about wanky?). That's why choreographed dancing, as on TOTP [Top of the Pops], is so contrived + silly looking. There is no structure to attach words to - so we can't talk about it.

(from uk-dance digest 1341, 28 February 1996)

The 'meanings' of dancing are multiple and are related to the larger cultures and social structurings of which the dancing individuals are constitutive. Even to a single individual dancing can assume varying forms and meanings at different times and spaces throughout and between Nights Out. Moreover, dancing can reflect powerful social forces that demand some explanation (Spencer, 1985), for the issues that dancing raises impinge upon highly significant issues such as political control and organisation (Browning, 1995), the relations between 'race' and gender (Thomas, 1996), social psychology, social morality and resistance and domination (Brinson, 1985; Thrift, 1996b; 1997).

In addition to these reasons, I propose that the practices of dancing as constituted through clubbing demand a deeper understanding for at least three reasons: first, because they

31 From second interview with Sun.
form a foundation of what for many young people is an important form of social interaction; second, and building on this first point, dancing is based largely upon notions of spatio-temporally bounded belongings and group dynamics and is strongly implicated in processes of identity creation and in the formation, consolidation and fragmentation of identifications through the embodied and performed nature of its techniques and skills; and third, because of this social centrality and these links to the formation of identities and identifications dancing resonates powerfully into the dancers’ everyday lives and thus into society: “in a very important sense, society creates the dance, and it is towards society that we must turn to understand it” (Spencer, 1985: 38).

Dance is [...] an active creation of meanings, that is, social action dependent upon social relationships at the time. This is the reality of dance whether it takes place on the village green, in a disco, or in an opera house.

(Brinson, 1985: 211)

As we shuffle, then, perhaps somewhat belatedly, onto the rapidly filling dance floor, I now turn explicitly to these practices of dancing. Dancing is a complex activity and its intensity can overwhelm theorists as well as dancers. Approaching dancing through a performative lens illuminates and places at centre stage the conceptual spacings of dancing - spacings through which clubbing more widely is also practically constituted and through which we might begin to better understand the complex nature of clubbing.

* * * *
4 Spacings of Dancing

There is no social order, only modes of ordering. What is certain is that all of this relates to space.

(Hetherington, 1997: 280)  (Maffesoli, 1988: 150)

The organization of space is assumed to have an important bearing on human interaction and its dance manifestations.

(Hanna, 1987: 200)

In the first stage of the Night Out I mentioned how, within the clubbing experience, notions of the in-crowd and out-crowd, notions of coolness and mainstream, and thus of identifications (belongings) and dis-identifications (outsiders), were critical to the development of an understanding of those cultures, and yet always relative. In building upon this and also developing my earlier points about sociality and performativity, I now want look in detail at the practices, timings and spacings of dancing - the major constitutive practice of clubbing.32

Dancing is a response to the music, to the clubbing crowd, and to wider aspects of the clubbers' social lives and identities. As Frith (1996: 139) suggests, "the ideal way of listening to music is to dance to it, if only in one's head", and through dancing one may lose oneself in the music physically and mentally. One can dance to forget certain aspects of one's identity, to express happiness at being together, and to find relaxation (Hanna, 1987)33. In the clubbing experience dancing can be about losing control over one's body

32 I should point out that, whilst I am interested in the ways in which the dancing bodies of the clubbers are timed and spaced - or choreographed - in the clubbing experience, I approach this interest in timings and spacings with the primary intention of further developing understandings of the evolving social relationships between individual clubbers and the clubbing crowd. In particular, I am concerned with the ordering influences of sociality - the accepted, yet continually evolving codes of presentation and expression of self - upon the dancing practices, spacings and timings of the clubbers rather more than with intricate tracings of the paths of the clubbers' bodies through times and spaces. Therefore, although of undoubted interest to an understanding of clubbing, to do justice to the complex details of the ways in which clubbers actually move their bodies in dancing would require a project all of its own. Excellent contributions by Foster (1986; 1996) provide an in-depth examination of dance studies and choreography approaches to dancing and its notation, although they tend to focus predominantly upon ballet and more 'formal' dance.

33 The cathartic potential of dancing has been highlighted by Margaret Mead (1928) in her study of adolescence in Samoa, by Rust (1969) in his survey of young people in London, by McRobbie, (1994b) in her essay on women and dance, and by Hanna in her work both on dance in general (1984, 1987, 1988b) and specifically on the relationship between dance and stress (1988a). Further, as I outlined in the previous chapter, some theorists have suggested that clubbing - and specifically
and yet somehow gaining a deeper level of control over the body through willingly yielding oneself to this process of relinquishment. Dancing can be about becoming part of and submitting to the dancing crowd, yet also individualising the self through the bodily practices of dancing within that crowd. Dancing can be about expressing oneself to others and constructing one's own notion of self concurrently. Dancing fuses notions of 'inside' (emotions) and 'outside' (motions) as the internal becomes externalised, and the external becomes internalised (Butler, 1990a).

BEN: When you were dancing then, did you think...?

VALERIE: I'll tell you what - dancing that night was quite amazing... yeah? I haven't had an E\textsuperscript{34} like that was really really dancey. I wasn't thinking about it - it was just happening to me [um-huh]. I was FORCED to do it. What I was doing I was being forced to do by something, yeah...

[short interruption by a sniffing dog - we're in a park]

BEN: ... tell me about this feeling of being forced... did you want to dance?

VALERIE: Oh yeah, I did want to do it, it was fun, it was just so... the fact that I was doing it... d'you know, the last time that I said to you, ummm... that you feel like you're the conductor - you ARE the music - you ARE the conductor... yeah? [yeah] - I had that yeah? I was just creating the music yeah, and that gives you a buzz. It just felt good. It just felt physically excellent.

BEN: Ummm... okay, so you're dancing and it's really hot - what about the others? You're kind of dancing in a little group...

VALERIE: Mike said that we should start dancing in a circle because then we get more room, because usually you're like facing the front like a fucking tribe yeah [yeah, that's right]. It's like such a personal thing though - you're not dancing for anyone else, you're dancing for yourself, you're dancing because you HAVE to dance\textsuperscript{35}

I want to draw out three main points from this extract. First, it is significant that in response to a question about thinking Valerie replies with a story about the physicality of dancing. The tension between being apparently 'forced' to dance and feeling 'excellent' is discernible even in the short extract reproduced here and it is a tension that is similarly

\textsuperscript{34}E is shorthand for the drug ecstasy (MDMA) - the practices and spacings of drug use are discussed in the following Chapter of the Night Out.

\textsuperscript{35}An extract from the second interview with Valerie.
evoked in what Valerie goes on to say about the duality of dancing for oneself, yet also in
and for the group. Second, dancing seems to be about having fun, being in control and
being with - and literally close to - others, yet at the same time, relinquishing that control,
being compelled to dance and losing touch with those around you - closing up. Thirdly, a
suggestion of the important role of spacings and orientations in Valerie’s inhabitation of
the dance floor is evident in the last paragraph of the extract. It is wrong to assume
clubbers merely drift around on the dance floor; their location, expression and bodily
practices are all carefully monitored, often pre-arranged. With practice these spacings
might become ‘second nature’\(^\text{36}\).

Pitched in terms of the relationships between performativity and sociality, dancing clubbers
constantly both produce and consume the activity in which they partake. Dancing
clubbers are continually investing and deploying skills, techniques and competencies (in
other words, sociality) that they have acquired and are acquiring in the processes of
attaining and maintaining notions of group identifications and social identities and in their
own imaginative constructions of self. For dancing clubbers, the contextual stagings of the
‘set’ - the physical constitution and boundaries of the dancing experience - are vital for their
performances within those stagings: their varying inhabitations and constitutions of these
stages over the course of the Night. Thus, notions of backstage and frontstage (density
and orientation of the crowd and of the individuals within that crowd, the intensity of the
dancing across the differing spaces within the club, the proxemic relationships clubbers
develop with those around them), notions of display and concealment (lighting / darkness,
visibility / invisibility, smoke / dry ice, lasers, strobe lighting, centre-stage / back-stage), and
notions of group collusion and teamwork (orientation and communication with the dancing
crowd, cooperation and synchronisation with other dancers) are not quite as open and ‘up-
for-grabs’ as they might at first appear. The key scriptings of style and coolness, of
personal abilities and learned competencies, and the impact of production and staging -

\(^{36}\) A further sense of the dazzling intensity of this particular night’s proceedings is perhaps evoked by
the following extract from my research diary for that night, written immediately afterwards on the
banks of the Thames, where I am struggling to paint a verbal picture of what I was experiencing:

\textit{Sunday, 7 July 1996, 5am:} ‘The atmosphere inside BS [the club] was extremely highly-
charged, massively dense and overbearing. There was no room for flinchers (and quite
literally no space for chilling out) - this was ‘give 100% all night’ social interaction all
right. You could smell sweat, ‘male’ smells - everyone I brushed against was sodden.
And to use that well-worn term, it really did seem tribal in that main dance-arch.
Surely Disco was never this group-orientated? Wasn’t it about showing off moves and
clothes, being in the limelight? Well, this was about disappearing, hiding not IN the
light, but FROM the light, melting into the crowd, the darkness, into the smoke, into the
music, into the mass of sweaty ecstasy-riddled bodies and the lasers in those musty
railway arches stuffed under the rail station. But why, why, why? The answers are not
within that club - I know that for sure, but right now ... I don’t know much else.
the directing influences of music, of timings, of volume, of lighting (visibility) - are blended imperceptibly in the 'tactical' (re)readings of these scripts and directions, and with the negotiated nature of the dancers' inhabitations of stage, set, props, scenery and costume. Through deliberate and accidental ad-libbing, dancers can veer away from prescribed and / or dominant practices, scriptings and spacings (see below) in creating unique and meaningful roles of their own.

BEN: [in a joking voice] ... so, Seb, do you think you're a 'good' dancer?

SEB: Do I think I'm a good dancer? Oh, let's be blasé about this - I like the way that I dance [do you?]. I definitely like the way that I dance. I think it's kind of an expression of yourself. Your dancing always changes - I mean I remember the way that I used to dance when I first went to clubs. I remember the first time at *Cream*, even before the drugs and stuff, watching people dancing and thinking "My God, they're brilliant!! - I couldn't possibly go up on that stage, because you've got to be someone to be up there!". It took me a long time to realise that it doesn't matter what you do or how you look as long as you're having a good time and I didn't accept that and I now accept that other people dance in different ways. I think my sister's a great dancer - some of the things she does I like, and some of the things that she does I don't like. When I see someone dancing I try and mimic what they're doing and make it my own. My mate Simon's a fantastic dancer - he's got that party piece that he does that's just got me in fits. I love the way I dance because it's an expression of who I am - I'm a very right-handed dancer [yeah, you said]. I noticed that especially when I was with Adam - I can take my right hand and use that and only that. Ummm, I can try with my left hand but it never lasts as long as my right. I'm very much a ... I try and get people around me involved. I try and single one person out and try and dance with them and if I can get a 'dance track' going with them then that's brilliant, but I'm very much a stage person, hands in the air, kind of bring people up with me. The night at *The Shed* when I was just totally off it, that's the kind of time when I really let loose and ... one of the reasons why *The Shed* was such a good night for me was it gave me the chance to dance the likes of which I wouldn't do in *Cream*. Because I was on my own and no one there knew me [ummm] and I'm not going to see those people again, I can just totally lose it and do what I want to do and if I think that it's accepted then it gives me confidence to maybe try it with people that do know me but that's what I like most. When I'm in a club with people
that do know me I think ... there's a little bit of holding back, accepting that
other people are aware of what you're doing and I think I'm conscious of that.

BEN: Do you often look down at what your feet are doing?

SEB: As a rule I don't move my feet when I'm dancing, not much at all, not
more than a shuffle anyway. I don't dance with my feet - I used to when the
music was different, but now it's all in my arms. Yes, I'm always conscious of
what my arms are doing. There's always times when I'm dancing, especially
early on in the night, that I start doing stuff. I might do something new or I
might do a move that I know how to do and if it's worked then I'll know that
it's worked and I'll know that it's looked good and I try and lose it and just go
with the music and let my arms and the music go as one. If it works - brilliant,
and if I see it not working then I'll make a little bit more effort.

BEN: What does 'not working' mean?

SEB: Just smoothness ... it flows. If I can go from one rhythm to another
smoothly, so it fits in. There are different kinds of moves that I've got - hands
going up, hands going down, side to side ... if I can get from one to another
smoothly and it fits in with the music - brilliant, and if I recognise a tune,
something I do when a tune is building and building is I gradually bring my
hands up as it builds and I can hold it and kick it off at the right time. If I
don't know the tune and it's a very long build up and I go up too soon, then I
think 'Shit, I've gone off too soon here, I'll just going to hold this and not look
like a dick' you know? It's choreographed, that's just the way I am.37

In this extract Seb begins to evoke a sense of the intense interaction of the dance floor.
Seb wants other clubbers to be on the same level as him, to dance with him and to share
his particular understanding of the music. He gains a sense of deep pleasure from being
seen as, and understanding himself to be, 'good' at dancing - that is, consistent and flowing
in his movements. Dancing becomes a source of both social and personal identity.

Clubbing experiences where little is at stake, such as the club where he was on his own,
that is, without his regular clubbing friends, provide opportunities for experimentation - "I
can just totally lose it and do what I want" - yet he still seeks 'acceptance' from these
clubbers, despite knowing that he will never see them again. Towards the end of the
extract it is possible to discern how the relationship between the micro-practices of
dancing and its relationships to the structurings (rhythms, narratives) of music are so

37 From my second interview with Seb.
important to Seb. He times his 'moves' precisely so that they fit in with the musical rhythms, and if he gets it 'wrong' and goes "up too soon" then he 'ad-libs' his way through his 'error' so that he does "not look like a dick". Seb acts within what is in one respect the totalising impact of the music - it dominates the space and the crowd - yet he also improvises and creates his own scripts within the apparently all-encompassing ordering of that music.

With this story of Seb's firmly in mind, I now want to re-work elements of the notions of egocentric and lococentric spaces that Maffesoli outlines in his discussion of "proxemics" (Maffesoli, 1995), and suggest firstly that these spaces might be better conceived as 'spacings'. Secondly, and related to this, I suggest that the sequences of spaces that Maffesoli proposes might be better conceptualised as concurrent spacings. These seemingly minor re-orientations make sense for similar reasons that 'consuming', 'ordering' and 'clubbing' are more useful conceptually than 'consumption', 'orders', and 'clubs' respectively (see Hetherington, 1997; Law, 1994). Spacings differ conceptually from spaces in that the former are explicitly 'never finished', always open to negotiation and thus always in a process of becoming. Further, many 'sets' of spacings - or spatial orderings - may co-exist within the same physical space. Each spacing - that is, each understanding of that space - will have its own usually unwritten codes, rules, symbols and customs and will generate its own systems and relations of power (Hetherington, 1997; Law, 1994). These rules, customs and rituals form the processes of sociality that may have evolved over time, across spaces, and through experiences (and which I introduced in Part 1). Crucially, these techniques and competency at their practicing must be worked at if 'mistakes' are to be avoided.

38 Maffesoli uses Berque's (1982) work on languages and identities in his own theorisations of the relationships between spaces and identities. Where "lococentric" spaces privilege the natural and social environment and surroundings within the cultures or ethos of those spaces (they disindividualise), egocentric spaces, argues Maffesoli, accentuate the individual and his or her concerted actions (they individualise) (Maffesoli, 1995).

39 The notions of Hetherington and Law have been influenced by the work of Foucault (1977; 1983; 1986).

40 As an aside, it is interesting to note how Goffman (1971: xii) refers to the connections between [...] social relationships [...] and public life as "orderings" (ibid: xiv).

41 Goffman makes this point in highlighting how "multiple social realities" may overlap: "... once a social situation is referred back to the social occasion that sets the tone for the gathering in it, we must admit the possibility that the same physical space may be caught within the domain of two different social occasions" (1963: 20). Goffman provides the (by now well-known) example of the restaurant meal being experienced as work and pleasure by the waiter and diner respectively.

42 As Bowen (1950: 67-69) so eloquently observes: "There is no longer the safety of a prescribed world, of which the thousand-and-one rules could be learnt, in which one could steer one's way instructed and safe [...] You can go wrong at any point, and by going wrong drag up a host of agonies: here too much is involved. How much more gladly would one observe ritual than be put through a series of daunting hoops".
The spacings or spatial orderings of dancing are never fixed or finished then, but continually in process. They are not singular, although there may be a dominant ethos or understanding at any one moment or in a certain area, but rather multiple and overlapping. Different clubbers will have different spacings of clubbing, and these will vary over times and between spaces. Conceptually, and with each differing in scale, the spacings of dancing are constituted in at least four important and inter-dependent ways: territorialisations and regionalisations; mediations; techniques and competencies; and emotions.

Dancing is constituted firstly through the territorialisations / regionalisations that its practices inhabit. The dance floors, the different areas within those dance floors, notions of frontstage and backstage, areas for sitting and drinking which surround them, cloakrooms, loos, eating areas - are all territorialisations which are bounded both spatially and temporally and are always open to alternative spacings and orderings which dancing and non-dancing clubbers may attempt to impose. In time these alternative orderings may become momentarily dominant themselves. Different practices are ‘acceptable’ within the differing regionalisations of the clubbing space. While dancing on the dance floor will usually be entirely acceptable, dancing at the bar where the ‘rules’ of tactility and bodily understandings of music are quite different can project a lack of tact and even a loss of bodily control. Drinking at the bar is completely normal, whereas drinking in the middle of the dance floor can convey a gross lack of awareness and drunkenness and is certainly uncool. Failure to recognise the boundaries of these regionalisations can signify incompetence, with special significance given to the dance floor perimeters. These perimeters might be physically established, for example through the provision of a clearly demarcated often wooden dance floor. In any case these boundaries will vary according to the particular stage of the evening; as the climax of the Night approaches, for example, it is possible that the whole floor area of the club might effectively become dance floor.

Differing regionalisations of the club provide greater potential for “involvement shields” (Goffman, 1963: 38) - that is, opportunities to momentarily come ‘off-stage’ or “go out of play” (ibid: 40) and interact with others in a much less active fashion. Club loos, the bar, 

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43 Notions of backstage and frontstage are always relative - while the loos may be backstage for the clubbers, for the loo attendant the loos are frontstage, and it is only by leaving and wandering the club beyond the loos that the loo attendant can experience any notion of being backstage. Furthermore, even within the loos there will be degrees of backstage, with the cubicles even further backstage than the sinks / urinals. Finally, it should not need pointing out that even within the backstage regions - in this case, of the loos - many clubbers will ‘keep up appearances’ and maintain the style-centred performances of the dance floor.
cloakrooms, inter-dance-floor corridors - these are all forms of 'involvement shield' or forms of 'backstage' regionalisation, yet so - at times - is the darkness, semi-visibility and sensory onslaught of the dancefloor. It is possible to 'disappear' in(to) the crowd. Competency at understanding the regionalisations of club spaces through a largely self-imposed self-education allows the dancing clubber to negotiate these complex socio-spatial demands. The spacings of the club are thus also bounded in the sense that they are constituted through technical competencies and a knowledge of 'local' customs, rituals, and modes of behaviour. Different areas of the club are used by the clubbers for various activities at different times of the night. The dance floor itself is often further subdivided by the dancers, with a common notion being that of a 'personal realm' - a notion of 'a space of our own' (a specific place for themselves and their friends) - which is more or less inhabited throughout the Night. These regionalisations can change from Night to Night, as well as during the course of a single Night Out.

BEN: Are you conscious of any differences that you get in various areas of the club?
LUKE: As a matter of fact, most of the time I move within a relatively small area of a club. Every place in a club seems to attract a different kind of people, even in small clubs. Sometimes it even goes so far that I can feel a little uncomfortable when being in the 'wrong' area. Not that I am afraid of anyone or so, it's just that things don't seem to fit. (Light, music volume, people around you). On the other hand, it can give sort of a new experience to 'explore' a new area sometimes. On an average night, I spend about 2/3 on my 'own spot' (In which 'spot' is more an area of the club, including some space on the dance floor and some space around the bar / seats) and 1/3 'being on vacation' to different areas ... Now that I think about it, I realize that 'my area' is almost everytimes close to the speakers. I can tell you a story about a rave, where I experienced the different types in a very extreme way. The main room was very large and in the middle there was a stage, in the form of a cross. (See figure ... below) The good thing about that was that every corner of the cross acted like a little area, though in fact everybody was in the same room. I spent most of the night in just one corner, 'cause while walking around, we saw that

\[44\] As I pointed out in the previous chapter, however, clubbers will vary in the extent to which they are aware of, and thus are concerned with, these socio-spatial demands. Those least concerned will have less 'to learn', while those consciously craving coolness might be extremely aware of the techniques and unwritten spatial orderings of cool: how to behave where and when in order to appear cool.
another corner was the place to pull up, the other corner turned out to be the homebase of the Essex-like guys and the other was really nothing. And of course, I was in the corner with the nice, friendly and open minded people <GRIN> ;-)  

This extract is re-presented here as it arrived in my e-mail inbox - the diagram, for example, was something that would not have been possible during a conventional face-to-face conversational interview. Luke is outlining how and why he uses different areas of the club through the night. His description of an area in which he stays most of the night is in common with those of other clubbers to whom I talked, with many speaking of a ‘space’ or ‘territory’ - Luke calls it “his area” and “his spot” - which they “colonise” for the night. This has the role of providing immediate security in the face of huge numbers of people, as well as acting as a meeting space for the clubbing group that the clubbers have either met or with which they came. The varying nature of different areas of the dance floor and the contextually specific practices deployed there are indicated by Luke; for example, certain areas are better for “pulling” while other areas are where the groups of lads hang out.

A second set of spacings that constitute the experience of dancing are mediations - the various environmental effects and qualities that exist within, and in many cases assist in defining, regionalisations and territorialisations. I outlined earlier how a central mediation is music which, even within a single club night, can be spatially variegated in terms of different areas and rooms for different musics and temporally variegated according to the stage of the evening and the particular DJ in control or ‘on the decks’. A change in music can radically change the constitution and expressive form of a dancing crowd, and the use of ‘anthemic’ and ‘classic’ tunes plays an important role in transforming the crowd’s intensity and numerical constitution.

45 From second interview with Luke, conducted by e-mail.
Supplementing the music are the environmental effects of lighting (or lack of it), thick smoke, dry ice and even ‘raining foam’, acting to both sensuously disorientate and physically insulate the clubbers from - and within - the surrounding crowd, even if only fleetingly. The combination of these effects, together with the extremely loud music, can evoke the sensation of being in a slightly unreal world, a space in which there is almost too much sensuous stimulation at once. Furthermore, the clothed, moving, and interacting bodies of the often closely-packed dancing crowd are themselves adding to this aura of unreality and ‘other worldly-ness’. With clever manipulation of lighting and the targeted use of visual effects such as slide show loops and film projections - both further ‘directing’ influences of production - an illusion can be fostered of being in an-other place at an-other time, of momentarily inhabiting a dream-world, of being beyond or outside ‘normal’ time and space.

Thirdly, dancing is constituted and experienced through the dancing clubbers’ techniques and competences and their spacings. Clubbers develop techniques and competencies - in the form of sociality - in the use of their bodies in such a manner as to successfully negotiate the trials of ‘impression management’ which present themselves across the various and changing regionalisations of the club in the form of sociality (Goffman, 1959). This impression management can be an individual matter, but more usually involves ‘team collusion’. Thus, the successful deployment of techniques on the dance floor involves co-dancers who to some extent share access to a wide range of information about these techniques. They agree on what should be understated and suppressed (what does not look good) as well as agreeing on what should be actively presented (what does look good), and upon basics such as the physical division of dancing space.

Perhaps the most obvious most significant forms of body techniques (Mauss, 1979) involved in dancing are the spacings of their co-present bodies. The dancers cooperate in distributing themselves throughout the available and constantly changing space of the dance floor to provide themselves with maximum personal space yet at the same time to also facilitate “engagement closure” through this spacing (Goffman, 1963: 156). The

46 “[...] the ways in which from society to society men [sic] know how to use their bodies” (Mauss, 1979: 97).
47 Referring to the work of Hall (1955)(on cross-cultural spacings), Hediger (1955)(on animal spacings) and Sommer (1959)(on personal spacings), Goffman notes how, in the absence of physical barriers to the perimeters of their engagement (such as walls), people engaged within a social situation frequently attempt to create a barrier through the spacing and orientation of their bodies. Dancing clubbers often orientate their bodies away from the open and perhaps still filling dance floor and towards either each other and/or the location of the DJ's mixing desk - often on a raised
nature of these spacings will change continually throughout the Night as the dancing crowd changes in size, intensity and constitution. 

Added to these bodily spacings are the techniques of engagement with co-dancers in the dancing crowd. Drifting between consciousness of their self and consciousness of the crowd, clubbers also vacillate between dancing ‘alone’ - dancing with themselves - and dancing ‘with others’, as part of and responsive to the dancing crowd. While some clubbers (such as Seb) preferred the sense of freedom that they experienced through dancing alone in various areas of the club, at least at times, others (such as Valerie) tended to remain together within the group with whom they came for the duration of the Night. Still others (such as Luke) said how they enjoyed the sensation of being between the crowd and the sense of aloneness that the crowded dance floor could instil.

In terms of dancing styles and the specific bodily practices of the clubbers, it is evident that different clubbers have different ways of dancing even where one dancer attempts to emulate another, and an individual clubber will dance quite differently according to the stage of the night, the type of night, whether they have consumed drugs or alcohol, the area of the club in which they are, the nature of the immediately proximate clubbing crowd, the music, and their level of competency. There are, nevertheless, very well-established ‘ways of doing’ dancing, in a similar way that I suggested earlier in the Night Out that there were specific skills at which one had to attain competency to successfully negotiate entry into the club. Dancing is one way of speaking through the body both to others and oneself, and as such when people dance they usually like to be saying the right things, or at least be seen to be in control of what they are saying. Appearances are an important facet of sociality in themselves - we come to believe that we are momentarily seeing into someone’s personality when we see someone dance - and the broad sharing of platform at the ‘front’ of the club. This point is evocative of Valerie’s earlier remark about dancing in a circle.

David Walsh (1993: 116) sketches out the significance of the practices of the dance floor in respect of the, “primary function of [...] social dancing” - “mating”. While Walsh’s is a fascinating ethnographic description of social interaction on the dance floor, I believe it overemphasises the prominence of “finding a mate” as a motivation for clubbing today (see survey information, presented in Part One, from Mintel, 1994; 1996; and Release, 1997). It is telling that Walsh discusses “disco dancing”, a dancing culture much more “geared to [the] self-presentation of glamorous sophistication” (ibid: 113) in which a “interest in dating remains a primary concern” (ibid: 118), rather than clubbing.

Not only have videos specifically on ‘how to dance’ been released and re-released, clubbing magazines regularly feature articles on dancing and dancing techniques. These articles are often presented in an ironic and somewhat mocking way - again a reflection of the discomfort that most clubbers experience when talking about their own dancing abilities, yet, at the same time they do usually contain relatively accurate diagrams and descriptions of dancing clubbers (see Cook, 1997).
dancing styles can be a powerful catalyst for development of (micro)identifications, as was evident in the above extracts from the interviews with Luke and Seb. In a similar way to dress and other forms of bodily adornment, dancing provides a way for the individual to present his or her self-image to others and to herself (Finkelstein, 1991). Supplementing the more immediately apparent techniques and spacings of body movements are the less obvious body techniques of gazings, touchings, gesturings and other forms of sociality which comprise ‘dancing’. Managing one’s body requires practice. As Butler (1990a) infers, the dancing body becomes a “variable boundary” - a “style of being” through which social - and thus self - identity is not only transformed but actually becomes possible in the first place.

Clubbers learn how to dance both through a combination of watching others (mimicry) and through listening to and understanding the music. The exact form of their ‘education’ takes on differing forms depending, for example, upon the genre of clubbing concerned, the age and gender of the clubber, the clubber’s past experiences and their view of their own relationship to the clubbing crowd. In its combination of listening, mimicry and embodiment, dancing represents a more spatially constituted form of listening to music than, say, watching a band perform on a bandstand or watching an orchestra play in a concert hall because understandings are more actively traced and visibly performed in space. Through their actions in inhabiting and constituting spaces dancing clubbers express a listening experience. Through the techniques of the body in understanding music they can explicitly identify with others through mimicry, with a style, through the display or emulation of that style, and with a crowd through combining proximity and tactility with this mimicry and its style.

It should be re-stated that the body techniques of dancing were, of the four sets of spacings I am conceptualising, the spacing about which the clubbers were the least happy - or perhaps least able - to talk during the interviews. Self-evaluation, when it did occur, tended to be restricted to value judgments about whether another person was dancing ‘well’ or not, or was ironically self-deprecatory in nature. However, I agree with one of the clubbers, Sun, in believing that this ‘reticence’ has more to do with the difficulty of talking about dancing than with any lack of significance of dancing to the practices of clubbing.

A fourth set of spacings, and the most elusive to pin down, are the emotional spacings of clubbing. These arise through the complex interaction of territorialisations, mediations (physical effects), and bodily practices, with notions of identities and identifications. These
emotional spacings are particularly significant to the dancing experience in that dancing is at once both a cause and effect. Emotions are expressed through the body yet concurrently instilled through bodily movement, in tandem with music and other mediations.

The emotional spacings of dancing are the most personal and ‘local’ - the most ‘up-for-grabs’ and pliable - of the four forms of spatial orderings that I am conceptualising. As clubbers become more competent at the practices constituting each set of spacings, they gain confidence at addressing increasingly personal - and thus more fluid - problems of competency and can ‘travel’ towards these usually pleasurable emotional experiences of dancing.

Conceptually decreasing in scale from ‘environment’ to ‘self’, clubbers can develop proficiencies at understanding and acting within the *territorialisations / regionalisations* of the various areas (or regimes) of the physical club space as a whole (notions of inside and outside, spaces of dancing and non-dancing, of expression and restraint, of involvement and of non-involvement), through the *mediations* of music (its volume, speed [bpm], beats, rhythms), of lighting and sensory stimulation produced through ‘directing’ (what to do where and in what way), and through the *bodily practices* of the dancing itself (how to move arms, legs, head, fingers, feet; when to open or close eyes; in what ways to embody the rhythm; how to express happiness and euphoria; how to interact through dancing; how to deal and interact with extremely close others; if, where, and how to gaze and be gazed upon).

As competency at negotiating each of these spacings is developed, the clubbers move toward addressing and understanding dancing through *emotional spacings*. The challenge of mastering - or for some merely coping with - the spacings of regionalisations, mediation and bodily practices at once is such that a complete engagement with the emotional spacings of dancing is rare and when it does occur is usually fleeting. The dancer is usually at least partially monitoring other facets of the dancing experience. If successful in meeting the spacings of regionalisations, mediations and bodily techniques through understanding where and how to use one’s body a sensation of momentary introspection - or ex-stasis - may be experienced.

During these deeply emotional moments - and ‘moments’ are literally their duration unless drugs are involved - the individual clubber is outwardly participating in the practices of
dancing but inwardly momentarily allows his or her attention to switch from this dancing to a playlike and reflexive world in which s/he alone participates. These relationships between bodily actions and emotional and mental reflection can be forcefully experienced - "dance is a powerful, frequently adopted symbol of the way people feel about themselves" (Royce, 1977: 163). Goffman (1963: 69) usefully describes this mixture of detachment within togetherness as an "away", and this term effectively and concisely evokes the sensation experienced by stressing the retention of a close control over one's body, yet a simultaneous sense of situational detachment. As the dancing clubber fleetingly experiences this 'away' and fluxes from consciousness of environment to that of self, the 'directing' influences of club production and staging (the territorialisations and mediations of production) become less or even insignificant as these spacings (and their scriptings) are progressively more open to deliberate ad-libbing by the individual dancing clubbers. In this way dancing offers to both individual clubbers and the group of which they are a part, "[...] the chance to become something else 'for the time being' or [...] to rebecome what they never were" (Schechner, 1981: 3)^.

ROGER: I danced for about two-and-a-half hours altogether, a bit more than average. I love the mixture of community and isolation on the dance floor ... you can go for ten minutes with your eyes closed, caught up in the mechanics, then look around and catch people's eyes and exchange grins. Sometimes I lay down some tasty moves ... although God knows what it looks like but who cares! [we laugh]. At other times I just do kind of the same movements over and over and think or daydream or just look around. Sometimes I dance "with" people, sometimes on my own ... it feels different and yet the same every time. I always start off feeling like Nelly the Elephant and two songs on I feel I have become Nureyev ... I wish!^1

Roger's brief account of dancing is noteworthy for at least five reasons. First, the isolation-community tension is evocative of the inbetweeness that I have been stressing throughout the Night thus far. Second, his notion of being "caught up in the mechanics" chimes with the notion of loss of bodily control that I turn to below. Third, and another facet of this inbetweeness, Roger fluxes between dancing with himself and dancing with others, while

^0 This notion of an 'away', somewhat paradoxically experienced as a temporary annihilation of everything beyond the here and now, begins to problematise certain overly-neat dichotomies between presencings and absencings, here and there, proximity and distance. I discuss this further in the next Chapter.

^1 An extract from the first interview with Roger.
he is always, of course, within the dancing crowd. Fourth, through feeling “different and yet the same everytime”, dancing provides both novelty and familiarity. Finally, Roger is quite aware of what ‘being good’ at dancing means and can be openly self-deprecating about his abilities, as his comparison of Nelly and Nureyev demonstrates.

I turn in detail to the moments of introversion to which Roger alludes above - moments which are of immeasurable importance to the popularity of the clubbing experience, and which I describe as ‘moments of ecstasy’ or ‘oceanic experiences’ - in the following two Chapters of the Night Out. I want to complete this Chapter, and thus also this initial discussion of dancing and music, by noting a final ordering influence that affects and constitutes each of the spacings that I have just outlined in a significant manner: that ordering influence is temporality.

Due to licensing restrictions, club nights usually start and finish at set times, so the spacings I have outlined are primarily defined temporally in that the clubbing experience lasts for a specified period. During the experience the presence of music and especially of rhythm powerfully impacts upon the clubbers’ notions of time as well as their experience of spaces. While the music is playing, the notion of linear time passing can seem to have changed. Indeed, as Blacking (1973) points out, one of the essential qualities of music is its power to seemingly create another world of virtual time. The massively loud volume of the music typical in most clubbing experiences not only virtually obliterates verbal communication, especially on the dance floor, but it can also act to structure time for those present, while they are present, as eternally in the present, as a momentary time of continual ‘nowness’. Through imposing sonic orderings and spacings upon the social gathering, music can affect emotional responses and can in certain instances effect a coincidence of emotional arousal at the same moment (Storr, 1992).

To dance is not just to experience music as time but to experience time as music, to experience a set of spacings that are cut off or divorced from everyday time (Frith, 1996).

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52 I note in the final part of the thesis, Reflections, how this ‘set time’ can be challenged by the clubbers in the form of their immediate post-clubbing activities.
53 “We often experience greater intensity of living when our normal time values are upset ... music may help to generate such experiences” (Blacking, 1973: 51). See also Tagg (1979) on the concentrated effects of TV theme music. Simon Frith’s (1996) discussion of the relationships between music and time is especially interesting.
54 That is not to suggest that clubbers ‘feel the same way’ while dancing or listening to loud music. Rather, by suggesting that a coincidence of emotion may occur, I am pointing to the role of music in the creation of a sense of empathy, the formation of a group or crowd ethos and thus the power of music to create and consolidate identifications.
Time passing is superseded by music playing. Time and its intense regulation of bodily actions outside clubbing - through the demands of working, of travelling, of sociability and interacting - is replaced by music and its regulation of bodily action within the spacings of clubbing - through dancing, through spatial selection, through bodily expression of emotional and identificatory responses to the crowd.

Dancing clubbers can and do forget time. The clubbing experience effectively transforms time into space and music for the clubbers whilst they are clubbing. The 'now-ness' of clubbing, its insistence on the present and the significance of the moment, repeatedly reinforces the notion of clubbing as somehow outside time, regulated temporally only through rhythm. The focus for the clubbers is on what is rather than what should be (Maffesoli, 1987) and the pleasures of the present may temporarily obliterate the concerns of life before, beyond and outside the clubbing experience. To give an example, a very common feature of the end of a club night is the palpable sense of disbelief that the night might actually be over. The fluorescent lights coming on overhead not only reveal the usually (by now at any rate) less-than-beautiful bodies, they also indicate that 'time' is back, that the experience is effectively over, that this space only exists within the city waiting beyond the door.

This “succession of presents” (Maffesoli, 1995: 145) that is characteristic of the ambience of clubbing further contributes to an ethos in which proximity to and identification with others is foregrounded, but in which there is also possible a strong sense of introspection. Clubbers are both submerged beneath, and yet are relatively easily able to fall in and out of, the clubbing crowd.

Music is not, by its nature, rational or analytic; it offers us not argument but experience, and for a moment - for moments - that experience involves ideal time, an ideal defined by the integration of what is routinely kept separate - the individual and the social, the mind and the body, change and stillness, the different and the same, already past and still to come, desire and fulfillment.

(Frith, 1996: 157; emphasis in original)

out of space, out of time

Clubbers’ understandings of the rhythms, beats and lyrics of music are central to their enjoyment of the clubbing experience. Music is central to the practices and spacings of
clubbing; not only can music intensify shared experiences through exaggerating and in some cases distilling emotional responses brought forth by that shared experience, but music can alter regionalisations to such an extent that it prevents verbal interaction between those sharing the experience of that space. Music can be ascribed a totemic role, can act as a "mainspring [...] which binds people together as well as liberates them" (Maffesoli, 1995: 144). Music can act as a focus for the articulation of identities and identifications.

Music is also central to the practices and spacings of dancing - practices and spacings which can be understood as embodied understandings of that music and as a form of creative listening which prioritises these shared knowledges of music and their embodied performance. For clubbers, dancing is about simultaneously losing yet also gaining control over one's body, dancing is about becoming part of and submitting to the dancing crowd. Clubbing crowds are at once both emotional and motional, both social and spatial formations, both expressive of self yet also constructive and transformative of self. Momentarily displaced, lost between the community and the isolation of the dancing crowd, the clubbers are as unified and inseparable as are the dancer and the dance.

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?
(W. B. Yeats [1956] Among School Children, p.viii)

Out of space, out of time,
Out of sight, out of mind,
Feeling you feeling me,
Feeling me feeling you -
We're flying, together,
We're flying in each others arms.

Marlena Shaw

* * * *
Chapter 3

Moments of Ecstasy: Oceanic & Ecstatic Experiences

That unmatched form and figure of blown youth Blasted with ecstasy.

(Hamlet, Act III, sc.i 166)
blasted with ecstasy ...

The dance floor is now exceptionally busy and appears chaotic. It is dark, crowded, very warm and humid. The lighting is going berserk and the music is now penetrating our minds and bodies, going through us rather than around us as its volume increases. Many clubbers appear to be almost picked up by the music and commanded or orchestrated in their dancing, unable to stop, not wanting to stop, unable to even conceive of stopping.

In this third stage of the Night Out I open out a conception of two closely related but significantly different forms of what are conventionally labelled ‘altered states’. I argue that these ‘altered states’ characterise, and for some clubbers provide the raison d’être of, the clubbing experience. Firstly, in outlining the notion of what I am calling ‘oceanic experiences’ I examine in detail the sensations of extraordinary and transitory euphoria, joy and empathy that can be experienced as a result of the intensive sensory stimulation of the dance floor. Notions of freedom and of in-betweeness appear to be vital.

Secondly, I discuss a major form of oceanic experience - the ‘ecstatic experience’ - which is premised upon the use of so-called ‘dance’ or ‘recreational’ drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA).

Thirdly, in tracing out a ‘night on E’ in some detail, I further develop an understanding of the often quite technical practices, spacings and timings of these ‘moments of ecstasy’ which, for many, are the very essence of clubbing.
1 The Oceanic Experience

Of all the arts, music is undoubtedly the one that has the greatest capacity to move us, and the emotion it arouses can reach overwhelming proportions.

(Rouget, 1985: 316)

Although it usually takes place within a social context, the dancing that is so central to clubbing is a highly personal experience and one that is rarely evoked in writing because of its ineffable and ephemeral qualities\(^1\). The contrasting moments of introversion and of complete engagement with the dancing crowd that the dancing clubber may experience, upon which I touched at the end of the last Chapter, are impossible to fully convey through words alone. In my attempts to evoke these experiences, which I am variously conceptualising as ‘oceanic’ and ‘ecstatic’ for reasons I outline below, it is thus important that the frames of reference and terminology that are used are explained as fully as is possible at the outset. While Lewis (1989: 10) is correct to critique over-elaborate and fanciful concepts of altered states and ecstatic (and other so-called ‘mystical’) experiences as flawed and based upon “elaborate structuralist dichotomies”, he firstly fails to outline any alternative, and secondly he partially falls into his own trap by embarking upon a lengthy and confusing chapter of debate over definitions. When discussing these most individual, fleeting and powerfully emotional experiences some clarification of terms and concepts is necessary and should not be avoided simply due to their complexity.

At the risk of tautology, at their most basic level of conception ‘altered’ states of mind differ from ‘normal’ states of mind in being qualitatively unlike the predominant states of mind experienced during one’s waking hours in the course of ‘normal’ day-to-day living; they involve some form of transformation in consciousness (Inglis, 1989; Laski, 1961; Lewis, 1989). Thus, ‘altered’ states do not include common experiences such as euphoria, happiness or joy as experienced on an everyday basis, but rather only euphoria, happiness and joy characterised by a transitory, unexpected, valued and extraordinary quality of rare occurrence and magnitude in which an altered sense of consciousness is temporarily experienced (Laski, 1961; 1980).

\(^1\) As I alluded to earlier, accessing and representing these stories as ‘the researcher’ can therefore be problematic. Dancing is a, “form in the making [...] a dynamic image” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979); when the dancer reflects on the experience in order to recount it the dynamism of the experience is gone (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b).
Throughout the Night I have referred to the experience of in-betweeness or liminality - of being somehow taken outside of or beyond oneself, especially while dancing - that is a characteristic of many crowds and particularly of the closely-packed, sensorially-bombarded dancing crowds of clubbing. At its most intensive this sensation of in-betweeness can partially induce or trigger the altered state of consciousness that I am calling, after Freud (1961) and Storr (1992), the oceanic experience. I use this term in evoking,

... a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.

(Freud, 1961: 65)

Drawing from work by Marghanita Laski (1961; 1980) on ‘ecstasies’, by Brian Inglis (1989) on altered states such as ‘trance’, by Anthony Storr (1992) on music and the emotions, and by I. M. Lewis (1989) on ‘ecstasies’ and altered states more generally, I define as ‘oceanic’ those experiences characterised by one or more of these sensations: ecstasy, joy, euphoria, ephemerality, empathy, alterity (a sense of being beyond the everyday), release, the loss and subsequent gaining of control, and notions of escape. Oceanic experiences are described “as being one in which all sense of self and time and the everyday world seem to vanish [...] a state of anxiety is replaced by mental tranquillity” (Laski, 1980: 12-13). Pleasurable fluctuations between awareness of self and environment, between sensations of intensity and withdrawal, and between practices of interaction and reflection, are foregrounded.

For Laski, oceanic experiences are usually described as indescribable, although this does not prevent people trying to describe them in some detail - they just usually never quite ‘get there’. Laski also suggests oceanic experiences might involve feelings of loss (of self, of time, of place, of limitations); feelings of gain (of unity, of ‘everythingness’, of oneness, of an ideal place, of release); and feelings of “quasi-physicality” (Laski, 1980: 14). People

2 In one of the first uses of the term in evoking this sensation, Freud (1961) compared the oceanic experience to the heights of being in love - a state where the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away (Storr, 1992). For Freud, this melting boundary between self and other was interpreted as a temporary regression to infancy, where the infant at the mother’s breast has not yet differentiated itself from the external world. Thus, for Freud, the oceanic represented a regression to a total merger with the world (Storr, 1992). Inglis (1989) attributes the first use of the term “oceanic” to Jung (1957) in describing the experience of transcendence (see also Jung, 1973).

3 As I have mentioned above and as I suggest in more detail below, I am using the term ‘oceanic’ in preference to ‘ecstatic’ because of the current connotation of ‘ecstasy’ with the drug MDMA. I am especially concerned to avoid inferring that all clubbing experiences in which sensations of altered perception are experienced involved the use of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA).
describing oceanic experiences often evoke their feelings in terms of notions of upness, swelling, warm flushes or glowing in the heart, feelings of warmth, of liquidity, tinglings in the head and spine, and the attainment of calm and peace (Laski, 1961; 1980). Happold (1981) appears to concur with Laski in proposing that “mystical states” (as he calls oceanic experiences) are marked by ineffability, transience, passivity, and a noetic quality, and often instill a sensation of the oneness of everything.

The term ‘oceanic’ has most often been used in discussing the states of mind that can be experienced by mystics and those involved in solitary religious contemplation (Laski, 1961; Storr, 1992). Laski (1961) lists three main and prior uses of the term “ecstasy” in addition to her own use as a form of oceanic experience: first, in describing a trance-like state; second, in describing a state of madness, as in Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as being “blasted with ecstasy” with which I opened this chapter; and third, in describing a state of being in love, particularly, Laski suggests, in advertising media. Of course, only two years after Laski had written her second text on ecstasy, the term had taken on a fourth and additional connotation of referring to an “hallucinogenic amphetamine” (ISDD, 1996: 2; Stevens, 1993).

In contrast to the more usual considerations of the oceanic experience - where solitude appears to be a pre-condition and feelings of unity are experienced more with a ‘God’ or ‘universe figure’ than with any ‘earthly’ manifestation or ‘thing’ - I am using the concept to evoke the sensation of oneness and the liminality of self / wider group that can be experienced within apparently diverse dancing crowds. These experiences can induce highly pleasurable moments of ex-stasis (or loss of self) within individuals.

The notion of the oceanic experience is appropriate in discussing the altered states of consciousness which clubbers describe as sometimes experienced while dancing in crowds for at least four reasons. First, as I have suggested, the oceanic neatly evokes the sense of in-betweeness or liminality that characterises clubbing and particularly the practices and practices and...
emotions of dancing: in between spaces (outside / inside, inner night-life / outside everyday life, spaces of work / spaces of play), and in between times (night / day, work / play, and even outside time, or between ‘real’ times). Second, the oceanic evokes the fluidity and constantly shifting socio-spatial dynamics of the dance floor - the sensory onslaught that can act to effectively remove any figure of reference (the walls merge into the darkness, the ceiling is invisible, the floor is rarely glimpsed) and the unceasing motion of the dancers. Third, as both Storr (1992) and Lewis (1989) note, music alone rarely triggers the oceanic experience. Yet, through dancing and the embodiment of that music, through self-mastery and the use of body techniques in the expression of a dancer’s understandings, the dancer is able to transcend or escape the self and strive for a realm beyond the confines of the body - “to move one’s body is to aim at things through it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 137). Fourth, and related to these first three points, the oceanic experiences of the clubbers to whom I have talked appear to foreground (as does Laski’s concept of the ecstatic) notions of loss (of differences between self and others, of time and space, of words, images and the senses), as well as notions of gain (of unity, of timelessness and eternity, of control, joy, contact, and ineffability).

I refer to oceanic experiences that are partially attained through the use of chemical triggers - in particular the dance drug ecstasy (MDMA) or similar hallucinogenic amphetamines (ISDD, 1996) - as ‘ecstatic’, and I discuss these further below. The use of the term ‘ecstatic experiences’ to evoke the broad range of experiences of in-betweeness, ex-stasis and joy that clubbers have talked about both whilst dancing and off the dance floor would perhaps have been less confusing. However, in an attempt to prevent all such experiences being associated with the use of ecstasy (MDMA) or other drugs - a common misconception - I will refer only to those experiences that do involve drugs as being ‘ecstatic’ experiences. The term ‘oceanic experiences’ is thus used to encompass both drug-induced (ecstatic) and non-drug-induced sensations of in-betweeness. Simultaneous feelings of disassociation and of warmth and empathy towards others - sensations of introversion and meditation yet concurrent expression and jouissance - are facets of all crowd-based ‘oceanic experiences’. ‘Ecstatic experiences’, on the other hand, at least in the sense that I am using the term, are those oceanic experiences in which drugs - and particularly in the clubbing experience the drug ecstasy (MDMA) - are used in an attempt to trigger, prolong or intensify the experience.
the nature of the oceanic experience in clubbing

I don’t know how to put it into words - forgetting oneself, no, oneself ceasing to matter and no longer being connected with everyday things, with the commercial sort of life one lives - a feeling that for the first time you’re seeing things in proper proportion - you know that the things in the women’s magazines aren’t worth anything compared with the leaves on the trees, say, - and time seems to stop, no, not matter, you’re not anywhere, and despite not feeling anywhere in particular, feeling in unity with everything - no, not with everything, with nature, but not specifically trees, flowers, plants, everything that comes out of nature, like you might say a book was written by a man, but it’s still nature - it feels to a certain extent like a great climax which has built up - this thing has been seething inside you and suddenly it comes out.

(Laski, 1961: 387)

I don’t know what the colour scheme is exactly, for it is continually changing. This is caused by ever-varying kaleidoscopic shafts of light - now purple, now blue, now orange, now something else - being projected in turn upon the floor from above. Everywhere light and life and colour and swift movement; the rhythmic tapping of feet; the gleam of backs as bare as they know how to be; the rustling of attenuated skirts; the throbbing of violins; and, again, the hum of laughter and talk.

(Wyndham, 1926: 49)

Before I turn to address the use of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) in the attaining of oceanic experiences I want to first note a number of more general qualities of the oceanic which can be experienced without (as well as through) the use of drugs, albeit perhaps in a more fleeting fashion. Moments of oceanic contemplation in clubbing are characterised by notions of membership of the clubbing crowd, by their momentary nature, by a tension between intensity and withdrawal, and by their technical and thus contextual quality. I now briefly address each of these points.

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6 This striking testimony is that of a sixteen-year-old girl who participated in the Questionnaire Survey upon which Marghanita Laski partially bases her text. The interview took place in the late-1950s. She is responding directly to the question: “how would you describe the sensation of ecstasy?”.

7 Wyndham is describing his impressions of a 1920s London dance-hall. The absence of violins and “the attenuated skirts”, and the presence of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) and much louder music are the only significant differences over 70 years later.
the oceanic and crowds

In her seminal study of the experience of ecstasy, Marghanita Laski (1961: 177) proposes that the crowd is an example of what she calls an “anti-trigger”, an inhibitor to the experience of the oceanic. While recognising that the crowd can be a source of real pleasure for those within it, Laski suggests that because the crowd is such an ordinary everyday aspect of ‘normal life’ - at least in cities we experience crowds on a routine daily basis - it can impede a full sense of loss of self and reflection. Other commentators see the crowd context as implicated in the experience of the oceanic. Lewis (1989), Gowan (1975) and Csikszentmihalyi (1975) all infer that the experience of the oceanic may also be marked by an involvement with the crowd, even if, as Lewis (1989) adds, individual experiences within that crowd will have a personal and unique quality to them. In contrast to Laski (1961; 1980) and as I intimated above, I am proposing that the oceanic - attained with or without the use of drugs - is not dependent upon, nor induced only through solitude. The oceanic can also be experienced, albeit in a differing form, in the dancing crowd - a crowd certainly not experienced on an everyday basis. With the exception of the use of drugs, the contexts of the dancing crowd and the loud music are, in fact, the two most significant features of the dancer’s route into experiencing the oceanic.

oceanic moments

The oceanic as experienced by those not using drugs almost invariably lasts “an immeasurably small space of time: an instant, a moment” (Laski, 1980: 14). Nevertheless, people often speak in these terms after having won a race, or a prize, or having held an audience spellbound on a dramatic stage or on a speaker’s platform; less intensely, it is the feeling of being a success at a party” (ibid: 151). Laski refers to them as “Napoleonic experiences” after Napoleon’s realization, after the Battle of Lodi in 1796, that he could henceforth consider himself ‘un homme supérieur’, a decisive actor on the political scene” (ibid: 151). Thus Laski links these variants of altered state of consciousness with social contexts in contrast to her conception of “ecstatic experiences”. I prefer to understand what I am calling ‘oceanic experiences’ as involving both the cleansing, purifying and reflective sensations of Laski’s “ecstatic experiences” and the social gratification, delight, sense of perfection and exaltation of her “Napoleonic experiences”.

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8 All of Laski’s 60 respondents underwent their “ecstatic experiences” whilst alone. This is the complete opposite of instances of the oceanic in clubbing, where the crowd is a foundation of, and even a necessary pre-condition for, the experiencing of the oceanic sensation.

9 It is interesting to note how, in her earlier text Laski (1961) only briefly (over two pages) raises the question of thronging crowds as ‘triggers’ for the ecstatic (what I am calling the ‘oceanic’), suggesting that too few accounts of being within crowds exist, and concluding that “crowd-induced feelings can seldom, if ever, be assimilated to ecstatic ones” (ibid: 206). Obviously still troubled by the ecstatic potential of crowds some nineteen years later, Laski (1980) draws a belated and not altogether convincing distinction between “ecstatic experiences” (what I call ‘oceanic experiences’) and what she calls “Napoleonic experiences”. While the former are (for Laski in any case) premised upon solitude and reflection, the latter are “essentially to do with worldly dominance, success, social gratification [...] people often speak in these terms after having won a race, or a prize, or having held an audience spellbound on a dramatic stage or on a speaker’s platform; less intensely, it is the feeling of being a success at a party” (ibid: 151). Laski refers to them as “Napoleonic experiences” after Napoleon’s realization, after the Battle of Lodi in 1796, that he could henceforth consider himself ‘un homme supérieur’, a decisive actor on the political scene” (ibid: 151).
this does not prevent the moment of the oceanic often being characterised by sensations of timelessness, of time temporarily having no meaning. This ephemerality or timelessness is due in part to the immense difficulty of suspending the conventional notions of civility, propriety and sociability - notions of consciousness of self and one’s social obligations - for anything more than fleeting moments. In addition to the enculturated monitoring and consciousness ‘systems’ that tend to retrieve dancing clubbers from their reverie almost as soon as they find themselves ‘there’, there is the more prosaic need not to hit another dancer in the face with a flailing arm. Self-consciousness and a sense of location return almost as quickly as they melt away and the ‘default’ settings of everyday life - the timings, spacings and monitoring of the body and its presentation and the monitoring of others’ bodies and their self-presentation - again re-assert themselves.

However, while the oceanic is usually described in terms of instants or moments there is often a period of “afterglow” that persists within the individual after the experience (Laski, 1961: 59), prolonging the sense of the oceanic having been experienced if not the actual experience itself. The pleasurable experience of these oceanic moments thus often endures well after their temporal and far beyond their spatial epicentres¹⁰.

### intensity & withdrawal

Experiences of the oceanic are obviously not identical, differing between instances even for the same individual. Laski (1961: 54-55) distinguishes two main forms of ‘the ecstatic’ (which corresponds to my notion of the oceanic): “intensity ecstasies” and “withdrawal ecstasies”. Laski argues that an experience that is predominantly characterised by intensity may be euphoric, intoxicating and elatory whereas an experience in which a sense of withdrawal dominates (while still an oceanic experience) might be characterised much more by reflection, contemplation and interpretation¹¹.

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¹⁰ In unpacking my conception of ‘Playful Vitality’ in the next Chapter I address in more detail these points concerning the value and role of oceanic and ecstatic experiences. This ‘afterglow’ is a significant part of the overall clubbing experience and one whose significance I examine in detail in the final Chapter of the thesis, the ‘Reflections’.

¹¹ As examples, Laski (1980: 15) proposes that “the intensity experience is the chosen religious experience of the West. It cannot be deliberately brought about. It is momentary and fulminant [furiously intense]”, while “the practice of contemplative prayer is the chosen method of inducing” the withdrawal experience, although “this is the preferred experience of the East rather than the West”, being attained “gradually rather than suddenly”. In her 1961 text Laski is explicitly concerned with religious experiences but in her later text (1980) she turns her attention to “similar but lesser experiences, in the contexts of everyday life [...] in everyday life’s more trivial contexts” (ibid: 7). Laski uses the examples of falling in love and acts of charity (both in their broadest terms).
Of course, these are only extremes - most oceanic experiences feature both moments of intensity and of withdrawal, both effervescence and introspection. The sensory overload that can characterise a state of euphoria can, through obliterating other aspects of the situation such as gazings, speech and other aspects of situational interaction, focus the mind within, as well as overwhelm it from without. If the intensity of the situation is such that the dancer is momentarily relieved of the obligations and technical requirements of social interaction then inner reflection and contemplation may become possible. Through focusing attention and concentrating the senses music and the other mediations of clubbing can limit the stimulus field, distractions are temporarily eliminated and a sense of merging with the music - a loss of self or sensation of ex-stasis - can be experienced (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b).

By no means do all clubbers, dancing or otherwise, experience oceanic sensations of intensity and/or withdrawal whilst clubbing. Given the difficulty of articulating these experiences for the clubbers, particularly to someone who is not a close friend, it is not possible to propose with any degree of certainty how many of the eighteen clubbers that assisted me in interviews and clubbing Nights Out had experienced oceanic sensations. However, all the clubbers attempted to evoke a ‘special feeling’ that they experienced at certain times while dancing. Some suggested that they were most aware of the intensity of the dance floor, that they were enjoying the massive sensory stimulation of music, closely-packed bodies and semi-visibility. Others talked about dancing as providing a time to think, as allowing them to “lose it” (as Seb suggested during my discussion of dancing in the last chapter). Still others (such as Roger, above) mentioned both the “community and the isolation” of the dance floor. The nature of clubbers’ experiences of intensity and/or withdrawal - and thus of the oceanic - while dancing appeared to depend, to some extent at least, upon how confident and competent they felt while dancing. The techniques of the dancing body which I discussed in the previous chapter as one of the key ‘spacings of clubbing’ are thus centrally implicated in the emotional and sensorial experience of the dance floor, and in the nature of the emotional spacings which I also mentioned.

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12 Inglis (1989) notes how this ineffable quality of ecstatic and oceanic experiences has led cynics to ask why, if the experience was really as significant to the individual experiencing it as they said it was, could they not describe the experience coherently to others? Inglis suggests that these critics should pause and ask themselves whether they could “describe sight ‘coherently’ to a blind man, or the feelings generated by the sight and smell of a flower even to somebody familiar with them” (ibid: 262).
techniques of losing and gaining control

BEN: What were you thinking?
KIM: Ummm ... in some ways I sort of switch off if you like, and not think, just ... I prefer ... the way I'm like responding or dancing to the music or anything. I try ... I don't like to think about that too much because if you start thinking about what you're doing or you suddenly think "oh, got that" and you try and ... so like I just try to tend to let me brain ... and saying about thinking about my CV or whether I should get my hair cut or something like that, thoughts like that often pop into my head and it's ... it does sound really trivial but ... one thing that I was thinking about was, and it was quite possibly because you were there and you were doing this interview and stuff, I was thinking about umm ... the rave culture and the dance culture and everything else, and that why everybody did it etcetera and I was thinking you know, like the video games, the quality of material, everything is so like, lighting, TV ... we're getting so much stimulation, really strongly, all the time, that if you want to go out and get ... it's going to be that hard to get ... and about care in the community as far as giving people things to, well, giving people the opportunity to go out and enjoy themselves and all the things against it and for it ... that sort of stuff.13

Kim is clearly attempting to relate the experience of the dance floor at that moment to her everyday life and to life more generally - partially, it would appear, because of my presence. She also appears to be struggling to find the words that precisely evoke her emotions and thoughts at that moment. Apparently, Kim does not like to, nor need to, 'think' about her dancing movements, instead using the space and time of the dance floor to think about other aspects of her life.

In the clubbing crowd, the oceanic, if experienced at all, is usually experienced through participation within the dancing crowd. Although Mauss (1979: 336) suggests that "underlying all our mystic states there are corporeal techniques", it is wrong to reduce the oceanic merely to the outcome of a correctly practiced set of body movements in a specific social context (Rouget, 1985). As with many other aspects of clubbing, issues of competence are not as clear-cut as merely involving the practice of learned body techniques. For one thing, notions of coolness can also affect the way - the spacings and

13 An extract from the second interview with Kim.
timings - that a dancer dances. Furthermore, the timings and spacings of clubbing mean that at certain times it is cool not to succumb to the crowd and music and actually to resist an available route into the oceanic, perhaps by not dancing. At other times the music, crowd and 'e/m otion' may become so intense that even experienced clubbers, regarded as 'cool' - if only by themselves - may appear incapable of resisting the summons of the music and the crowd and thus they lose themselves to the intensity of the situation (Rouget, 1985). As Crossley (1995: 137) states, "to have acquired a body technique is precisely to be able to adapt and apply it in accordance with the demands of particular situations". Clubbers have differing understandings of when and where it is appropriate to be seen to momentarily surrender control of one's body in experiencing the oceanic.  

ROBERT: I'm not into sort of sweat-box, nutter-tops-off sort of stuff - that's just obscene! It's like, you don't want to be a fucked-up nutter in a room full of sad people! [we laugh] ... then you come out looking like a schmuck [?]. I mean, you want to be around ... when you're really fucked then it's almost as if you want everyone else to be fucked too cos you are, but they're not [ummm]. You want everyone to be on the same sort of vibe. You're grooving to the music or whatever, kind of like more heads down and just sort of totally in your own world, your own ... sort of head, just totally off on one sort of thing, which is cool sometimes, I mean, and other times you'll be totally more head up, totally looking at where the DJ is and the people will be jumping around you. If everyone else is on the same buzz and fucked or whatever [um-huh] and jumping about and having a laugh then that's going to be a good night ... crowds DO make nights.

There appear to be times and spaces when being 'cool' is about demonstrating control over one's body while at other times being 'cool' is about abandoning or relinquishing control of one's body to the crowd. From Robert's story, it is apparent that for him these different times during the clubbing experience are again related to the tension between the ways in which a clubber can experience the crowd ("crowds DO make nights"). Both

14 And it is thus lazy to generalise techniques across social situations as Crossley suggests Mauss (1979) is guilty of doing.  
15 One of the topics on which I have least material in the clubber interviews is the actual experience of the oceanic and ecstatic states, although as I have already mentioned, all the clubbers referred to a special motional-emotional sensation which they experienced while dancing, even if only in vague terms. Given the apparently sublime nature of many oceanic experiences this absence of detailed discussion is perhaps not surprising. This short passage is taken from one of my earlier 'pilot' interviews with a 23-year old man called Robert (he worked in an engineering company in Kingston, Surrey).
modes of experiencing the crowd - as distinctive from it (individualised) and as submerged within it (anonymised) - are able to foster moments of oceanic contemplation, but the nature of the crowd around him is implicated in influencing which of these modes Robert experiences. If Robert wants to interact with the crowd it appears important that the crowd are ‘with him’, that they seem on the same level as him, that they are “on the same buzz” and display broadly similar body techniques. On the other hand, if Robert is more reflective - more “in [his] own world” - then his head is “down” and he is not interacting with others. Yet, this can be “cool” too. What feels ‘cool’ at any one moment is thus at least partially crowd-premised in an on-going and permanently unfolding fashion.

Although dancers may feel momentarily out of control of themselves, they may also experience this as a sensation of being partially controlled from without, by the music and the aura of the dancing crowd around them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). This simultaneous sense of losing and gaining control over the dancing body is complex, particularly when related to clubbers’ understandings of their own techniques and competencies. As Ludwig (1969: 14) suggests, “(r)einquishing conscious control may arouse feelings of impotency and helplessness, or, paradoxically, may represent the gaining of greater control and power through the loss of control”.

It would therefore be wrong to surmise, for example from Kim’s description, above, of her “switching off”, that the dancing crowd consists simply of a large number of dancers each attempting to ‘lose it’, to slip into automatic in their quest for pleasurable sensations. Apart from anything else, if that were the case then the dance floor would become a chaotic and dangerous situation resulting in injury. The dancers are not in a trance. Rather, the dancing crowd ‘works together’ in creating conditions for the positive experiencing of intensity and withdrawal, the oceanic, and, if drugs are involved, the ecstatic experiences. The body techniques of the dancers are orientated according to the changing demands of the dance floor and the social situation which is the dancing crowd, as well as to their own senses of expression and release. The dancers are keen to avoid “over-intrusive perceptual relations” to each other - hence, in Goffmanian terms, the feigning of ‘disattentioon’ and the occasional tactical use of ‘involvement shields’ to effectively go ‘off stage’ temporarily. Yet the dancers must also - even in successfully appearing ‘disattended’ and experiencing the most intense moments of oceanic reflection - “scan the scene of their action for postural, gestural and linguistic clues regarding the

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16 As in Valerie’s description, in the last Chapter on dancing, of being “forced to dance ... I wasn’t thinking about it, it was just happening to me”. 
possible action or inaction of others, and they must provide similar clues themselves” (Crossley, 1995: 138). All this “is necessary if the distinct projects and actions of embodied agents are to be coordinated [...] within shared spaces” (Crossley, 1995: 139). Differing areas of the dance floor demand different techniques of the oceanic just as differing times do, and thus the stereotypical ‘abandon’ of the dance floor is actually constituted through extremely complex and constantly changing socio-spatial negotiations and orderings.

Awareness of self is thus both heightened and in some way muted in the oceanic experience. Some control of the body is ceded to the music and the crowd, yet through this semi- or unconscious ceding a heightened sense of control over the body can be established. The apotheosis of this phenomenon is that clubbers can lose a sense of themselves as entities separate from the crowd - they feel lost in the crowd - yet they can use this sense of merging and harmony with the crowd as a context for interpretation and contemplation of self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c). Dancing clubbers are thus at times almost sub-consciously attentive to the changing nature of the crowd around them, very subtly monitoring others’ dancing techniques and territorial spacings.

JOHN: Uh ... the black room, the big black room downstairs, I didn’t find that until about one o’clock in the morning and I was totally fucking shocked when I went down there, it was mental. It was totally dark and there were just a few lasers here and there - red and black looked really good together, ummmm ... and you didn’t really get an impression of how big it was except when the lasers flashed, and then you sort of only got an impression and you couldn’t really tell and that sort of gave it the impression of being a lot bigger than it really was ... a couple of times I’ve done what I call ‘lost it’ while dancing, just totally [yeah] ... but then I realise like five or ten minutes later, ummmm .... that you’re dancing really hard and you see everyone around you dancing the same way - really hard, and actually I notice this girl looking at me like this and laughing, ummm ... but that is the best part to me, of dancing, is when the music just builds up so much that you just go without thinking about it really, and ... lose it. To do that it’s got to be really really fast [ummm]. It just happens, you don’t even notice it while it’s happening and then afterwards you think ‘fuck that was really good!’ [yeah]. I was in the black room when Paul Oakenfold came on. It was ... how do you describe the feelings ... excitement, ummm, oh, contentedness [right] that, I dunno, that ... do you know what I mean? [yeah]. I’d got something that I’d wanted almost and was just so nice - the heat, the
lasers, and blackness of it ... that was awe-inspiring. It made you go
huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhh [draws breath deeply inwards]. It was excellent.\textsuperscript{17}

John here conveys the oceanic sensation as actually experienced on the dance floor. John's experience of 'losing it' is partially based on the practices of the crowd around him, as well as his dancing and the building music to which he is responding. The fleeting nature of the experience is evident. Yet again, John's search for the words to evoke the feelings he experiences demonstrates the difficulty of articulating the nature of the oceanic.

In the following Chapter I discuss in detail the exhilarating and often ineffable sensation of strength or vitality to which John alludes in this extract ("I'd got something that I'd wanted"). These sensations appear to result from this simultaneous losing and gaining of control over the body, through the feeling of merging with the crowd (or ex-stasis), and through the experiencing of "glowing moments" (Laski, 1961: 65) or sensations of euphoria, spacelessness, timelessness and the momentary. Before this, however, I want to complete this Chapter of the Night Out by entering the chemically-altered world of the ecstatic experience.

* * * *

2 The Ecstatic Experience

As well as being attained through the practices of dancing and the use of the body in crowd interactions and personal expression, the oceanic sensation of euphoria, liminality and ex-stasis can be experienced through the use of recreational or 'dance' drugs. Where chemical triggers are used by the dancer they are usually used in tandem with the practices of dancing and bodily control on the dance floor that I have just outlined, and thus the use of drugs represents in some ways an additional layer of emotional and sensational 'action', as opposed to an alternative. I want to turn now explicitly to examine the role of drugs, and especially the drug ecstasy (MDMA) in the clubbing experience, with a particular focus upon their use in attaining a form of oceanic experience which I am calling the ecstatic.

\textsuperscript{17} From the second interview with John.
ecstasy (MDMA) and clubbing

There are a whole gamut of drugs used by clubbers in Britain. Some are thought of as ‘old
favourites’, such as cocaine and cannabis. Others are newer ‘synthetics’, such as ecstasy
(MDMA), MDMA-related substances such as MDA and MDEA, and the anaesthetic-like
 Ketamine (often referred to as ‘special K’ or ‘vitamin K’)\(^1\). Still others are so-called ‘legal
highs’ made from natural plant and herbal substances. Over the past ten to fifteen years
clubbing in Britain has been increasingly pervaded by ecstasy (MDMA) and this has had a
huge impact on the practices and nature of clubbing experiences\(^2\).

‘Ecstasy’ is the popular name for “3, 4-Methylenedioxy-N-Methamphetamine” (‘ecstasy’ or
‘E’ is slightly easier in everyday conversation), a compound originally patented by the
German E Merck Company in 1912. The popular rumour that it was developed as a
slimming pill is almost certainly a myth (Henry, 1992; Saunders, 1997), with Saunders
(1997: 7) suggesting that MDMA “was just one of many compounds which were patented
but never marketed” and which “next came to light [...] in 1953 when the US army tested a
number of drugs to see if they could be used as [...] agents in psychological warfare”. A
Californian chemist named Alexander Shulgin re-synthesised MDMA in 1965, and after
introducing a therapist friend to MDMA in 1977 the substance quickly became popular
amongst West Coast USA psychotherapists due to its empathic effects (ISDD, 1996;
Saunders, 1995; Shulgin & Shulgin, 1991)\(^3\). MDMA first appeared on ‘the streets’ of West
Coast America in 1972 as an at that time legal alternative to MDA, a related substance
which had already been made illegal. In Britain MDMA or ‘E’ was initially associated with
clubs that played so-called ‘Balearic’ dance music in the mid-1980s, although its possession
was made illegal much earlier than this through an amendment to the Misuse of Drugs Act

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\(^1\) I refer to the drug ecstasy as ‘ecstasy (MDMA)’ throughout. Once again, this admittedly somewhat
clumsy description is used in order to avert any danger of misunderstanding between the drug
‘ecstasy (MDMA)’ and the state of being in ecstasy.

\(^2\) I am concentrating upon the use of ecstasy (MDMA) for two connected reasons: first, most of the
clubbers I talked to who used drugs in clubbing used or had experience of using ecstasy (MDMA);
second, after cannabis it is the most-used drug in Britain, and unlike cannabis is almost exclusively a
‘dance drug’ - that is, it is used predominantly during the practices of dancing during clubbing and
raving (Saunders, 1997).

\(^3\) Jay Stevens (1993) calls ‘E’ an “empathogen” in contrast to an hallucinogen as it involves none of
LSD’s hallucinatory effects, instead fostering pleasant but emotionally draining experiences. Stevens
recounts his first experience with the drug: “I was told to take Ecstasy with someone I loved and
that’s what I did one autumn afternoon, sitting outside in the afternoon sun. I live in the middle of
farm country, so the road was full of farm trucks bringing in the fall silage. For the first twenty
minutes we felt nothing, then a slight amphetamine rush that grew in strength until it suddenly
evaporated. What followed was a six-hour conversation that dipped and soared from the trivial to
the personally profound” (Stevens, 1993: 488).
(1971) designed to blanket-ban all amphetamine-like compounds (ISDD, 1996). MDMA is thus a Class A substance (Schedule 1 in the USA, where it was banned as recently as 1985) - a designation reserved for those drugs deemed to be most harmful.

The use of MDMA can induce a feeling of euphoria and benevolence although while it is believed to enhance perception its psychedelic potential is low, at least in its pharmacologically pure state (a rare occurrence - it is almost always blended with non-MDMA ‘fillers’). The positive effects of boosted energy levels, confidence, happiness and heightened empathy that MDMA can provide can be offset by blurred vision, nausea and vomiting (Release, 1997; Stevens, 1993). In Britain the drug is taken orally as a tablet or capsule with an MDMA content of usually between 0-150mg, although higher amounts have been reported (Saunders, 1997). The street price for an ‘E’ (or ‘pill’) is currently between £12 and £15\(^2\).

Given that our bodies express the emotional states in which we find ourselves (Frith, 1996) and that we are able to feel ‘oneness’ or “sympathy” (Scheler, 1957) with others in certain specifically framed situations (Blacking, 1973), it follows that use of a drug which particularly impacts upon emotional, and thus also physical, states can affect the sense of identification that one may feel (or not) with a clubbing crowd. However, clinical and psychological research on the effects of so-called dance drugs is still scarce. What little work has been done suggests that ‘empathogens’ such as ecstasy (MDMA) undoubtedly affect an individual’s sense of self - both their identities and identifications - with some

\(^2\) For more detailed histories of and commentaries upon the nature of MDMA and its spread into mainstream youth cultures in Britain as well as information on its historical background see: Abramson (1985) on early conflicts in the USA between psychotherapists who saw potential uses for MDMA and those who wanted to ban it; Adler (1985) for an early overview of both the pharmacological and clubbing uses of E; Beck & Rosenbaum (1994) for the first comprehensive analysis of the clinical value of MDMA; Benson (1997) and Collin (1997) for detailed histories of MDMA’s pervasion of the British clubbing scene; Eisner (1989) for a general historical treatment; Melechi (1997) for a general history of the use of psychedelic drugs in Britain; Mignon (1993) who links music and drug use (particularly E) explicitly; Nasmyth (1986) for an early examination of MDMA-use in British clubbing; New Scientist (1989) for warnings over long-term brain damage associated with MDMA-use; Peroutka (1990) for an extremely detailed evaluation of the clinical and pharmacological effects of MDMA; Redhead (1993) who edits a collection of contributions about raving which foregrounds the use of MDMA; Saunders (1994; 1995; 1997) who provides perhaps the most comprehensive and accessible overview of all aspects of the debates over MDMA-use; and Stevens (1993) who approaches the use of MDMA in the context of the West Coast USA psychedelics scene from the late-1960s onwards. The internet newsgroup ‘alt.drugs’ - particularly its FAQ list - is an indispensable and well-maintained resource while Nicholas Saunders’ website (‘http://ecstasy.org’ in the USA; ‘http://obsolete.com/ecstasy’ in Europe) provides a huge amount of data, links, and up-to-date pill-test results. The ISDD’s (1996) publication “Drug Notes 8: Ecstasy” is a concise, un-biased and clearly-written account of what ‘E’ is, how it is taken and the positive effects and dangers of its use.
studies suggesting 90% of ecstasy (MDMA) users experience a feeling of closeness to others (Release, 1997).

Recent studies have suggested that between 68% and 76% of clubbers regularly take ecstasy (MDMA), with many others taking amphetamines (such as ‘speed’), LSD or smoking cannabis or ‘grass’ (Mullan, 1997; Release, 1997; Solowij, 1992). The British Crime Survey (1996) suggested that between 303,000 and 385,000 people were regular users of amphetamines as a whole (a group of drugs which includes ecstasy [MDMA]) and between 2,486,000 and 2,696,000 had used amphetamines at least once. Overall, 1% of those under 30 years old and less than 0.5% of older people were found to be regular users of ecstasy (MDMA). So while many of those who go clubbing or raving have tried and continue to take ecstasy (MDMA) it should be stressed that amongst the general population by far the ‘norm’ remains not to have tried any form of illegal drug ever (Balding, 1997; cited in Druglink, 1997). The media-fuelled moral panic that surrounds drug use in Britain, especially use by young people, often obscures this basic fact.

A further point relating to the use of ecstasy (MDMA) in the clubbing experience is that within general media and clubbing discourses the term ‘ecstasy’ has become almost synonymous with unknown street drugs in pill-form. According to one study it could mean “anything”, with the label applied to virtually any drug (ISDD, 1996); “what is sold as

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22 Mullan et al (1997) surveyed 720 people at club events between April and September 1996 - overall 92% of those surveyed had used drugs, with 76% having used ecstasy (MDMA). Ecstasy (MDMA) seemed to be used more on a weekly rather than a daily basis (as cannabis was), with approximately half of those having taken ecstasy (MDMA) in the previous six months taking it every week. Of those that completed the questionnaire, two out of five were using ecstasy (MDMA) every week. In the Solowij (1992) survey, 68 (68%) of 100 people surveyed had used ecstasy (MDMA) more than three times, while 83 (83%) had tried it at least once. While the Release Survey (1997) found that 81% of those in their survey (clubbers aged between 16 and 29 years old) had tried ecstasy (MDMA) and 91% cannabis, the British Crime Survey (BCS)(1994) indicated that, of the population of 16 to 29 year olds as a whole, only 6% had ever tried ecstasy (MDMA) and 34% cannabis. This indicates the highly unusual levels of drug use that can occur at clubbing events. Interestingly, the BCS (1994) also noted that 16-29 year olds who went to pubs, clubs and wine bars were nearly twice as likely to have ever taken illegal drugs than those who did not go to these places, and three times more likely to have taken drugs in the last month - “in essence, people who go out take more drugs than those who stay in” (Release, 1997: 12). A survey by the University of Exeter (1992) suggested that 4.25% of 14 year-olds (24,000 young people nationally) had tried ecstasy (MDMA) - a worrying statistic that reinforces the need for effective and coordinated drugs awareness education to be available from a young age.

23 The British Crime Survey collects data on - amongst many other things - illegal drug use among a large representative sample of adults aged 16-59 in England and Wales - the sample in 1994 was 9,646 (Release, 1997: 10).

24 A “regular user” was deemed to be someone that had taken ecstasy (MDMA) in the previous month. An “older person” was one aged 30-plus.

25 On media and moral panics about drug use see: Bellos (1997); Campbell (1997); Daily Star (1997); Desenberg (1997); Perri 6 (1997); Saunders (1996); and, Travis (1997).
ecstasy in Britain may in fact be a number of different drugs” (Saunders, 1997: 212). While most pills have at least some MDMA in them (Saunders, 1995; 1997), others are constituted from, at best MDMA-derivatives and at worst cheap ‘fillers’. Thus while clubbers refer to ‘ecstasy’, the pill or capsule that they have taken may have contained no or very little MDMA, with the chance of getting “pure MDMA” in Britain being about two out of three and the chance of getting a pill containing a similar type of drug (such as MDA or MDEA) being about three out of four (Saunders, 1997).

The use of drugs in the attaining of states of ecstasy and as a fast-track into the experience of the oceanic is far from new - in fact, it can be traced back over thousands of years (Abel, 1980). There has been a long association in Britain between all-night dancing and the use of drugs, going back to the use of stimulants such as cocaine in the pre-War West End club scene (Cohn, 1992; ISDD, 1996; Saunders, 1997) and including, for example, the “furious consumption” (Barnes, 1980) of amphetamines by Mods during the late-1950s and 1960s. The scale of the use of recreational drugs in contemporary clubbing cultures is, however, unprecedented.

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3 A Night on E: The Use of Ecstasy (MDMA) in the Clubbing Experience

One way in which to represent and attempt to understand the role of ecstasy (MDMA) and other dance drugs in the clubbing experience is to ‘shadow’ clubbers who use drugs over the course of the Night Out. Like the practices (and the spacings and timings) of the Night Out more generally, the practices of taking drugs - whether ecstasy (MDMA) or any other

26 MDMA is a member of the MDA family and only one of many derivatives (including MDMA, MDEA, MMDA, MBDB, and MEDA), all of which are chemically synthesised from the oils of natural products such as sassafras (ISDD, 1996). MDEA and MDA are two common drugs similar to MDMA and all three have similar effects, although the choice of ‘connoisseurs’ is reputedly MDMA because of its enhanced empathic effects (Saunders, 1997).

27 Some so-called ‘ecstasy’ pills contain only ‘speedy’ drugs such as caffeine, amphetamine and ephedrine, while others contain completely different drugs altogether. Worst of all are those containing dangerous and sometimes mildly poisonous fillers (Saunders, 1997). The Dutch Institute jellinek tested 345 samples sold as ‘ecstasy’ in 1994 - on average 83% contained ecstasy(MDMA)-type drugs and 5% contained paracetamol or unknown drugs (Saunders, 1997).

28 For more general histories of the use of drugs in attaining altered and ecstatic states see also Berndge & Edwards (1981); Goodman, Lovejoy & Sherratt (1995); and Shivelbusch (1992).
drug - are complex. Skills, techniques and notions of competency and coolness in the
practices of finding, buying, preparing for, taking and coping with the consumption of the
drugs are important in the constitution of these ecstatic experiences.

Clubbers who do take drugs as a route into the oceanic experience will each have their
own personal routines and rituals which will vary from night to night. However, there are
specific practices and sensations that are commonly expressed, with the spacings and
timings of drug consuming practices of the dancers taking on a relatively ritualised form.
The brief schematic that follows is therefore merely an evocation of a Night on E based on
Nights Out with clubbers during the course of this research. The complex and highly
ritualised nature of the consumption of ecstasy (MDMA) during clubbing merits at least a
thesis all of its own and thus what follows can, in the space available, only drift lightly yet
hopefully suggestively through the ecstatic experience.

**pre-clubbing - sorting, preparing, bonding**

The period immediately prior to clubbing is always exciting - drugs or no drugs. For those
intending to take drugs in the hours that follow, this excitement is often augmented by a
sense of nervous anticipation and the intricacies of deciding what they want to take, where
and whether they are going to get it, and the less-discussed worries that they may have
about their forthcoming experience: is the drug ‘safe’? is it ‘E’? will I be okay? will I get it
through the security on the door? will my friends be alright?

These concerns about safety are reflected in the efforts that some clubbers make to
research what they will be taking. For example, the clubbing magazine *Eternity* features
reviews and news of different forms of ecstasy (MDMA) tablet, giving information on the
results of tests. Nicholas Saunders’ internet website also features up-to-the-minute news on
ecstasy (MDMA) tests and ‘dangerous’ pills with detailed breakdowns of the chemical
constitution of current types of E; this website was consulted up to 400 times a day during
1996 (Saunders, 1996). For the extremely patient the Drug Detection Lab in Sacramento,
California, does postal testing of pill samples for $100 (Saunders, 1997), although the turn-
around-time and cost would prohibit this form of testing for most British users.

VALERIE: I’m not going to do loads because then I would worry, yeah, but if I did a
whole pill to begin with I know I would be paranoid so there’s no way I’d fucking do
it in the first place. I’d be worried about how fucked I’d be. I think I’m a
lightweight. It does make me laugh sometimes though, cos I think to myself there's like people taking three pills and here's me with my half. I think I did worry a bit about the effects on my brain when I first started taking it, long-term effects. I was concerned. When we started taking them we looked up on the internet every bit of information on E's to find out what, roughly, the effects were [uh-huh]. We tried to work out what a safe dose was, we tried to work out what we were taking, yeah [uhmmm] cos there's so many different sorts. We tried to get as clued up as we could on it ... I really insisted on it. I think everyone else was like pretty like interested, but I was definitely wanting to know what I was taking. I’ve realised through the last year that it’s impossible to know - you just can’t know. In a way, I know it sounds strange, but I get ill on them, I know it sounds a bit peculiar ... Okay, this is the story: I take E twice in a row on weekends and I get ill, and I take E sort of every month or a little bit longer and I’m okay, so from that I’ve deduced that I have to be really careful with my intake.

BEN: Do you not worry about taking it at all, in that case?

VALERIE: I might do - if I have kids then obviously I won’t do it while I’m pregnant, and I won’t do it while I’m breast-feeding so that’s like two years of not doing it ... you know they’ve got those testing points in Amsterdam - they’ve got like 10,000 bits of data. Do you know what I mean? You could be getting anything, absolutely anything [um-huh]. I mean I think some people have all sorts of problems - liver problems, whatever, and they just can’t handle it. There’s an amount of people that get admitted to hospital every week, not through E-ing but just through overheating.²⁹

In this clearly quite personal - and, frankly, somewhat alarming and disturbing - exchange with Valerie, it is obvious that she obviously spends a great deal of time and effort worrying about exactly what it is that she is taking. Despite Valerie’s apparently carefully regulated intake of the drug ecstasy, it is apparent that she really does have no idea about what it is she is taking each time and what the long-term effects on her might be. The importance of the group-based decision-making process is also clear. For most clubbers, decisions about whether to take drugs, where to get them, how much to take and when to take them are indeed made as a group. This form of decision-making appears popular because it gives the illusion of taking the responsibility for choices about taking drugs away from the

²⁹ An extract from the second interview with Valerie. For more detailed accounts of and debates about these safety and health aspects of ecstasy (MDMA) use see Saunders (1994; 1995; 1996; 1997), who provides an extensive bibliography of references covering every facet of the 'ecstasy debate'.
individual clubbers. Of course, ultimately these choices remain individual ones. This early group involvement engenders sensations of 'not being alone' in both the anticipated risks and the excitements that await during the Night ahead, and thus before the Night has even begun notions of group trust and bonding may be developing, particularly if (as is usual) previously successful Nights are being evoked and used as a foundation, framework or rationale for the Night to come.

BEN: So it's a relaxing afternoon?
KIM: Yeah, maybe pop into town, go out and get something to eat, again it's really just sitting about, talking, reading, having a relaxing day, but not sitting about smoking [cannabis] too much or otherwise you're just dead by the evening ...
VALERIE: ... totally.
KIM: ... so we try and do something like just go into Dartford and do a bit a shopping, cook dinner, and that sort of thing, ummm ... sort of early evening the music gets turned up and people will be popping in and someone will be sorting out the pills and stuff. And it all starts getting a bit technical ...
VALERIE: ... when we sit there cutting up our pills, that's one of my favourite moments. We all sit there and we've all got our cling film or whatever and we're sitting there going "How are you going to do yours? Halves or quarters? What time are you taking them?" ... we sit there and have this massive discussion.
KIM: We used to do that a lot more when we first started going out. It would be ... we'd all do it at the same time but now it's more of an individual thing ...
VALERIE: ... I think we've worked out that we've all got a different pace, yeah? [right] ... and before we were all doing it together but now it's much more individual. I think it's partly because we all feel a little safer with it as well. We used to get all our pills beforehand, before we went up there, but now, we're having trouble ... I mean our theory was that we weren't going to get any shit off people that we knew, yeah? [right] We're not going to get any dodgy pills.³⁰

A glimpse into the pre-clubbing routines of Valerie and Kim is provided in this extract. The early evening rituals of relaxation are gradually replaced by a set of increasingly "technical"
decisions and operations concerning the sourcing and purchasing of the drugs, the amount each of their group will be taking and the implicit worry that the clubbers have about the actual content of the drugs. Despite Kim’s claim that “it’s more of an individual thing now” the social nature of these decisions and of this stage of the early evening as a whole is clear.

The most common source of drugs is a friend who “does not sell regularly” (in other words, was not a ‘dealer’), although “almost as prevalent [is] buying from a dealer” (Release, 1997: 15). If ecstasy (MDMA) or other drugs are to be taken later in the evening then this undoubtedly dominates these early stages, although this may not be consciously articulated within the group.

‘dropping’ / ‘boshing’ - taking the drugs

No two clubbers have the same method for taking ecstasy (MDMA). While clubbers might take the same amount and even the same ‘brand’ of pill, each will approach the experience differently. Some may ‘drop’ part of what they intend to take even before the Night has started - maybe at home or more commonly while waiting in the queue outside, particularly if it is already late or they are very near the front of the queue. However it most usual to ‘drop’ the first amount, of what might be just one but also two, three, or even more amounts over the course of the night, within a short space of time after entering the club. It usually takes between twenty minutes and an hour to start experiencing the effects of the drug - to ‘come up’ on it). This conveniently leaves time for the clubbers to find a space to have a drink, deposit items in the cloakroom, and wander through the club generally getting into a clubbing mood, perhaps meeting other friends. In instances where clubbers purchase the drugs (‘score’ them) when they get into the club, thus avoiding the risk of bringing them through security themselves and the potential difficulties and dangers of scoring the drugs beforehand, the search for a dealer from which to ‘score’ may also take place in these initial stages. Occasionally, perhaps due to a later arrival, a build-up of excitement or a familiarity with the club night, clubbers will ‘drop’ their pills immediately on entry and go straight to the dance floor, with the nervous excitement

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31 According to the Release Survey (1997) buying from a friend became even more popular with increasing age with those aged over 30 years nearly twice as likely to have bought from a non-dealing friend as opposed to an unknown dealer (ibid: 15). This progression highlights the frequent exposure of especially younger clubbers to unscrupulous and/or unknown older people.

32 The term ‘dropping’ seems dominant in London while I’ve only ever heard taking the drugs referred to as ‘boshing’ in Manchester. To refer to ingesting the pills as ‘taking’ them appears to carry with it too many medicinal connotations.
of having just taken their pill combining with the music and their familiarity to induce an impatience to start dancing and for the Night to begin.

BEN: Everyone was going crazy already ... at half eleven! What was going on?
VALERIE: I tell you what, when I got in there, something ... I dropped my pill because I was really eager to get my pill down me so I could come up straight away yeah ... and ummm ... when we got in there I started dancing straight away - it was just like I was bopping away from the moment that I got in there and I don't usually do that. I like to sit down usually. I was SO excited. I was like a fucking kid in a sweet shop!!
BEN: I was so surprised at how quickly everyone started going for it ...
VALERIE: I was really eager to just get on with it, I just wanted to get 'up there'.

This impatience that Valerie exhibits in taking the drug is common. The pre-clubbing period of playing loud music at home or in the car, perhaps smoking cannabis, and generally getting wound up for the evening inevitably leads towards two key moments in the early part of the evening. The first, and one that characterises nearly all clubbing experiences, whether or not drugs are involved, is the initial overwhelming and nearly always adrenaline-producing experience of the music at the club; much louder and more powerful than anything that might be produced on a home or car-based system, it is as much felt by the body as heard. The second key moment is restricted to those that take drugs such as 'E' and that is the moment of actually taking the drug. This is a vital moment that results in a build-up of tension, partly because of uncertainty over what is actually in the pill the clubber is taking and partly due to anticipation of the excitement, euphoria and adventure to come.

There is no 'usual' amount that is taken and in one sense it matters less how many individual pills are taken and more what the effects are. Sometimes a half or a single pill will be sufficient for the clubber to experience the sensation that they are seeking, whether or not this is an ecstatic experience. At other times clubbers may take three or four pills; one clubber with whom I went out took four within a single hour, complaining of "poor quality". Further, the size and weight of the clubber's body and the vital issue of tolerance will influence the amount of the drug that is needed in much the same way that a unit of alcohol will affect drinkers differently.

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33 From second interview with Valerie.
first experience as revelatory

Clubbers often talk of their first experience of ecstasy (MDMA) and other ‘dance’ drugs in revelatory terms - almost as if they only now know the score or ‘the secret’. It is usual for clubbers to talk about their first time with a strongly positive tone, even for those who have long since ceased to take the drug.

SEB: I’ve experienced the friendliness of clubs when I danced in Glasgow but because I wasn’t into ecstasy I didn’t appreciate that that was what it was. I just thought that the guys liked me, I was that naive - guys would shake my hand and I thought, “brilliant”! I was totally into it, I loved the music and I loved the dancing and I knew I was enjoying myself so much that I just thought they were as well and if anything I thought that they were enjoying it more than me so that just egged me on to enjoy it harder. I didn’t realise that when you drop a pill you just start smiling and it all takes over.\(^\text{34}\)

Seb’s deep sense of appreciation for the affects of the drug is apparent in that this extract is taken from only the second minute of our very first conversation. Seb presents a picture of pre-ecstasy and post-ecstasy, the former characterised by what he sees as his naivety, and the latter by the revelation that all was not as it seemed, that now he “knows”.

‘coming up’ - starting to lose touch

Usually even for relatively experienced users, once the pill has been taken a short period of nervous waiting follows during which the clubber will discover firstly whether or not the pill is a ‘dud’ - there is no effect or unusual and unpleasant effects - and secondly, if it proves not to be a ‘dud’, the strength of the pill. Feelings of nausea are not uncommon, in part due to nerves, in part to the physiological effects of the pill dissolving, and the clubber may experience a feeling not unlike ‘butterflies in the stomach’. Occasionally clubbers may vomit, yet these feelings of sickness usually pass within thirty minutes and, in most cases, within an hour the clubber begins to experience an altered state of sensory perception, a surge of euphoria and elation, feelings of unbounded energy and a heightened sense of empathy with those in the crowds.

\(^{34}\) From first interview with Seb.
BEN: Okay, so where were we - you were telling me what E’s like for you ...

JOHN: Okay, um ... after about 20 minutes you start to feel the edges where you start to feel something, feel slightly different, or I do anyway [um-huh]. Usually smoke a joint around then - I try to if we’re at a club, hopefully we’ve got a joint with us - we head off to the middle of the dance-floor if there’s nowhere quiet - smoke it there and that brings us up. What do you notice ummm ..... uhuh ... altered perception is what I really notice, it’s the fact that I’m noticing things differently ... something has happened ummm ... and I start feeling very excited as well, and like light in my stomach, and light in my head as well then, and I dunno ... it’s like, here we go, it’s just all starting, and that’s when I start listening to the music as well and that builds up and not this time but the time before at Banana Split, I got in there, had a pill, had a joint, and then went up to the dance floor [right] and we were standing about just looking at each other as the first tune was building up and the main thing that was building up was the atmosphere between us as the tunes built up, it was very trancey sort of stuff and just everyone was looking around grinning at one another and thinking right here we go, this is going to be a quality night [right]. They know where you are and you know where you are and you both go to the same place. While I’m on the pill I feel absolutely fine, I find it very easy not to worry about anything - I’ve never had a paranoia attack although a few times I have been a little bit ill - felt sick, been sick and then afterwards I’ve just been saying to myself ‘no, I’m fine, it’s just me winding myself up, I got too hot or whatever, I hadn’t drunk enough’ [yeah, yeah] ... ummm .... one of the things when you’re on E, you can’t control your body temperature and you start to feel a little bit sick and then if you don’t immediately go in to a chill out area and try and cool down a bit ... for me anyway ... I start feeling it and I start thinking I’m going to throw up and once I start feeling I’m going to throw up that’s it, I’m going to throw up. I think that’s more attitude than the actual drug itself - it’s more me thinking, ‘Oh I’m going to be sick, I’m going to be sick’ ... I mean a lot of the times I go running off to the toilet, into the toilet and it’s cool in there and I feel fine [yeah], or even when you do actually heave you only heave once and it’s like errrhghghghh! [making ‘sick’ noises]35

The build-up of tension that the clubbers share in the early pre-climactic period of the Night is evident in John’s story. A feeling of familiarity and of sharing (“here we go again”) and the sense that they will shortly be “going” somewhere, to another “place”, plane or level,

35 From second interview with John.
are both characteristic sensations, particularly amongst groups of friends. The clubbers feed off the emotions of each other, developing “the atmosphere between us” - an ethos of sharing something extraordinary evolves between those within the dancing crowd and this provides the starting point for an ecstatic sensation.

stripping of defences - a ‘natural’ state?

“It made me feel how all of us would like to think we are anyway” [...] ecstasy can act as a reminder of a kind of honesty rarely found in human relations. Certainly, nobody needs a drug to tell them of this, and it may be that the message that Adam brings is the reminder that ecstasy has always existed without it.^^

(Nasmyth, 1985: 78)

A recurring feature of the experience of ecstasy (MDMA), as well as other non-drug induced oceanic experiences, is the sensation that one has witnessed the revelation of the ‘true’ nature of one’s self and of others - the individual ‘suddenly’ sees how people ‘really’ are, their ‘natural’ states. Stevens (1993: 488) describes this sensation as a “melting [of] defenses [sic]”. It appears that the ecstatic experience facilitates what can seem like a fleeting glimpse of sanity or ‘naturalness’, as the inhibitions of an apparently rule-bound ‘outside world’ dissolve in the space of the dance floor and within the dancing crowd.

BEN: How do you feel about yourself when you’re there on the dance-floor?
VALERIE: I believe that we all have personas, yeah [uh-huh, right]. So you’re a totally different person with me than you are with your mother [oh, definitely!]. Right, and ... I think I like to believe that when I’m on an E I have no defences whatsoever, so in many ways I would say that the person I am when I’m on an E is the ‘real me’ right, because I feel totally open and .... I feel clean, yeah .... I feel cleansed of all my worldly woes.

BEN: What do you mean that you have ‘no defences’?
VALERIE: I don’t ... I don’t worry yeah ... I don’t, I feel like, I trust, I feel more trusting, I’m quite a trusting person anyway, yeah. I don’t ..... it’s really difficult - I

^^ ‘Adam’ was an early street pseudonym for ecstasy (MDMA): “the name ‘Adam’ for MDMA is related to the innocent man as in the Garden of Eden - ‘being returned to the natural state of innocence before guilt, shame and unworthiness arose’ ” (Saunders, 1995: 15).
feel really sort of like spiritual like I don't judge, I trust, I feel cleansed, I feel ... it's like a really sort of pure feeling.

BEN: But is that different from others parts of your personality?

VALERIE: When you're at a rave and you're with hundreds of people dancing and you're having fun yeah, you don't worry about what your mother said to piss you off earlier that day, yeah? You're just concerned with what's going on then - there's a really happy atmosphere, a really happy vibe, and you're part of that, yeah. When you're not in that setting it's not that you've got to worry about things but you've got to ... not be on your guard but you've got to be aware of things yeah .... there ... there are people who for their own reasons are doing what they do, yeah, which are right to them, but they don't necessarily tie in to what you want, so you've got to be aware of it so that you can compromise, so that you can analyse, so that you can do whatever, yeah. When you're on an E, everyone's there to enjoy themselves.

BEN: So you feel that you're amongst like-minded people?

VALERIE: The thing is I think it's easier because you know that everyone else is also on an E, yeah, so you're getting the same sort of signals sent out, so ..... 

BEN: How can you tell if others are on a drug?

VALERIE: God, I don't know? I really don't know. That's quite strange really because I don't know what people are on. Like Brian, he said people were on coke [cocaine] there, yeah ... at Banana Split, and I hadn't noticed. He said that people going like that [makes face] ... and I hadn't thought about it, I just assumed that everyone was really happy, so it's sort of like my perception of it more than anything else [yeah]. I perceive everyone to be happy. I mean if I smile at someone and they don't smile back I just think they're really lucked and I think enjoy it for what you're at at that moment [yeah].

The non-confrontational, consciously open attitude that many clubbers suggest forms one of the most attractive aspects of clubbing is discernible in Valerie's clearly carefully thought through account of the "different" persona that she presents on the dance floor. William James suggests that the nature of our identity is revealed to us when we can say "This is the real me!" and this sensation - of being able to identify a 'true' self, of finding who you 'really' are - is one that Valerie appears to value highly. "Defences" that Valerie deploys in other social encounters (and she uses the example of talking to her mother) appear unnecessary while dancing, for having taken ecstasy (MDMA) Valerie has no worries but

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37 From second interview with Valerie.
38 William James (1961); cited in Erikson (1968: 19; emphasis in original).
rather, "trusts, I feel more trusting [...] I feel cleansed". It appears important to Valerie that others within the clubbing crowd are also there for these reasons - "everyone's there to enjoy themselves [...] you're getting the same sort of signals". The notion of 'momentary time' and its relationships with identities and identifications is also further textured through Valerie's description: "you're just concerned about what's going on then [...] enjoy it for what you're at at that moment".

Far from being concerned with some form of mindless and meaningless hedonism, then, as often portrayed in popular (mis)representations of clubbing, it seems that the experiencing of ecstatic sensations can actually be about an extraordinary and for many unparalleled and extremely precious experience of their own identity. Crucially, this experience of identity is perceived as their 'real' identity - how they really are (and/or want to be). This dramatic sensation of having one's 'true' self or 'natural' state uncovered, unveiled, or released can be so powerful as to be experienced as a form of earthly utopia or dreamworld. This is a notion which I broaden in my discussion of 'playful vitality' in the next Chapter.

elation and euphoria - experiencing the ecstatic

At their peak, ecstatic experiences culminate in the temporary losing of a sense of time and space, and the experiencing of a strong sense of alterity and euphoria, as the dancing clubbers experience the tension of being caught between the dancing crowd and their self, between an atomistic sense of identity and a sense of (crowd) identification, between the urge for outward expression and the opportunity for inward reflection, between the music as controlling them and themselves as in control, between isolation and community. By no means is this ecstatic experience automatic - drug use does not guarantee an ecstatic experience, but can make one easier to experience, and longer in duration and greater in intensity if it is experienced. Unpleasant side-effects of the consumption of ecstasy (MDMA) are not uncommon, although in most cases the positive effects appear to easily outweigh the negative effects (Release, 1997).
BEN: A tricky one - what does ecstasy actually do for you?

BRUCE: That's a very tricky one, umm... it makes me feel utterly elated, uhmm... it makes me very relaxed and at the same time incredibly, you know... I'll have bags of energy which is an unusual feeling to feel, uhmm... and it, I don't know, I certainly don't hold any magical qualities to it, you know, it's familiar enough now for me to know what to expect [right] but I feel...

BEN: Do you treat others differently at all?

BRUCE: Yeah, you are far less judgmental and you're certainly far more tolerant uhmmm... and you're far more passionate and you're prone to saying "I love you" uhmmmm and .... but you know it just makes you feel good, you feel very .. if you're going to something like Che Guevara where I know then it makes you feel very safe as well. You don't feel like you're going to get busted at any second, you don't feel like something bad's going to happen because you know how to handle this feeling and it's a feeling that you have actively encouraged.\(^1\)

This tension between energy and relaxation that Bruce describes is an attribute of oceanic experiences - both drug- and non-drug-induced - more broadly (see Laski, 1961; 1980). Yet this short extract is characterised by the notion that Bruce is in control of himself and his emotions - he is relaxed, elated, safe, tolerant - he knows how to handle the feeling. I believe it is no coincidence that Bruce is 28 while John (in the preceding extract) is 22 - the extra years of experience, while not guaranteeing control, are likely to mean that the older clubber has more refined practices of drug-taking (and clubbing), knows his or her limits, and in one sense knows better what to expect as well as 'how to behave'. The routine nature of clubbing for Bruce appears vital to his enjoyment.

**intensity and withdrawal**

If they do experience the ecstatic sensation the clubber may experience it **intensively** - participating within the crowd, actively interacting with others and experiencing euphoria socially. On the other hand, they may experience the ecstatic through **withdrawal** into

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\(^1\) From first interview with Bruce.
themselves - through reflection, interpretation, and sensations of clarity and tranquillity (Laski, 1961). This continual fluctuation is palpable in this extract where Dionne is describing the sensation of ‘coming up’ on a mixture of ecstasy (MDMA) and speed (or amphetamine).

**DIONNE (an extract from “The Moment”):** Wander around for a bit, chat for a bit, can see a few familiar faces so that’s cool. Seems a good crowd and not so young - paranoid about being over twenty-five. Think I’ll just stand still here for a minute and lean my head against this pillar, close my eyes and let the sounds wash over me. The bass is pumping, I can feel it reverberate in my body, so that’s where my sternum is. I like this. Time to dance I think, just casual to start with, check out the opportunities. Couple of raised-up platforms with good showing off potential for later on. Ditch the beer and fill the bottle with water from the cistern, can’t seem to get the taps to turn on. Not a smoker but now’s the time for cigarettes. Gum too, starting to gurn. No pockets so have to pester boyf [sic] every time. He gets a bit fucked off and that brings me down for a while. Shit, don’t need this, what I need is another pill and then I’ll just be ready and waiting for the moment. Do a whole one, feel a bit guilty for quarter of a second then head to chill out room. Find Sarah - whispers conspiratorially how much have you done, 2, that’s alright then as she pops another. Rushing big time now and sit down heavily leaning against the wall. Mouth runs away with me as I insist I’ve seen this woman on TV - get a grip. Steve comes and sits down, he’s well loved-up. He puts his arm around me and I grip his arm tight. It’s suddenly very important I must hold on. Don’t ever let go. He smiles. My heart is racing and I scrounge a fag. It - the moment - will be soon.

Whether the clubber experiences intensity or withdrawal at any one moment depends upon a number of factors. To give a simple example, if it is dark and crowded and visual contact with others is problematic, withdrawal is more likely than if there is more light and eye contact can be easily made. Moreover, a fuller dance floor may trigger an experience of intensity with the crushing tactility of the crowd inducing euphoria and a sense of

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42 An extract from the short story, “The Moment”, written during 1996, which Dionne enclosed with her original letter replying to my request for volunteers in The Face. She adds in the letter that the story is autobiographical.
closeness, yet it may equally trigger withdrawal through the employment of an “involvement shield” (Goffman, 1963: 38) as the dancer gets ‘lost’ in the crowd.

Secondly, the clubbers will orientate themselves within the regionalisations and mediations of the dance floor depending upon the spacings and timings of that stage of the Night, the physical configuration of the club, especially the location of the DJ booth, their own location and whether they are within a sub-group or not, and the type of music being played at that moment. If the DJ is visible, perhaps on a raised stage or platform at the ‘front’ of the dance floor, then the clubbers will be more likely to face him (or less usually, her). If the dance floor is relatively small or the periphery too well-lit then the clubbers will be more inclined to face into the dancing crowd in an attempt to avoid eye contact with non-dancers, who, it might be assumed with some confidence, are not on the same motional and emotional ‘wavelength’ as the dancers at that moment. If dancing within a group of friends, the clubbers may be more likely to face other members of that group; if alone, they will be more likely to face the ‘front’ of the club, perhaps where the main lighting rig or slide projector images are positioned. These are further examples of the “engagement closure” that Goffman (1963: 156) mentions in his discussion of crowds and social interaction. In any case, any environmental feature - physical or social - which encourages crowd interaction on the dance floor will be more likely to foster an intensive interaction as a result of the ecstatic, with the reverse (withdrawal) being the case in instances where crowd interaction is difficult.

A third factor which impacts upon the clubbers experience of the ecstatic is their pre-clubbing state of mind and attitude - the impact of their social lives more broadly. In certain cases where I accompanied clubbers on their Nights Out my presence unquestionably had a tangible impact upon their state of mind and thus their enjoyment of the Night.

SEB: Certainly the next time that I go out with you, just because we’ve been out once already and we’ve had this drink and stuff, and we’re obviously going to keep in touch [um-huh] and something as simple, cos I’ve got to stress that this DID affect the way that the night because it took up a lot of my consciousness - because I didn’t feel comfortable when I went out and it was just because I was in London and I didn’t have a change of clothes and I should have had and I normally come down with two or three outfits knowing that it will be how I feel, what I choose to wear - I didn’t do that for some reason this week but that
can affect me and I think it must have affected the way that I was on the
night.\footnote{From second interview with Seb.}

Throughout the evening Seb was conscious of not being happy with the way he looked
and I believe this concern, combined with my presence, actually prevented him from
experiencing the ecstatic in terms of withdrawal or intensity. He did not feel comfortable
with himself, and was also too concerned that I had a good time to 'lose' himself fully.

The music is a fourth feature of the Night that impacts upon the nature of clubbers'
experiences of the ecstatic. The playing of 'special' musical tracks - what some clubbers
call 'anthems' or 'classics' - can trigger a very sudden shift across the dance floor from
predominantly withdrawal to mostly intensity. An introverted experience can quickly
become an extroverted one. Catching a simple glance or smile from another dancer while
dancing can also suddenly pull someone quickly away from a sensation of personal
inwardly-orientated reflection and isolation and into a crowd-based sensation of empathy,
intensive inter-clubber interaction, and a sharing of spaces and emotions.

BEN: So, as far as I understand it then, for you, you take ecstasy for stamina
but also for other reasons ...?
KIM & VALERIE: [together] Oh yeah ... VALERIE: Someone will say something to you and you’ll go, “Yes, definitely”
- you’re totally connected.
KIM: And as well - you don’t need to talk. Part of the thing of going out
clubbing is that you’ve got everyone around you ... this is what I was talking
about expressions - everybody is expressing themselves. Take Jim and that -
you [talking to Valerie] look over and whereas I haven’t seen you for sometime
and we may have got a little different, when we’re at a club, we might look over
at each other and we both grin because we don’t NEED to say anything. It’ll be
that connection. It’s all there. Partly it’s experiencing things together,
whatever they are, but because it’s on such a different level and everything’s so
new and ... umm ...
BEN: ... and do those feelings extend to people who aren’t in the immediate
group, beyond your friends I mean?
KIM: You might not know what they’re thinking but you know that they’re
there to be happy....
VALERIE: ... but I definitely feel a lot more empathy for our little group than... when I see people in a club I just think excellent, they look really happy, they know exactly where I’m coming from, yeah, but when I look at Rachel, David and John, there’s something more ....

KIM: .... but then you can look at the other people in the club and it’s more than just them being happy. It’s more than that. You’re dancing to something and it’s building up and up and you look around and they’re building with it as well, when .... it’s the experience you have together that matters. You do sort of empathise and connect better with them. I think it’s really natural.

VALERIE: When I’m straight it’s a different experience - I don’t talk to people when I’m straight. I’ll just go to dance, yeah? [right] ... and I’ll look at people and I’ll know how good they’re feeling, yeah, but I’m not on the same wavelength as them ...

KIM: ... you don’t feel as in tune. When you’re up there dancing and you’re on one you can get going as the music will get you into it and you’ll be really going for it, but when you go and sit down and like take a break and just sit down and look around, sometimes you’ll feel part of it, sometimes you won’t though as you’re more an observer of what’s going on than part of it [yeah].

This wonderfully nuanced and evocative passage is interesting for at many reasons; I want to make four points. First, the clear sense of empathy and of a shared ethos existing between clubbers (“you’re totally connected”) is obvious. This is manifested in the lack of the need to say how they feel - they just “know”. Second, the importance of the group of clubbing friends is clear; while Kim and Valerie feel empathy for others (“you might not know what they’re thinking but you know they’re there to be happy”), what they feel for their close friends is “something more” than this. Third, the “natural” quality of the empathy that Kim suggests the non-verbal communication of the dance floor can generate is suggestive of the notion of a ‘real self’ which, as I suggested above, appears so valued in the clubbing experience. This “natural” feeling is generated through being within the dancing crowd - “it’s the experience you have together that matters”. Finally, Valerie notes how her dance floor experiences of being straight are quite different to her experiences of being on ‘E’ - she is not on the “same wavelength” as others, but just goes to dance. Kim adds that she feels more of an “observer” when she is not on ‘E’ - “you don’t feel as in tune”.

44 From first interview with Kim and Valerie.
what goes up ...

Just as the ecstatic tide comes in so it must recede, and inevitably the effects of the ecstasy (MDMA) will begin to wane. The post-ecstatic experience shares many features with the post-oceanic, although the ‘come down’ often lasts longer and can be far less pleasurable than during the post-oceanic. Furthermore, a post-ecstatic experience may be accompanied by physiological effects such as tiredness, edginess, stomach cramps, and insomnia. This is in addition to the usually positive mental and emotional effects which characterise the ‘afterglow’ of the oceanic (Laski, 1961). I discuss this ‘afterglow’ further in the final part of the thesis, the Reflections.

the ecstatic and the oceanic in clubbing

Whether reached partially through the use of drugs or not, during an oceanic experience the (usually) dancing clubber will perceive music, themselves and others within the dancing crowd in an altered, non-everyday, fashion. Even when not fully attained, the mere experience of oceanic sensations in previous clubbing Nights Out appears to impact upon the attitudes, practices and emotions of the dancing clubbers at that moment. Clubbers’ understandings of themselves and of their own identities are transformed during these moments of ecstasy. This transformation may endure long after the experience itself.

The role of the music is the oceanic experience should not be overlooked in the quite justifiable focus upon drug use. The use of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) can change the way that music is appreciated (Storr, 1992). It is also clear that a dancer’s appreciation of rhythm and bass in particular can be heightened through the use of certain drugs, almost to the extent of inducing a form of trance (Inglis, 1989; Rouget, 1985). Yet, at the same time, there is no evidence to suggest that this trance experience is not also attainable without the use of drugs (Laski, 1980). In this study it is only possible to say with any confidence that it certainly appears possible to experience music in a heightened form and as inducing an oceanic experience through dancing without the use of drugs at all. Finally, it is clear that clubbers’ understandings of themselves and of both the wider dancing crowd and those who constitute it are altered during and as a result of the oceanic experience, as well as through ecstatic experiences which involve the use of drugs.
So far, I have only briefly touched upon the role of notions such as 'play', 'escape' and 'utopia' with which clubbing appears to be entangled; these notions have been bubbling just below the surface throughout this Chapter. In broadening understandings of the attractions of and roles for oceanic and ecstatic experiences in the everyday lives of the clubbers', as well as continuing to elaborate upon the spacings, timings and practices of clubbing more narrowly, I turn now, in the next and final Chapter of the Night Out, to what I am calling 'playful vitality'.

VALERIE: Everything seems okay, everything seems fine, I ... quite often when I'm raving I think to myself 'I'm so lucky', yeah, I just think, 'I'm the luckiest person in the world to have the opportunity to do this, to have the friends I have around me, to have the people I have around me, to have the club I've got around me' and I just feel like the luckiest person in the world, and I sort of want to cry, yeah, I want to cry with happiness. I never sort of physically want to cry but you know that feeling [yeah] - total joy yeah, oh, it's like ... ecstasy! It's total ecstasy!^a

You haven't got the everyday, well, if you call it pressure, I mean some people are a bit pressurized more than others. I'm lucky. I'm not too pressurized. But at least you can come here and forget the whole damn lot. It's right out of your mind. You've forgotten work. You've forgotten even the street you live in. You've forgotten you next-door neighbours. Just for a little while. You can think about nothing, if that's possible.^b

We're going to places that are new, and old, and blue and gold, and rainbow bridges carry us to another side of dreams, we're swiftly moving galaxies away; what a place to play, what a place to play.

Marlena Shaw

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^a A powerfully emotional extract from the second interview with Valerie.
^b An account from a "fisherman on the pier" when asked why he had gone to Margate and what he had got out of it (from a BBC TV broadcast in the Man Alive series on 3 October 1974; cited in Laski, 1980: 156). From this extract it is apparent that this man has a relationship to fishing not dissimilar to the relationship of clubbers to clubbing, and this (to me fascinating) point is tackled in detail in the next Chapter where I discuss notions of play and escape in relation to the oceanic.
Chapter 4

Clubbing and Playful Vitality

There is a gregarious impulse, as it were, that pushes one to seek out others, to touch them, and incites one to get lost in the mass as if in a more vast entity where one can express, by contagion, that which enclosure within identity does not permit. The individual, in losing himself, in expending herself in such a 'society of souls', knows or feels that he or she is gaining a 'boost of existence', that of participating in a community that turns his or her loss into a net profit.

(Maffesoli, 1996b: 58)
"we were all part of it, yet all gasped in wonder ..."¹

In this final stage of the Night, I develop what has been suggested so far in respect of crowds, of music, of dancing and of the role of the ecstatic and oceanic experiences in clubbing. I sketch out an alternate conception of the relationships between notions of power and resistance to those directed outwardly and around apparently straight-forward conceptions of authority and subordination. This is a conception that I am calling ‘playful vitality’.

This conception of the vitality that can be experienced through play is developed in three main ways. First, after noting a general lack of intellectual engagement with the world of play, I suggest clubbing is a form of play through which a sensation of ‘flow’ - a matching of challenges with skills and techniques - may be experienced. Second, I develop this notion of clubbing as playful in critiquing and extending some existing notions of resistance and domination, suggesting that ‘power’ can also be constructed as ‘vitality’. That is, vitality can be immanent and inwardly-oriented, contrasted with and against other less-pleasurable aspects of an individual’s life. Third, I relate playful vitality explicitly to clubbing through highlighting this autotelic quality but simultaneously stressing its vital group context. I conclude by problematising what seem to be sometimes over-romanticised and idealistic visions of the supposed annihilation of social differences upon the dance floor. These visions, while in certain cases crucial, would appear to be founded more within what may be termed ‘sensibilities’ than ‘realities’.

¹ From an entry by Seb in his clubbing journal (see below for further details).
I do not think it sensible to ignore, as most rationalists have done, ecstatic experiences and the emotions or ideas to which they give rise. To ignore or to deny the importance of ecstatic experiences is to leave to the irrational the interpretation of what many people believe to be of supreme value.

(Laski, 1961: 373)

- Just what is it that you want to do?
- We want to be free ... we want to be free to ... to do what we want to do!
- And we want to get loaded, and we want to have a good time.
- And that’s what we’re going to do ... we’re going to have a good time, we’re going to have a party!

(Primal Scream [1991] *Loaded*)

1 Play and Flow

BEN: What do you think about at the club?
LUKE: Everything and nothing ... Sometimes my head really seems to be empty, but I can have many thoughts as well. If I think, it’s a bit on the background and my thoughts are a bit like when you’re tripping [using LSD] (though no drugs is involved): many little thoughts, just popping up and dissolving. Sometimes I think of the things I have or had to do and my problems. But not in a nasty way, it’s just like I organize things in my head, maybe the sort of dreams you have when half-asleep. Sometimes, I think about the people around me. That may be because I like someone or because I don’t like someone. If someone cares me for some reason (seems to be threatening, talks too much in an offensive way etc.) that can annoy me. Or I think about the girls around. How pretty they are, or how to get close to them. Or I think about myself, about how good I feel. And, sometimes I think how about I look. It’s not something I think about the whole night, but I am aware about how I dance (not that I’m good at the standard poses, but it is extravagant...) and that I might be ‘cool’ or ‘good looking’. (But don’t take that all too literal, I’m not such a glossy dressed-up boy...). To be short: it’s a bit hard to tell you what exactly I think about. It depends on my mood and what’s happening around me. Surprisingly, drugs (XTC/Speed) don’t really seem to influence what I
think about. More indirectly, though, XTC normally makes me feel good, so I have good thoughts... Ehm.. fairly, XTC makes my head rather empty, maybe I dream a bit more and have more freaky thoughts...

The subtle yet important experience of dancing for Luke is evident in this extract. Luke's head is both "empty" - for that brief moment, he does not have to or need to think - yet his perceptions of himself, of those around him, about the experience of which he is a part and of his life beyond it, clearly dominates his thoughts - "sometimes I think of the things I have or had to do and my problems". For Luke the dance floor and the experience of dancing is both a space of dreamy non-thinking and a space of self and situational monitoring of an intensive quality - a space of play.

**play**

Clubbing is a form of play\(^3\). In academic terms play and playing have often been neglected as strands of social life. Play is seen "not to fit in anywhere in particular" (Turner, 1983: 233) and as a "rotten category ... tainted by inconsequentiality" (Schechner, 1993: 27; cited in Thrift, 1997). Yet play matters, for it is central to our everyday lives. To play is to spend time, exert energy and employ techniques on an activity which can be self-contained (or autotelic), cathartic and, at times, ego-expressive (Giddens, 1964). Play is a voluntary activity which is positioned in some way as opposed to 'work' both in terms of its location and duration - play contains its own course and meaning (Huizinga, 1969) - but also in terms of its content and practices. Play is different through its definition as 'play', yet like non-play, play also has rules and limits (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). Playing can be a source of identity and even of a form of power, but play does not necessarily come easily. In a similar way to that in which work can be playful, play often needs to be worked at. Thus, the same activity can be play to one person while another experiences it as work - various sports for example. Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) even suggests that for some surgeons the practices of surgery itself can be playful.

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\(^2\) An extract from the second interview with Luke (via e-mail, and again, reproduced verbatim). "XTC" is used as shorthand for ecstasy (MDMA).

\(^3\) The Collins Concise Dictionary lists over thirty definitions of 'play'. I am using 'play' to mean a blend of: "to occupy oneself in a sport or diversion"; "to perform or act the part (of), in or as in a dramatic performance"; and, "games, exercise, or other activity undertaken for pleasure" (Collins, Concise Dictionary, 1997).
Approaches to understanding or constructing a role for play have variously positioned it as a long-range survival technique, in that it prepared young people for adult tasks, as an outlet for unexpressed needs, and as compensation for routine behaviour (Young, 1997). These are explanations which have broadly concentrated upon adaptation to a changing environment and associated changes in responsibilities and expected behaviour (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c). Furthermore, play has been proposed as being the result of a physiological need for optimal arousal. That is, play is valuable in that it provides stimulation in parts of the brain that are not utilised in other human activities such as work or sleep (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c). Play has been posited as being about stepping out of ordinary or everyday life (Huizinga, 1969; Young, 1997), while for others, “man [sic] only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays” (Schiller, 1967; cited in Young, 1997: 75). While the slightly obtuse language of Schiller’s point can be more easily understood when it is noted that the original text was first published in 1795, the point he makes is as relevant today. One often feels more human when one plays; that is, to feel you are ‘working’ or have to ‘work’ at a certain time is not to be free, not to be - in a sense which is difficult to capture - a real ‘human’.

Thrift (1997) and Bauman (1990; 1993) place within play less significance than do Csikszentmihalyi (1975c) or Huizinga (1969). Zygmunt Bauman (1990; 1993), for example, understands play as “gratuitous [...] serving no sensible purpose” and which, when called upon to reveal its function, displays its “utter and irremediable redundancy” (Bauman, 1993: 170; emphasis in original). I disagree, instead understanding play as potentially refreshing and revitalising, and as performing an important role in (to give but two examples) social and sexual interaction, neither of which I would suggest were “redundant” aspects of social life. Neither is play “free”, as Bauman (1993) asserts. Play demands of the individual ‘player’ at least as complex a set of techniques and competencies as the worlds of work. The hierarchies of power are often less clear in play - the ‘rules of the game’ more open and up-for-grabs - and those playing together are more likely to include some who have not before played in that social context. When play is explicitly a group activity, as in team games and crowd-based events and situations, the ‘rules’ of the game become even more prominent and the associated competencies much more valued as the additional notions of acceptance, belonging and identification explicitly impact upon the situation. Like ‘work’, play involves knowledges of ‘ways of doing’, conventions, customs, and competency at their timely implementation. Play thus involves not an absence of orderings but a set of alternate orderings (Hetherington, 1997).
Bauman (1993: 170) further suggests that it is the sense of being “free and gratuitous [...] that sets play apart from the ‘normal’, ‘ordinary’, ‘proper’, ‘real’ life, and thus play is “not for real”. Yet I would suggest that play is merely another facet of an everyday or ‘normal’ life, that play exists not outside, but as a constitutive part of, our everyday lives. Certainly, play differs qualitatively from other facets of everyday life such as ‘work’, but play remains a significant facet of that everyday life and not something optional and outside experience.

Following this, in suggesting that play “does not add up” - that, in other words, play has no direction or continuity outside of the moment of playing - Nigel Thrift (1997: 146) perhaps overlooks the critical roles afforded by many individuals to play, to playful times and spaces, and to play-based activities and experiences. Play is an intrinsic part of our everyday lives, not only affecting but in many cases also partially constituting central aspects of our identities and identifications - aspects which we carry through our non-playing times and spaces. Time may take on a different quality and feeling during the practices of play - ‘time flies when you’re having fun’ - and the spaces and contexts of play might be perceived as different or special, and endowed with a powerful significance or even totemic quality. Yet this sense of being different has meaning only inasmuch as play is a part of, and exists only in contra-distinction to, the realm of non-play. In any case, play does (to use Thrift’s term) “add up” in the important sense that individuals can get ‘better’ at playing.

Turning to the dancing that is so central to clubbing, it is clear that clubbers feel ‘better’ or more competent at dancing after some time practicing, and that as they feel ‘better’ at dancing so their enjoyment of that activity increases. This is a point made forcefully by both Seb and Sun in the previous discussion of dancing (Chapter Two). With practice, play

4 It is worth mentioning that certain conceptions of Bataille (1988) and Baudrillard (1993) spin off and cut across these arguments about play. Towards the end of his provocative discussion of various theorisations of capitalism beyond retailing, David Clarke (1996) suggests that Bataille’s (1988) notion of the “accursed share” - a surplus or excess beyond the bounds of ‘rational’ economy - highlights the “irrationality” (I prefer ‘non-rationality’) of certain forms of consuming. In his original analyses, Bataille (1988: 55) uses the example of “sacrifice” - which “restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane” (the sacrificee) - in proposing that the sacred lies beyond the relatively narrow notion of ‘exchange-value’, having no equivalent and no substitute. Thus, in a society in which exchange-value dominates, like our own, sacrifice is inconceivable because rationality is transgressed (Clarke, 1996; Lechte, 1994). Baudrillard (1993) seeks to further these notions, widening Bataille’s analyses to incorporate further forms of “symbolic exchange” in which the “anti-economic” principle of the “accursed share” is mobilised and in which the “rules of equivalence” are broken - nothing is produced, and ‘usefulness’ is not an issue (Clarke, 1996: 299). The practices of play might thus be understood as forms of consuming which are inconceivable to conventional rational theorisations of ‘purpose’ and ‘use’ and represent forms of “accursed share” (excess, base, non-productive) themselves.
requires less 'work'. As sensations of competency at playing increase a sense of 'flow' becomes possible.

**play as flow**

Do activities for which extrinsic rewards are minimal provide a set of intrinsic rewards of their own; if so, what are these intrinsic rewards?

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c: 179)

SEB’S JOURNAL ENTRY: If ever there was a call-to-party this was it. For once, it was our turn to look around in bewilderment. Everybody could see what was taking place - we were all part of it, yet we all gasped in wonder. It was truly astonishing to witness. (Even I was tempted to ask ‘What have we started?’ ... but I stopped doing that ages ago!). To 'go with the flow' is the accepted response to this captivating hedonistic magic that is the Party Posse and which follows us wherever we go. That’s all there is to do. Tonight the wave which swept us along was as sweet as honey: a radiant mixture of all the hopes, vitality, passion and enthusiasm shared by an extraordinary bunch of like minded party people. The energy generated at that one instant as I hugged Noel’s Enough [a friend] and grinned at all those others glowing around me was fucking electric. We were charged for a party and as it turned out we proved ourselves very worthy! ^

In this wonderfully evocative, almost poetic, description of the experience of the dance floor during the climax of the evening, there are captured a number of important points about play and about the sense of flow which can accompany it (and to which I turn in detail below). First, there is a palpable sense of disbelief amongst Seb and his friends about what they were actually part of and were witnessing, as, “for once”, it was their turn to be astonished. Second, what they were witnessing had “called them to party” - the experience of the euphoric and ecstatic crowd had forged within them an even deeper sense of ecstasy and euphoria, it was a self-magnifying process. Third, Seb himself

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^ This extract is from a ‘clubbing journal’ which, for a period during 1995 and 1996, Seb kept in intricate detail. As perhaps the key member of a loose gathering of clubbers calling themselves the “Party Posse”, all of whom used to go to the same clubs (and who often hired coaches to travel to clubs in other cities), Seb took on responsibility for writing, copying and distributing a three or four page newsletter / report of each of their big Friday and Saturday nights to up to fifty clubbers who were there. This entry is extracted from a much larger narration of a Night Out he spent with friends on 26th May 1995. The entry is reproduced exactly as it appears in the journal.
describes the experience as one of “going with the flow” (my use of Csikszentmihalyi’s
1975c term ‘flow’ thus does have some foundation within the experiences of clubbing
themselves, although of course Csikszentmihalyi does not mention clubbing). Fourth, Seb’s
use of the metaphor of the “wave” that “swept them along” is reminiscent of the clubbers’
descriptions of experiencing the oceanic that I presented in the previous chapter - “a
radiant mixture of all the hopes, vitality, passion and enthusiasm shared by an extraordinary
bunch of like minded party people”. Finally, throughout both this extract but also the
journals of Seb’s experiences as a whole, there is an emphasis on the “we”, on the group
and its strong identification and tightly-bound constitution. Seb rarely talks in terms of his
own personal experiences, instead repeatedly referring to “the Party Posse”, “we” and
“our”. Seb is recounting a shared experience as well as one that it is extremely rewarding
on an individual level.

In his elaboration of a “new theoretical emphasis for the understanding of human
motivation” Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) sets out to problematize the conventional
distinctions between work and play. His main theoretical tenet is based upon the notion
that a “sense of flow” can be experienced from the meeting of challenges with learnt or
acquired skills and competencies. Any activity in which this sense of flow is experienced -
work-based, play-based or a blend of the two - can be understood as a pleasurable activity
(Sadgrove, 1997), and the quality of everyday life depends partly upon the balance
between the challenges experienced and skills required in certain situations (Moneta &
Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). These flow experiences, argues Csikszentmihalyi, indicate that (at
least in his terms) it is less the label or category of ‘play’ itself that determines the pleasure
inherent within or potentially gained from an activity, and more the timely and embodied
practice of skills in the negotiation of the various challenges that a given activity - work and
/or play - offers to an individual (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993). This point may be
clearly illustrated through the example of dancing. Whether one dances for pleasure - for
example, as a clubber, in carnival, or as part of a line-dancing, contra-dance or ballroom
dancing group (see Levine, 1987) - or as a form of work - for example, as a ballerina, as a
‘dancing’ sex worker (see Law, 1997) or stripper, or as a cheerleader at a sports event - the
demands for competency and the pleasure experienced through meeting the challenges
posed by the social situation through that competency override the polarised notion of
dancing simply as being either ‘fun’ or as ‘work’. It follows that whether dancing is
enjoyable or not depends not only upon the fact that it can be a leisure pursuit and an
occupation:
Apparently, something besides the activity itself must be analysed to decide whether it is intrinsically rewarding; specifically, one must consider the structure of external rewards that ties the activity to other social institutions.

(Csiksztentmihalyi, 1975c: 180)

Like Csiksztentmihalyi (1975a), I see play as significant in understanding the social lives of individuals and groups both for its intrinsic value, that is, in terms of the person's subjective experience of play and playing, but also for its extrinsic value - its relationships with the ways in which individuals and groups function and live their lives outside of the specific contexts of that play. Within any group situation involving practices of play, such as clubbing, there will be variation in the extent that play is significant intrinsically and extrinsically, and this variation will exist between individuals and also within the experiences of a single person throughout the timings and across the spacings of that situation.

Whether and to what extent clubbers experience dancing as an intrinsically and / or extrinsically rewarding experience might be understood in terms of whether they experience the clubbing experience as what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as a flow experience or as an experience of boredom and anxiety. The former is used to refer to an experience in which skills and competencies are successfully employed in overcoming or meeting understood challenges, and the latter is used to refer to an experience where there are either too many or too few opportunities for action - the individual is either over-skilled or under-skilled⁶.

Through this 'flow lens', clubbing, and the techniques and spacings of dancing in particular, can be understood as foregrounding the matching of personal skills, acquired through mimicry, observation and practice, with a broad and constantly changing range of physical or symbolic opportunities for action, where these opportunities represent "meaningful challenges to the individual" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). Thus, the oceanic and ecstatic

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⁶ Going off at a tangent for a moment, the fascinating contention with which Csikszentmihalyi concludes his discussion is that the essential difference between the activities which constitute our lives should not be understood simply in terms of work and play. Csikszentmihalyi uses the work of Weber (1976) in suggesting that the Protestant Work Ethic is a "new game or flow activity" which comes into existence when work is redefined as a "logical set of goals or means" - thus, despite ostensibly condemning all forms of so-called 'enjoyment', devotees of the doctrine must have enjoyed the very rigours of - and gained pleasure through - their ascetic way of life (1975c: 187). Csikszentmihalyi suggests that Weber never quite saw how this ascetic withdrawal could paradoxically lead to a form of pleasure, even though he did come close to recognising the arbitrariness of the work-play distinction.
experiences which I discussed in the previous stage of the Night, and of which Seb’s journal entry - above - is powerfully evocative, might be understood as moments of extreme flow for the clubbers. These transitory sensations of extreme flow can be experienced through the meeting of additional emotional and identificatory challenges - challenges which I discussed in my unpacking of the emotional spacings of dancing - in addition to those of dancing techniques, or crowd interaction, and perhaps of sexual interaction and the consuming of drugs. During these extreme flow experiences, of which the oceanic and ecstatic in clubbing are just two examples, those ‘going with the flow’ might,

[...] concentrate their attention on a limited stimulus field, forget personal problems, lose their sense of time and of themselves, feel competent and in control, and have a sense of harmony and union with their surroundings [...] some people emphasize the movement of their bodies; others try to maximize emotional communication; still others respond to the social dimensions of the activity [...].

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c: 182-183)

SEB’S JOURNAL ENTRY: With The Main Room packed, Jon of the Pleased Wimmin [a DJ] loaded an anthem that had 800 sets of hands, three brussel sprouts and one decapitated head in the air (bearing in mind I was tripping, don’t ask too many questions). From our vantage point just in front of the DJ box, myself and those around me could envision the emotion flowing across the floor and through the already entranced crowd of party people. This sight only served to heighten my own rush as I became overwhelmed in ecstasy ...

delirious and delighted because of it.

As the night wore on, I became oblivious of time, only conscious that I was having a great one.

And everybody else ... well, their collective state was pretty much ‘fucked’! - but on everybody’s face was a story of an exceptional party night.8

Seb evokes the self-reinforcing notion of the flow experience that can be experienced through dancing. The sight of the “entranced crowd” leads Seb to become “overwhelmed in ecstasy”. In this case, Seb is overwhelmed both through the combined effects of ecstasy

7 In addition to the example of “rock dancing” as a flow activity, Csikszentmihalyi also examines chess, rock climbing and surgery, noting that “a close analysis of any such activity may reveal possibilities for enjoyment that are not obvious at first glance” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c: 183).
8 An extract from another clubbing journal entry for Seb (17 March 1995).
[MDMA] and the physical sensation - extasis - produced through the crowd, the music and the movement. Seb’s careful noting of the temporary disappearance of time - once again, a concentration on the ‘here and now’ - and his referring to the dancing crowd as one (“everybody else” ... “their collective state” ...) are characteristic of both the experience of flow and also of the ecstatic experience. This is a social situation seemingly beyond regular times and spaces. This sensation of ‘being controlled’ by the situation, of being carried along with it, is redolent of Valerie’s description of her experiences of the dance floor which I mentioned during my discussion of dancing - “I was FORCED to do it, what I was doing I was being forced to do by something”. This particular experience can now be understood as both a form of oceanic experience but also as being constituted through sensations of flow. Furthermore, dancing can in this way be understood as a playful activity through which flow, at times of overwhelming proportions, may be experienced. Dancing is a playful activity through which the relationships between self and those that constitute the surrounding dancing crowd are at the least unsettled and in certain cases temporarily re-cast completely.

Maria Pini (1997a) refers to the work of Haraway (1991) and Braidotti (1994) in her elaboration of how, within “rave”, the physical body of the woman comes to include technology “in the forms of music, lighting and drugs” and is perhaps better understood “in terms of a mind/body/technology assemblage” (Pini, 1997a: 124). Thus, arguably, Valerie could be understood in this way as becoming a “Cyborg” (Haraway, 1991), with her body being taken over or ‘controlled’ by technology (Pini, 1997a). Whilst fascinating, these points seem to spin more off the (feminist) agenda of the theorists concerned than the experiences of the raving women being discussed. The male clubbers whom I interviewed evoked their experiences in a similar fashion - take Seb for example - and in any case I would place more emphasis upon the flux between self and the clubbing crowd than upon any flux between human and human-technology assemblage (I further discuss these points below).

That said, it should be added that the flow experience works both ways. The experiencing of flow through play is by no means automatic and clubbing can also be an experience laden with anxiety. The demands of the social situation can become too much; for example, in instances of clubbers new to a certain club, scene, or even to clubbing itself, or perhaps at certain moments of the Night. How many clubbers, however ‘cool’, experience ‘flow’ in the queue? This anxiety arises as a result of the general management of what a clubber might describe as a ‘cool identity’ - that is, the presentation of self in certain stylish
ways so as to become accepted, and ideally accepted as ‘cool’, through the manipulation
of body techniques, dress, and physical appearance. Anxiety can thus arise because of a
sense of complete non-flow, the sense that one does not belong, or does not wish to
belong, or perhaps does not know how to begin to establish belongings even if one so
desired.

BEN: Do you do a lot of thinking when you’re out?
MARIA: It depends on the evening I think, ummm ... there’s occasions where
err, you’re very relaxed and you don’t really think that you’re too heavily
enjoying yourself, um, if that makes sense, erm, not really!
BEN: So you’re quite relaxed, or ... ?
MARIA: Well yeah I mean if I think I’m comfortable in a situation ... to put it
into context erm ... I recently, I’m seeing one of these people that were
organising Saturday - I only met him three months ago. Went down to Bristol
a while back to see him and he wanted to go out to a club night at Freeform,
it’s a ... it was a non-Freeform night basically, taken over by sort of free party
people and it was the weekend before Tribal Gathering and it was actually a
very bad turnout and I only knew him, and I’ve met his flat-mate very briefly
and I was in a sort of ... I dunno ... [yeah?] ... not having a clue how to get
home if I didn’t enjoy myself, with two people ... well ... umm ... he went off on
a mad one, just running around for like an hour - I didn’t see him for ages.
And it probably took me an hour and a half to adjust to my new surroundings,
so in those sort of situations I would say yeah, I definitely .... I do think a lot
more, in other situations if I’m in a club, if I know a few people down there
then it’s ... y’know.9

In this short story Maria indicates how clubbing may lead to an anxious experience rather
than one of flow. The experience which Maria narrates here is certainly unlike the oceanic
and ecstatic experiences which I outlined in the preceding chapter and to which Seb and
Valerie allude above. Moreover, the very fact that Maria mentioned this night as
memorable despite the obvious lack of fun that she experienced suggests the extent of her
discomfort - it certainly left its mark upon her.

9 An extract from the first interview with Maria.
Clubbing, then, can provide opportunities for elements of flow to be experienced; that is, it can have intrinsic value and can allow a matching of challenges with skills and techniques. However, clubbing can provide instances in which flow is inhibited. In particular, a dancer may be interrupted in their dancing practices, they may experience a 'break in the flow', and become self-conscious. A dancer may even get ambiguous or even unpleasant feedback from those within the crowd. Thus the 'edges' of the dance floor can be regionalisations of increased self-consciousness because of the presence of non-dancing clubbers who appear to be watching those dancing. Yet, for similar reasons, the edges of dance floors can also provide opportunities for overtly staged displays of skill, dancing styles and self-control - a static audience is also a captive audience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b).

The demonstration of flow whilst dancing - of apparently coping successfully with the demands of expressing bodily understandings of music and the social situation - is thus an important element in establishing oneself as competent, as 'cool', and as belonging. Dancing 'well' is not only important for the intrinsic rewards it provides for the clubber but is also important as it forms one of the major "character attributes" (Goffman, 1968) through which clubbers are understood socially by others within the clubbing crowd.

As with in any other form of social situation, the challenges of playing are experienced in practical terms in the guise of the rules, customs, standards and traditions through which that play is constituted. Yet, while play may well be "rule-bound" (Thrift, 1997: 146), these rules - the customs, 'ways of doing', practices and techniques constituting the sociality of clubbing - overlap into, and themselves partially constitute, other aspects of the clubbers' everyday lives. Play can itself be a source of identity and of identifications and can instil notions of community and belonging even outside the timespace of that playing. The 'rules' of play are important - they do partially structure play - but they also go beyond play. Notions of competency and identification extend well beyond the moments of flow themselves and into the individual's sense of self identity.

Furthermore, while play, in this instance in the form of dancing, may serve "no useful purpose" (Thrift, 1997: 145-146) in being beyond rational notions of 'functionality' on the one hand, on the other hand play may be an important source of strength or vitality for the individual dancers, both in terms of their individual identities (how they see themselves) and their identifications (with whom and how they identify - their belongings). This vitality can be drawn by the clubbers through the experiencing of flow. In extreme cases this flow
is experienced in the form of moments of oceanic or ecstatic euphoria. The paradoxical in-betweeness of these moments - fleeting sensations of both losing control yet also finding control - can result in sensations of ex-stasis, of the dancer losing a sense of themselves as a separate entity, of becoming part of or identifying strongly with something outside and beyond, yet also including, themselves.

In the remainder of this final Chapter of the Night Out I want to build upon these notions of play and flow through making two further points. First, I want to re-visit notions of resistance in sketching out the conception of resistance as 'vitality'. Secondly, I want to blend aspects of play and flow that I have just outlined with these notions of vitality and, both through the words of the clubbers' themselves and through critiquing existing accounts of this form of 'other-world', sketch out the notion of 'playful vitality' more fully.

* * * *

2 Resistance and Vitality

Club-culture [sic] remains unashamedly escapist. The hedonist motto, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" is undoubtedly very popular. Ignorance is Ecstasy. This indifference to the world of politics can lead to a subjectivity where criticism plays no role.

(Ali, 1998: 15)

What if, instead, we were to consider 'resistance' in other less fundamental ways?

(Thrift, 1997: 124)

[Pe]ople are positioned differently in unequal and multiple power relationships, [...] more and less powerful people are active in the constitution of unfolding relationships of authority, meaning and identity, [...] these activities are contingent, ambiguous and awkwardly situated, but [...] resistance seeks to occupy, deploy and create alternative spatialities from those defined through oppression and exploitation. From this perspective, assumptions about the domination / resistance couplet become questionable.

(Pile, 1997: 2-3)
There has been an increasing impetus across the social sciences over the last thirty years to illuminate the words and worlds of the so-called powerless and dominated in societies (Hetherington, 1997). In these studies, the relationships between the so-called ‘powerful’ and the ‘subordinated’ have often been constructed in terms of the worlds of work and/or as relationships in which the weak are exploited by the powerful and thus exercise tactics of resistance in their relationships with those in power (Scott, 1985; 1990). Others have broadened this focus upon resistant practices to include the ways in which, for example, clothing, food and writing can be subject to tactical subversions (de Certeau, 1980; 1984), and have questioned the extent to which (to give another oft-cited example) the everyday practices of walking in the city coincide with the intentions and orderings of the city planners (de Certeau, 1993). Still others have examined the inversion of the everyday that can occur during carnivals and fêtes - Scott calls these practices “rituals of reversal, satire, parody, and a general suspension of social constraints” (Scott, 1990: 173).

In discussions of ‘youth’ or young people as well, resistance has often been variously cast in terms of a defiant stylistic insubordination (Chambers, 1986; Hall, 1984), as an attitude or ritual of resistance to those in power or in authority (Hall & Jefferson, 1993; McKay, 1996), and as forming a process of “bricolage” and symbolic transformation (Hebdige, 1979; 1983; 1988). Throughout, there has been a powerfully resonant notion of a power, a hegemony or an authority against or in defiance of which these young people have been acting.

More recently, in certain feminist and cultural geography perspectives on relations between spaces, the nature of power, and identities, issues of domination and resistance have started to become more textured and problematising in their approach (Hetherington, 1997; Keith & Pile, 1993). I want to build upon some of these recent approaches, and specifically upon the suggestion that it is no longer enough “to begin stories of resistance with stories of so-called power” with the process of thinking about and

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10 See also Bakhtin (1984) on the carnivalesque as “the ritual location of uninhibited speech [...] where undominated discourse prevailed, where there was no servility, false pretences, obsequiousness, or etiquettes of circumlocution” (Scott, 1990: 175; emphasis in original). Jackson (1988) provides a short but interesting understanding of the politics underlying the Notting Hill Carnival, while Stallybrass & White (1993) examine and briefly expand upon Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque in discussing bourgeois approaches to (and their abhorrence of) carnival.

11 See, for example, the edited collection by Keith & Pile (1993) in which relations between power, identity and resistance are addressed through the language of their spatialities. A later collection edited by Pile & Keith (1997) deepens these understandings of the nature, and our understandings, of resistance. Cresswell (1996) offers a discussion of the relationships between places, spaces and ideologies, and especially resistance to and transgressions of these ideologies, while Bell & Valentine (1995) explore the places, spaces and mappings of sexuality in contemporary culture. For further discussion of feminist approaches see Bondi & Domosh (1992) and Rose (1993).
attempting to broaden understandings of “geographies of resistance involving breaking assumptions as to what constitutes resistance” (Pile, 1997: 3).

In constructing clubbing as simultaneously a form of play and as constituting a form of vitality I want to highlight a differing inflection of ‘resistance’ and of ‘power’. I am interested in resistance less in terms of being concerned with effecting changes in a macro or overtly-stated context (or scale) but rather as constituting a situation in which an “alternative conception of the self” may be fostered (Pini, 1997a: 118) - an alternative conception which may provide a sense and a source of vitality, or personal worth. This situation is produced through a temporary replacement of the ‘normal’ and normative codes and customs of interaction and communality with a set of alternate orderings. Before I turn to this in detail and attempt to contextualise my argument through the stories of the clubbers, I first want to draw out a number of key pointers from discussions of the relationships between power and resistance.

**power and resistance**

In one of the most influential discussions of the domination-resistance relationship in recent years, Michel de Certeau (1984) uses what is by now a set of well-rehearsed arguments in noting how the practices of resistance form a popular culture that, through continual evolution and mutation, resists “assimilation” by the powerful and the elites. This popular resistance to situations of domination and the imposition of power is neatly illustrated by de Certeau through his use of the notion of “la perruque” (or ‘the wig’). He outlines, for example, how in some cases a worker’s own ‘work’ - perhaps talking to friends on the telephone or reading whilst ostensibly working - may be disguised as productive work for their employer:

> In the very place where the machine he [sic] must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his work and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through spending his time in this way.

(de Certeau, 1984: 25-26)

James Scott (1985; 1990) develops a perspective on resistance and domination which is strikingly similar to that of de Certeau, yet seems to offer a more contextual and in some
ways more approachable conception than de Certeau’s polarised ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’. Although largely basing his arguments on anthropological work carried out in a small Malay village, Scott nevertheless offers a cross-cultural perspective in proposing that, other things being equal, structures of domination can be demonstrated to elicit patterns of resistance which are comparable in form. That said, Scott is quick to recognise how the “ultimate value of the broad patterns [...] could be established only by embedding them firmly in settings that are historically grounded and culturally specific” (ibid: xi).

Like de Certeau, Scott suggests that open resistance to the practices of domination is rare - a point he makes in relation to the slaves and serfs in the villages that he studied, yet that could be equally applied to, say, workers in the City of London, bar staff in a nightclub or someone using a ‘second-hand’ ticket in a pay-and-display car park. Every subordinate group fashions a “hidden transcript” out of its ordeal - an embodied and spatialised critique of power that is almost always spoken behind the back of the powerful (Scott, 1990). Thus, much more likely than open resistance is an opposition to domination or the powerful that is spatialised, occurring within specific places, and clandestine. The ‘hidden transcript’ comprises the “off-stage” or backstage responses that are carefully choreographed in spatio-temporal terms (Scott, 1990: 109).

Where, stated simply, power is generated through strategies, and resistance to that power is generated through tactics (Pile, 1997): “while strategies define a territory marked by an inside and outside, resistances cross these spaces with ‘other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop’ “ (Pile, 1997: 15; citing de Certeau, 1984: xviii). While “political, economic, and scientific rationality [have] been constructed on [the] strategic model [...] “many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking etc) are tactical in character” (de Certeau, 1984: xix).

Tim Cresswell (1996: 23) makes this notion of “intentionality” and “being noticed” central in his distinction between “resistance” and “transgression”: “transgression is judged by those who react to it, while resistance rests on the intentions of the actors”, although he goes on to add how these are ideal types, and, for example, “some acts judged as constituting transgression are intended by the actors and thus also constitute resistance”.

There are obvious yet still striking similarities here with Goffman’s use of the spatial metaphor in his discussions of how people behave in different contexts. Scott, however, explicitly politicises his spatialisation of these ‘hidden transcripts’ whereas in Goffman’s work, whilst it is always perceptible, the political angle on the performance of everyday life is rarely made explicit, and some suggest that Goffman was not concerned with political or social issues at all (Gouldner, 1970). That said, Lemert and Branaman (1997) note the inherent political slant to much of Goffman’s oeuvre, placing his work alongside landmark texts of the 1950s and 1960s such as Packard’s (1957) Hidden Persuaders, Riesman’s (1961[1950]) Lonely Crowd, Whyte’s (1956) The Organization Man and Wright Mill’s (1951) White Collar. For Lemert (in Lemert and Branaman, 1997), “Goffman was among those who understood, at some basic level, that social relations were already by then organized more around the appearance than the content of things” (xxii), and “contrary to the impression that he lacked a social consciousness, he actually worked out his own, admittedly perverse and muted, social critique of America in the 1950s [...] he was attuned to something deeply wrong in American life and, in this, he resonated with others whose social critiques were more overt” (xxiv).
Both the accounts of de Certeau and of Scott, then, privilege the realms of overtly politicised resistance; even where this resistance is clandestine in nature it is ‘aimed’ at simple notions of ‘power’, even if unintentionally. Both sets of accounts are concerned with apparently dualistic constructions of ‘power’ versus ‘resistance’, in which the less powerful resist or subvert the apparent control of the more powerful through their tactical responses to the strategic control of the powerful, whether this is through re-inscribing the names of streets with different and unintended meanings (de Certeau, 1984) or through the singing by slaves of thinly-veiled (but still “hidden”) attacks on slave owners in the form of hymns (Scott, 1990). I want to look at an alternative facet of this power-resistance relationship.

**play as vitality**

Understood one way, play can be about using the body to “conjure up ‘virtual’, ‘as-if’ worlds by configuring alternative ways of being through play, ways of being which can become claims to ‘something more’” (Thrift, 1997: 147). Play, whether involving nine holes of golf, an hour in the kitchen with a cookbook or a night spent on the dance floor with friends, is about the temporary inhabitation - and thus constitution - of alternate worlds and their orderings (Hetherington, 1997) in which rules different from those dominant within ‘normal’ life usually apply and through which, in some way, a sense of vitality, of personal worth, of energy and of reward is experienced (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c).

If this engagement with apparently ‘different worlds’ or imaginary realms that can characterise play is about the eluding of certain forms of macro-power and structurings in the social lives of actors - such as in work, the demands of sociability, the legal system, the class system, the categorisation of the self - as Thrift (1997) contends, then it is not only about this. Play is also about an engagement with, and an expression of a different facet of power altogether. This power comes not from above - it is not ascribed - but from within - it is achieved. Rather than being a mode of power that is evaded through play it is instead a form of micro-power or ‘vitality’ that can be inhabited through play.

*JOHN:* For me it’s not like escaping from a particular place, like, geographically ... it’s about escaping full-stop. Just escaping from everything I think. Escaping from work, escaping from normal life, escaping from everything, everything full-stop. Ummm ... it’s almost as if ... I don’t know, you step into a totally different life - nothing at all ... nothing else matters [no] and once you’re at the club, or on your
way to the club or whatever, or on a night out, whenever it starts - whether it's six o'clock when you leave work or eleven o'clock when you walk into the club [ummm], that whole night, and the next morning when you're sitting around indoors chilling out and smoking, is ... just going to be my time, our time [yeah, yeah]. No one else's wants or needs or anything comes into it, I mean the other people I'm with - yeah [ummm], I mean them having a good time or ... I might give up a little time to make sure of them, but I'm just escaping from everything else.

BEN: How do you feel when you're actually there then, at the club?

JOHN: Cut off a bit, safe ... in some respects I don't even think about it, I don't worry, that's pretty much it, it's not so much that I don't worry about this or I don't worry about that, or I put this to the back of my mind, I don't need to put anything to the back of my mind really. You don't think, you just do [yeah]. And that is the best feeling about it - you just don't care about anything - you just enjoy yourself!  

The subtle nature of the vitality that John experiences through and while clubbing is tangible in this powerfully evocative extract. John repeatedly uses the term "escape" - he's escaping not from a place so much as from "work", from "normal life", from "everything full-stop". The clubbing experience is clearly different from other aspects of John's everyday life. Furthermore, whilst clubbing, nothing beyond or outside it matters - "this is just going to be my time, our time", he says, a time quite unlike that of work and of life beyond the here and now. The obligations of thinking about his actions and his worries are also temporarily suspended while clubbing - "you don't think, you just do" - and there is a clear sense in what John says of the experience being rewarding for reasons deeper than it just being 'fun'. This is certainly no crude hedonism that John is evoking.

From this story, it is possible to see how we might begin to understand the practices of sociality that constitute play more as implicit notions of autotelic strength or vitality than of power or resistance in the face of any explicit dominating authority. In this sense play can be understood not so much as a reaction to "all the dangers and dysfunctions of the moment" (Maffesoli, 1996b: 48) but more as in spite of them:

It is certain that unemployment, violence, economic constraints, the threats of moralism, and other forms of alienation are felt as so many impositions that bridle, alter, or hamper a flourishing social and individual life. But all that

15 An extract from the second interview with John.
does not prevent one from being engaged in experiencing, at best, what one can enjoy. One could even say that, faced with these constraints, there is a frenzy to enjoy, a *carpe diem*\(^{16}\), a surfeit of social energy that no longer is carried over into the future, but invests itself in the present.

(Maffesoli, 1996b: 48)

Through the matching and superseding of often self-posed challenges with acquired skills and competencies an individual can experience sensations of control over their body, can re-invigorate their sense of self-worth, eliminate alienation and experience an exhilarating feeling of vitality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975c). Michel Maffesoli (1995: 3) calls this form of micropower or vitality "*puissance*", suggesting that it is a form of "underground sociality" that can be expressed and experienced by individuals through "trivial vectors" such as places of everyday chit-chat and conviviality\(^{17}\). For Maffesoli, puissance is the "will to live" and it "nourishes the social body" (ibid: 31). Practiced through "abstention, silence and ruse, puissance is the opposite of politico-economic power" (ibid: 3). It is derived from the "proxemic reality of community" (ibid: 31) rather than from any sense of counter-authority. Unfortunately, while this distinction between ‘tactile’ and ‘optical’ understandings of others is useful, Maffesoli fails to develop his notion of puissance in a more textured and useful fashion, instead merely suggesting little more than just that “this energy is difficult to explain” (1995: 32).

Building upon the sentiment underlying Maffesoli’s conception, and through re-positioning play as form of activity through which flow may be experienced and a sense of vitality be (re-)forged, I propose that apparently autotelic and playful practices, such as dancing, may be at the very centre of many individual’s attempts to make themselves significant both to themselves and also within group social interactions. However, before I move on to discuss this notion of playful vitality in detail, I first want to further refine exactly how clubbing might be understood as potentially providing vitality to clubbers.

\(^{16}\) A Latin term meaning to "enjoy the pleasures of the day, without concern for the future [...] literally: seize the day!" (Collins Concise Dictionary, 1995).

\(^{17}\) The term "puissance" is derived from Old French and etymologically means ‘mighty’ or ‘having power’. The translator of *The Time of the Tribes* (1995) translates “puissance" as, “the inherent energy and vital force of the people" (ibid: 1).
now everything is ‘resistance’?

I am aware that I am not alone in these explorations into the nature of resistance. In the wake of the strategies and tactics of de Certeau, in particular, have come a tidal wave of discussions and debates about resistance as being present in the minutiae of individual’s everyday lives. Conscious of the rather narrow conflation between dualistic notions of resistant practice and powerful—subordinate relationships premised either within the worlds of working or overly structuralist notions of ‘subculture’, and based upon clear constructions of ‘authority’ or ‘surveillance’, many have recently attempted to broaden their focus. This flood of reconfigurations has reached such an extent that Pile (1997: 15) is driven to wonder, if resistance “can be found in the tiniest act - a single look, a scratch on a desk - then how is it to be recognised as a distinctive practice?”, Morris (1988: 214) mockingly suggests that one can discover “washing your car on a Sunday is a revolutionary event”, while for Cresswell (1996: 22), it seems that “almost any activity from eating to walking to writing books and making films can [...] be construed as resistance”. In both further qualifying my arguments about clubbing and playful vitality, and in order to avoid accusations of “romanticization” and “misguided optimism” (Cresswell, 1996: 22) in discussing certain practices of play as forms of resistance, I want to set out in some detail how and why, in the practices and contexts of certain playful activities, there exists the realisable (and realised) potential for the experiencing of personal and social vitality.

Firstly, I am arguing quite simply that play can be experienced as a form of resistance and an oppositional practice in the guise of what I have described as ‘playful vitality’. By this I mean a reconfigured notion of resistance that falls somewhere between the purposeful and outwardly-orientated, macro-politicised sociality of Scott and de Certeau, the immanent and at times somewhat mystical sociality of Maffesoli - who never pins down exactly who it is that is supposed to be experiencing strong feelings of “puissance”, and how and where this is directed - and the explicitly technical sociality inherent within Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow”. Playful vitality is purposeful and directed, yet inwardly-orientated. Playful vitality privileges sensations of flow, of the here and now and of the tactility of the crowd.

Secondly, and related to this, I am suggesting that de Certeau’s “la perruque” might be a notion that we can expand and apply not just to situations of individualised tactical responses in both institutionalised (work or production) and consuming contexts or settings (walking, reading, cooking), but also to crowd-based social situations, many of which are based upon the practices of playing and having fun as a group or crowd, such as
carnival, and involve notions of ‘power’ not directly related to conventional constructions of ‘authority’. As Steve Pile proposes,

[... ] resistant political subjectivities are constituted through positions taken up not only in relation to authority -- which may well leave people in awkward, ambivalent, down-right contradictory and dangerous places -- but also through experiences which are not so quickly labelled ‘power’, such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting.

(Pile, 1997: 3)

Thus, and thirdly, I am proposing that through play individuals may offset or counterbalance other less playful and less flow-based, and thus less rewarding, aspects of their own lives in both working and playing contexts. That is, rather than ‘resisting’ notions of power which are acting upon them, individuals may actually be ‘resisting’ other facets of their own identities, certain of their other identifications and even some of their other emotional experiences. Importantly, it appears that this form of ‘self-resistance’ might be easiest to experience in group situations.

Fourthly, I want to move beyond simplistic conceptions of alternate orderings that involve and attempt to reify certain social encounters as in some way (even) temporarily obscuring, incorporating or annihilating differences in terms of the identities of those taking part in that encounter. In the final part of the Chapter I argue that conceptions such as Turner’s (1969; 1982) ‘communitas’ idealise the inclusivity of ‘differences’ that occurs during moments of group effervescence. While not denying the genuine nature of the sentiments of inclusivity that can occur in clubbing, I propose that the actual differences of those within clubbing crowds should be carefully scrutinised. I now turn to look at the relationships between clubbing and the notion of playful vitality.

* * * *
3 Clubbing as Playful Vitality

Music creates order out of chaos; for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent; melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous.

( Menuhin, 1972: 9)

We are together,
We are unified and of one accord.
Because together we got power,
Apart - we got pow-wow.
Unified, we are together.
(Primal Scream [1990] Come Together)

It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd.

( Canetti, 1973: 19)

Moving back towards the clubbing experience in contextualising this concept of playful vitality, I make three related points: firstly, I highlight the autotelic nature of clubbing in noting its lack of explicit outwardly-oriented politics; secondly, through drawing out the unburdening of individuality that can be experienced during the clubbing experience I note how playful vitality is very much collectively experienced as well as individually valued; and, thirdly (and a little more detail), in attempting to defuse, problematise and qualify the romanticism and idealism that often exists around discussions of communality and difference in respect of clubbing (‘Peace, Love, Unity, Respect’ again) I suggest that sentiments of openness and inclusivity are often misconstrued as suggesting a hugely diverse collection of identities on the dance floor when this may well not be the case.

However, this is not to deny the validity and authenticity to the clubbers of these experiences of a ‘better’ or ‘ideal’ world in which relief from the mundaneness and tensions of other aspects of everyday life can be temporarily found and enjoyed.

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18 As I mentioned earlier, ‘PLUR’ is a clubbing maxim with origins in the early ‘acid house’ scene of the late-1990s, and, for example, is still occasionally tagged on to e-mail signatures.
Dancing is a play form in which, through flow, a sensation of usually private, often covert and very much personal vitality can be experienced, although clubbers will tell differing stories about the nature of this vitality just as they tell differing stories about their experiences of clubbing.

BEN: ... what goes on inside you head?
SEB: That's another thing that was different about that night. If I'm somewhere where I know ... I know The Tunnel I suppose ... how can I explain this ... if I'm totally relaxed, it's like I was saying to you before I went out, then the death thought comes into it, the writing of letters in my head. I think I wasn't free to do that on Saturday only because I was conscious of looking for Sarah, partly because I was uncomf ... well not uncomfortable but just because the unknown between us on our first night out. Partly because I was drunk as well. My mind kept flitting away to things like - "is Ben having a good time?, what else can I do to show him what I do in a club? is Sarah going to arrive? is that her over there?" - there was too much going on inside my head for me to totally relax and I don't remember relaxing really. I mean, how I want people to remember me, I am at that point the most complete person I could be, the happiest person that I could be, I'm just ... you know, everything has a purpose and everything has meaning, and nothing has meaning and nothing has a purpose - you're just there on your own and everything: brilliant! Ummm ... but if it was all to end the next day as a result of drugs I would only want people to think good things and to know that it was a choice that I made and I stand by that choice and I'd want them to know that I had a most fulfilling time ever. Ummm ... I think about writing something that I'd like to be read at the funeral, by someone who knows me. I'd think of the tunes that I'd want to be played, I would want to go out to Grace, It's not over yet [a popular anthemic track] and another tune, a banging-hard-happy tune. I would want people to go to the funeral in their party gear - none of this black tie sombre stuff. Go the way that they remember me. And if people started dancing in the aisles of the funeral parlour then all the better. Better to be a celebration of life and not a sorrowful experience or a good-bye.¹⁹

¹⁹ An extract from the second interview with Seb.
In this starkly melancholic and reflective story of Seb’s we begin to gain an understanding of quite how important clubbing is in Seb’s life. Seb explains how, at certain times during his clubbing experiences when he “is totally relaxed”, his thoughts turn to in some way capturing that moment as ‘his essence’. Clubbing is what Seb is, it is what he is about. I am wary of reading ‘behind the lines’ of this extract too much for I have no idea what other aspects of Seb’s life may be triggering these thoughts, but I do want to draw out just two points. First, Seb contrasts being “totally relaxed” with the particular night he is talking about where he was worried about me, about his girlfriend, and about being drunk - these worries prevent him from the deep contemplation or ‘flow’ of which his “death thoughts” are part. This frustrated him as it was not how he wanted “to be remembered”. Second, Seb notes how, when he is relaxed, he is “the most complete person” he could be, “the happiest person” he could be - “everything has a purpose ... and nothing has a purpose” - this perfectly captures the strong sense of self-validation that may characterise playful vitality. Of course, other clubbers will experience and evoke the sensation of playful vitality in different ways.

BEN: What do you think about when you dance?
MARIA: Errr ... I suppose fucking stumbling all over the place not really being ... sort of bumping into people, sort of looking around to see how other people are enjoying themselves, ummm ... if I’m dancing a lot and I’m enjoying myself I might not be thinking of that much. I may be think about how the evening has sort of developed and how I’m feeling now [right] ummm ... yeah.
BEN: Does your mind ever wander over things outside that particular night?
MARIA: Yeah, all the time, when I’m feeling ... when I’m dancing ... when I’m having a good time I forget about the worries that I have like what the fuck am I doing in my life, you know, um ... what am I going to do about that? I think about these things but I think “don’t worry, you’re only 24, um ... you’ve got a lot of time to sort things out, something will sort itself out, you know. You’re intelligent, you’ve got a lot to offer, you know, don’t worry about it”. 20

Here, Maria Is expressing broadly similar sentiments to those of Seb, above, although in a less explicitly melancholic fashion. Whilst part of her consciousness is occupied with the spatial and social demands of the dance floor - “... looking around to see how other people are enjoying themselves” - another part of her consciousness is concerned with wider and

20 An extract from the first interview with Maria.
deeper issues - “what the fuck am I doing in my life?”; the time-space of dancing is for Maria partly one of contemplation, affirmation, self-validation and resolution. Again, this perfectly captures the rewarding and reflective nature of the experience of playful vitality.

In these extracts, Seb and Maria are not resisting any notion of ‘authority’. Rather, they are engaging reflexively with themselves and aspects of their own lives. Their vitality is drawn not from a political engagement with ‘others’ or a dominating, subordinating exterior force, but from an inward exploration of this particular aspect of their identity, this identification. In the case of dancing then, playful vitality is a form of oppositional practice in which the primary scale of operation is the bodies and experiences of the individual dancers, and one set of foci for these oppositional practices are alternate facets or identifications within the clubbers own lives.

**clubbing and the unshackling of individuality**

Instead of yielding to a music that is more or less identity-affirming, the sensual activity of losing oneself and regaining something else on the dance floor opens up a social space that is quite different from the public and private boundaries that hold our identities all too tightly in place.

(Ross, 1994: 11)

**SEB’S JOURNAL ENTRY**: If anyone can claim to have had a better time in a better place (with or without the aid of drugs) than we all have when we’re together on Saturday night at Supreme, then I think they’re either lucky (mild understatement) or lying (much more likely!). I know I’ve said it before and I know that you all realise it too, but what’s wrong with saying it again? We’re all wonderful!  

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21 It is worth stressing that dancing is, in other contexts, used by people as a tool for macro-political change. Brinson (1985: 207) notes how dance and music perform that role in South America today through “reinforcing resistance to authoritative regimes”. This is clearly a hugely important and quite different context of and for dancing and one that I would not claim to even begin to cover in this thesis. For further discussion of the liberatory potential of dancing in Brazil, see, for example, the excellent texts by Browning (1995) and McGowan & Pessanha (1997).

22 This extract is from Seb’s clubbing journal for 22nd April 1995, and is reproduced as in the original - the stresses are his. The communality of the experience for Seb is once again apparent, but it is the powerful sense that this communality has engendered Seb with a deep sense of personal worth and vitality that marks this extract out as interesting. When he writes “we’re all wonderful!”, Seb is not being arrogant or cocky - this is for ‘internal distribution’ to those who were there only. Rather, this is an expression of what clubbing with his friends does for Seb - it simply makes him feel great.
The clubbing experience not only provides opportunities for a reflexive exploration of the self, then, but is also very much a social encounter. Just being within the dancing crowd can be enough to instill feelings of vitality within an individual (Le Bon, 1930). Thus, playful vitality is constituted both individually, and in one sense privately, but also communally, and thus socially. Although being-together is a basic given in society (Maffesoli, 1995) - the social is what makes society - certain contexts of being-together in social situations are more pleasurable than others. Being-together with many others in the clubbing crowd can reinforce the vitality experienced through the experiencing of flow on an individual scale, with the crush of people together magnifying the sensory stimulation of the mediations which constitute a critically important spacing of the clubbing environment: lighting, warmth, loud music, continual movement, semi-visibility, verbal obliteration.

In Chapter Two I introduced Bauman’s (1995b) notion of “manifest togetherness” in unpacking one understanding of the clubbing crowd. In certain instances, this ‘manifest togetherness’ can “numb through over-stimulation: ecstasy leads to (borders on, melts with) nirvana”. Bauman adds, “togetherness of this kind is mostly about the “unburdening of individuality” (ibid: 47).

Ostensibly, the masks are torn off to uncover the grimace of a bare fact; in fact, it is faces that are wiped clean of their identities so that another identity may rule supreme which is no one’s identity, no one’s responsibility and no one’s task.

(Bauman, 1995b: 47)

This collective unshackling of identity that can characterise certain forms of group encounter is a further important strand of playful identity, for it is this betweeness of self and crowd - the flux experienced between experiencing oneself egocentrically and experiencing oneself lococentrically whilst dancing - that facilitates both moments of individual reflection and moments of ecstasy (or exstasis), at times simultaneously. This subsumation of the clubber into the clubbing crowd and yet also into them-selves is reminiscent of Rossi Braidotti’s (1994) work on the “nomadic subject”. For Braidotti, “nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent” (ibid: 33; cited in Pini, 1997a: 127), and Pini (1997a) proposes that this nomadic metaphor neatly evokes the situation whereby a “raver moves into the space of an event, makes connections with other bodies [...] and leaves, never likely to meet any of these bodies again” (ibid: 127).
Forms of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1912) such as those experienced through music and dancing have often been conceptualised through the employment of Victor Turner’s (1969; 1974) concept of *communitas* (see Spencer [1985] and O’Connor [1997]). In brief, proposing that political power is fragile, and that all humans are united by a shared experience of the mysteries of life, death, fertility and the uncertainties of nature, Turner suggests that humans are essentially humble beings who live and thrive only due to their involvement with, and interaction between, each other in the form of communities.

Spencer (1985) argues that the associations between dancing and communitas “should be immediately apparent” (Spencer, 1985: 28), with O’Connor (1997: 154) paraphrasing Turner in noting how one of the major ways in which a sense of community is achieved today is “through the breaking-down of hierarchical structures which form part of everyday life, the abolition of difference and the creation of a sense of ‘communion’ “. For O’Connor, the communitas of the “set-dance” (her object of study) “consists of people who may have come from different social backgrounds but who are rendered equal by the nature of the set-dancing encounter” (ibid: 155).

**clubbing, difference and sentiments of inclusivity**

O’Connor’s account of communitas on the dance floor over-simplifies and idealises the encounters which take place there. Whilst it is certainly the case that people who may not know each other dance together, as O’Connor proposes, it is wrong to assume from this that the dancing crowd consists of socially very different individuals who generate “instant community” (O’Connor, 1997: 155) through dancing. Throwing off the shackles of identity does not necessarily mean that those identities were that different to begin with. Furthermore, to take clubbing, this would also be to gloss over the centrality of notions of style and display, of coolness, of ‘appropriate behaviour’ and its ad-libbings, and of skills and competencies, all of which are used to differentiate - as well as establish identifications with - other clubbers within the dancing crowd.

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23 Aside from the more general disagreements that I have over O’Connor’s use of Turner’s ‘communitas’ (which I outline below), I have two further and more specific points of disagreement. First, while noting the similarities between set-dance and “raving” - the pleasures found in music, in bodily movement and in the “sense of a group vision” (ibid: 154) - in attempting to then draw out distinctions between the two forms of dancing, O’Connor simply conflates clubbing with drug use, inferring that clubbing involves drugs, full-stop. Second, and more significantly, O’Connor proposes that “verbal and other forms of communication, particularly the sense of touch, are important aspects of set dancing [...] but are not present in rave” (ibid: 154). This proposed insignificance of touching is clearly not the case in any form of clubbing or raving I have experienced - one wonders whether O’Connor has ever been clubbing?
In his somewhat rambling discussions of communality and difference, Maffesoli (1995) attempts to build upon Turner's (1969) notion of communitas and introduces the concept of “unicity” in proposing that the sharing of a space and the social situation within it can act to bind that social situation through the generation and consolidation of a group ethos. While this crowd “may be made up of a plurality of elements [...] there is always a specific ambience uniting them all” (Maffesoli, 1995: 14). Maffesoli loosely defines “unicity” as a state of togetherness that goes beyond the (rationalist) “dream of unity”, instead being characterised by the “adjustment of diverse elements”. There is no magical increase in tolerance of difference, but rather an “organicity of opposites” (ibid: 105) in which the notion of ‘outsider’ or ‘stranger’ becomes transferred onto those beyond the social situation at that moment, in that place. The “mutual tuning-in relationship” (Schutz, 1964c: 161) that characterises the interaction of diverse elements in this way is, suggests Schutz, the bedrock of all communication.

While the “dynamic rootedness” that for Maffesoli (1995: 107) characterises his notion of unicity is premised upon the heterogeneity of crowds being energised through exposure to diversity, Maffesoli’s conception suggests an all-too-easy, somewhat inevitable, empirically-unproven and almost miraculous thriving on differences when it is quite clear that this is not an inevitable outcome. Admittedly, dancing can be seen as central to the disrupting of cultural, gender, age and ethnic boundaries (Spencer, 1985), with an emphasis on the momentary and the now, but this does not mean that ‘anything goes’ in the clubbing crowd. Extensive cross-genre research into the attitudes and practices constituting and differentiating each of the many genres of contemporary clubbing, as well as detailed studies of the actual constitution of clubbing crowds, would be necessary for one to draw any firm conclusions about if, when and how clubbing crowds in any way dissolve or obscure social differences or if they are, in fact, comprised of more varied identities than any other form of play. For now, the experiences of the clubber-interviewees blended with some theoretical contributions concerning similar social situations must suffice.

To start with, clubbing is no utopia - an imaginary concept (literally a ‘non-place’) that by definition can never be realised. Rather, through clubbing, its moments of ecstasy, and the playful vitality that can be experienced, a type of utopian sentiment may be achieved or inhabited. Richard Dyer (1993) usefully makes the critical distinction between models of...
utopian worlds, such as those of Wells (1906; 1933) and More (1965), and the feelings of utopianism that may be experienced through, and form the raison d’être of, many forms of contemporary entertainment. The qualities of experiencing “wish-fulfillment”, “escape”, “something better” (Dyer, 1993: 273) a “dream world” (Spencer, 1985: 34), the “imagination of nirvana” (Storr, 1992: 98) - these are all utopian feelings as experienced rather than the parameters of a utopian world as, for example, More and Wells set out in such detail (I discuss Dyer’s notion in further detail below).

Writers in the 1960s and 1970s such as Huxley (1961; 1972) and Leary (1968; 1973) tried to convince young people, and indeed, society as a whole, that utopia was already here, within their grasp in the form of psychotropic substances. Yet, despite the use of similar substances in some clubbing experiences, the clubbers appear aware that the worlds they inhabit through the practices and spacings of the dance floor are imaginary and temporary, yet no less meaningful for being so (Dyer, 1993). As the following extract from the first interview with Kim and Valerie suggests, clubbers can and do idealise their experiences.

BEN: So what is so good about it?
KIM: The whole atmosphere ...
VALERIE: ... it’s electric ...
KIM: ... everybody’s happy and just there to enjoy themselves ...
VALERIE: ... everybody’s up for it and they’re just loving it and it’s brilliant [uh-huh?].
KIM: The music used to be really really good there and it used to build really really well [uh-huh] and it used to take everybody sort of through the night on the same level and you’d be like “wa-heyyyyy” and like smiling and chatting to people that you’ve never met before or just the occasional nod on the dance-floor. I suppose Banana Split because that’s where I found that sort of club the first time that I went there and it was like “wow” [yeah] and I don’t suppose there are ... although they are a lot of clubs - they’re all going to be slightly different. We were just lucky to find one like that. We’ve been to a couple of others, like Fierce Child, and that and they were good but ...
VALERIE: ... we went to Elysium didn’t we ...
KIM: Yeah, and that was good, but that was way back in the early days and ...

Interestingly, accounts of utopia often propose ecstasy as the natural condition for the inhabitants - life is always like that (Laski, 1961). For example, in his book In the Days of the Comet, H. G. Wells (1906: 185-6) describes the feeling of “glowing moments” that can be “induced by histories and music and beautiful things, by heroic instances and splendid stories”.

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25 Interestingly, accounts of utopia often propose ecstasy as the natural condition for the inhabitants - life is always like that (Laski, 1961). For example, in his book In the Days of the Comet, H. G. Wells (1906: 185-6) describes the feeling of “glowing moments” that can be “induced by histories and music and beautiful things, by heroic instances and splendid stories”.
VALERIE: Yeah, and we didn't really know what we were looking for, yeah [uhm-hum]. We just went looking for a night out and the nights were just ... to this day I haven't seen nights like that in my life, and it was really a good club. I find that gay clubs tend to be a lot more open and everybody's up for it. *Banana Split's* supposed to be a gay night isn't it?

KIM: No, it's not, it's just ... I think it's just "open" as well.

VALERIE: Right, but *Elysium* was good although we didn't really know what we were there for - we were just there to go out [right].

KIM: And then you've got the music - we didn't really know what sort of music or ....

VALERIE: But you're not on your own though, ever. Someone's always smiling at you, talking to you, dancing at you, or whatever.

KIM: It's like you're at a party and you know everybody there, it's wicked.

BEN: What are the other clubbers like?

VALERIE: All sorts - the only thing that they have got in common is that they go out clubbing, transvestites, girls in their little skirts and their spangly tops, people in trendy club stuff, there's like people in workman's jackets and you've got all the lads in there in like dealer jackets, black men in their sunglasses. There's people that look twelve in there, yeah. I've seen a couple of really young people in their the last couple of times that I've been.

KIM: That's what's so good about *Banana Split* - it's not a trendy club, it's not a hard club, it's not a trance club - it's just lots of people having fun, that's all.²⁶

From this captivating exchange between Kim and Valerie I want to draw two points related to the present discussion. First, they spend the initial part of the exchange saying how incredible is the club, *Banana Split* - "I haven't seen nights like that in my life ...". The music and the people stand out as particularly important. Second, at my prompting, they then go on to discuss the constitution of the clubbing crowd at *Banana Split*, fleetingly surmising that it is a gay club, although it is not (and Kim points this out to Valerie) because of it's apparent "openness". Kim and Valerie then list the 'different types' of clubber that go to the club, suggesting that "the only thing that they have in common is that go out clubbing". My impression of *Banana Split*, gleaned over four different visits, was that the range of

²⁶ From the first interview with Kim and Valerie.
differing identities there was actually extremely narrow. My research diary for one night I spent there records at one point:

"RESEARCH DIARY EXTRACT: ... the clubbers were mostly between 17 and 20 years old, with very very few people over 23/24, I'd say. Probably slightly more men than women; almost zero range in ethnicity - practically all white ... as far as style was concerned, this was interesting: for the boys, jeans, and either trainers or boots (lots of [Ralph Lauren in evidence], short cropped hair; for the girls it seemed important to wear as little as possible, frequently little more than just underwear, and lots of boob tubes and short skirts, lots of fake tans, chests crammed into Wonderland. Overall, there seemed very little variation in style, dress, identity .... most were HAPPY, that's without the slightest doubt, but most were similar to each other, at least they seemed that way ...".

Building on this disjuncture in attempting to deepen understandings of how different identities constitute clubbing (or not), Goffman's (1961) shrewd analysis of social encounters can, once again, come to our aid - in this case, through his work on the role and nature of differences within a social gathering. In his discussions of the sociability of parties Goffman (1961: 75) suggests a party is, "by way of being a status blood bath, a leveling up and leveling down of all present, a mutual contamination and sacralization". However, Goffman qualifies this by noting how, in his analyses, those invited to parties were actually more similar than they might have imagined themselves to be, but that, at the same time, a "feeling of boredom, that nothing is going to happen" (ibid: 75) can occur when social encounters are entirely made up of those that know each other or are socially similar.

So we find that the euphoria function for a sociable occasion resides somewhere between little social difference and much social difference. A dissolution of some externally based social distance must be achieved, a penetration of ego-boundaries, but not to an extent that renders the participants fearful, threatened, or self-consciously concerned with what is happening socially. Too much potential loss and gain must be guarded against, as well as too little.

(Goffman, 1961: 75)
It seems that clubbers, in a similar fashion to Goffman's party-goers, might assume greater diversity within the dancing crowd than there actually may be. The notion that the dancing crowd can act as a source of group effervescence because of this supposed diversity, as alluded to in discussions of communitas, oneness and utopia in points made by O'Connor (1997), Spencer (1985), and Maffesoli (1995) is not entirely convincing. This is not to deny for a moment the validity and strength of the sentiments of inclusivity of which some clubbers talk. These clubbers do, it appears, experience sensations of openness, both resulting from the use of empathogens such as ecstasy (MDMA) and as an outcome of the general euphoria and elation that can characterise crowd-based oceanic experiences. However, rather than suggesting that because these sentiments were 'real' - they were experienced as such by some of the clubbers - then the clubbing crowds miraculously became the theoretically slack yet poetically evocative 'melting pots' of different identities that often cause one to cringe in certain accounts of the city, it might be more useful to return to the distinction between "sensibilities" and "reality" that Dyer (1993) makes in his discussion of utopia and entertainment.

Differentiating between a "utopianism [that] is contained in the feelings it embodies", and "models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Sir Thomas More and William Morris", Dyer (1993: 273) suggests that the utopianism present in various forms of entertainment - and his 'case' is the Hollywood musical - is "contained in the feelings it embodies" (ibid: 273). Dyer proposes that the Hollywood musical industry expresses the needs of those that come to enjoy the musicals - and especially their desire for a better and a different social order - firstly through "non-representational means" (ibid: 273).

27 On a related theme, Roebuck & Spray (1967) offer a fascinating insight into the actual constitution of what at first appears to be a highly differentiated social gathering in the context of a 1960s cocktail lounge. While acknowledging the cocktail lounge as providing "gratifications that may not be available in other spheres of life" (ibid: 395), Roebuck & Spray also note that "(p)opular myth has it that the cocktail lounge is a place where strangers pick up sexual partners ... [whereas] ... in fact the regular patrons of the lounge constituted a highly stable group of persons who considered the lounge to be an important center of activity" (ibid: 395). The parallels with the clubbing experience are striking. For a further examination of the class differences which existed within these 1960s cocktail lounges see Gottlieb (1957).

28 Darke (1996) highlights these sensations of openness in her discussion of how Protestant and Catholic young people in Belfast are experiencing an "unrivalled atmosphere of acceptance" on the dance floor: "A new forum for integration has sprung up from a surprising source - dance music. It is something that sets out with no political agenda, ends up with none, involves no political organisation, and which, despite many doing their best to prevent it, cuts across all divides [...] this is no deliberate attempt from some charitable authority to create a forum for exchange, but the free choice of individuals to enter into a common activity" (Darke, 1996: 5). Without wanting to appear too cynical, one wonders to what extent this "unity" does cross the sectarian divide. See (or hear) also United Through Rhythm (Radio 1, 7pm, 2 June 1996).
music, colour, movement - and secondly through presenting social relations between people more simply and directly than they exist in other aspects of lived experience.

Thus, in the musicals, the stars always seem “nicer than we are, characters more straightforward than people we know, situations more soluble than we encounter”, yet at the same time the nature of the non-representational “signs” that “we are much less used to talking about” are also important - the beauty of the melody, the movement of actors on the stage, the expressions on their faces, the speed and excitement of the performance, the smarter-than-usual dress of those co-present (ibid: 273). Together, these qualities distill the utopian sensibility that is experienced as ‘real’ by the audience for the duration of the performance. The feelings that these qualities elicit from the audience are, in one sense, what it would feel like to inhabit a ‘real’ world like that on the stage.

In a parallel fashion, we can begin to understand how the clearly powerful expression of playful vitality that it is possible to experience through clubbing can instill utopian notions within the clubbers’ imaginations and be based upon idealistic visions of the way they would like things to be (or know things not to be) in other aspects of their lives. Dyer (1993: 277) sees utopian “sensibilit[ies] as temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment”. In a similar way we can understand the notion of vitality through play and the apparent openness and inclusivity on the dance floor as an ephemeral relief from a society in which communality and trust are regularly swamped by individualism, communication with ‘strangers’ is seen as an inherently and increasingly ‘risky’ activity, work dominates play, and oppressive (as opposed to expressive) codes of social interaction seemingly cut through virtually every social space through which we live our lives. Lastly, what makes clubbing an even more powerful site for utopian sensibilities than the Hollywood musicals of Dyer’s analysis is that, in clubbing, the audience are also the actors - their utopian ‘worlds’ are of their own making.

‘it makes you more free’

Playful vitality is only one conception of the sense of inner resolve, pleasure, resilience and bodily control that can be experienced through the combination of very loud music.

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29 This important point is discussed further, in the context of broader notions of communality and ‘resistance’, in the next and final part of the thesis - Reflections.
30 From first interview with Bruce (see below).
dancing to that music within a dancing crowd, and the spatial and visual effects (the mediations) through which clubbing is produced as a sensory experience. The sensation of playful vitality is problematic to evoke for it is rarely articulated through direct speech by clubbers. For many it is the sub-conscious reason why they enjoy clubbing. For others who are more conscious of its value, attempts to describe and evoke the sensation, even for the most articulate of clubbers, often falter as they confront the limits of spoken language.

BEN: What does dancing 'do' for you then?
BRUCE: Dancing is your body's expression of that feeling - there's ummm ...
this is going to sound appalling, I'm sorry [we laugh] - there's a book by someone called Robert Liston called the *Salamander Tree* and it has a very sort of complex plot but it's set in the Second World War and it's all about an alchemist, umm [yeah] who ... the real end of alchemy is not to turn lead into gold, the real end to alchemy is to find the sort of key to life and the spirit that inhabits us all and ummm, in this book an alchemist actually finds this and once he's got it he wants to find a form in which to trap it and so what he does is he paints it and turns it into a paint and paints it and that actually takes me completely off ... [we laugh]. Well, hang on ... right .. in this book, there's this plot and the plot goes that umm ... during the war the Nazi's were doing this experiment - this is going to sound so fucking bad - in which they monitored the electric signals that were given off by people just day to day ....
BEN: [incredulously] Is this part of the story true?
BRUCE: I think it might have some sort of basis ... they just monitored the way in which human beings affect the atmosphere around them electrically and then they turned those electric signals into music, they sort of plotted them on a diagram and then they turned them into music, and they played that music back to people and they found that that music made them dance and that that dancing in turn gave off another set of signals [right] that was sort of the key to life, if you see what I mean ...
BEN: [slightly sarcastically] I know exactly what you're saying ...
BRUCE: And then that was turned into paint ... anyway ... it's really a very good book!! [yeah] ... so, dancing is doing that in a sense, it's releasing the way in which everything reacts around you through your body, and when you have house music played to you it sometimes taps into that and in combination with drugs as well it makes you more free and able to do that and that's just what
you do and it's tied in with sex and it's tied in with looking and the seething and so many people sort of mimicking people on the dance floor - you know you'll see someone doing a particularly good move and then someone next to you or you will try and do that move [yeah] and you can either do it better or you realise that it's an absolutely stupid thing to try and do with your body and .... So, it's all to do with that, and it's to do with sex as well - you see women dancing and you think 'bloody hell if I dance then they'll love me' and so it's all that knotted up together.

BEN: How does that music then work at home, in the car, on the Walkman?
BRUCE: Because it's redolent and it reminds you of those times when you have been out dancing to it. I think, I mean it would be very hard to get someone into house music who hadn't been clubbing because it's an experience that's first hand if you see what I mean, and what it does to you [ummm] so when you hear it at home it has its value and its ummmm ... worth as music and because music will always affect you and if it's good music it will always affect you like good music [yeah] but it also carries with it memories and you know sometimes expectations - I've had the experience where I've heard a really good song on the radio and thought I'd fucking love to hear that in a club because I know that on a good sound system and stuff it would do a lot more to me than if it was just there on the radio, but on the radio it sounds good anyway, so ummm ...

As was the case with many other clubber-interviewees, the feeling that Bruce actively thought about the nature and 'purpose' of his clubbing experiences on an everyday basis, and often in some depth, is communicated clearly in this short extract from the first interview with him. As an older clubber (aged 26), at least in terms of those that I talked to, the comparison of the stage at which he is now compared to a younger "teenage" mentality is perhaps predictable, yet still significant. Within the first paragraph he has made the connection between music and dancing, suggesting that the most pleasurable way to listen to (in his case) 'house' music is in fact to dance to it, for dancing expresses feelings and sentiments which are perhaps far more difficult, and even at times impossible, to express through a concentration upon verbal means alone. Some of the subtle techniques of the dance-floor are touched upon by Bruce here: the senses of looking, of mimicry, of seething crowds, of sexual interaction, or, at least sexual display. The lengthy anecdote about the Salamander Tree merely reinforces the sense of constant evaluation

\[31\] An extract from the first interview with Bruce.
and even philosophical investigation that goes into Bruce’s clubbing experiences both during and after the Night Out. In many ways, the simplicity of his story, re-presented here verbatim, evokes more sensuously, forcefully and poetically the nature and importance of clubbing for Bruce than any structural analysis of dance or Deleuzian-inspired notion of “musical molecules” or “threshold of disappearance” (Hemment, 1996) despite the seductive and provocative nature of these latter descriptions. Finally - and most powerfully of all - throughout the extract there is a palpable sense of the vitality that Bruce draws from his clubbing experiences.

* * * *

going with the flow

This Chapter has been about developing an understanding of the experiencing of playful vitality - an experience that, while tricky to pin down and certainly problematic to articulate verbally, appears to be centrally-placed in the clubbing experience. The conception of playful vitality suggests that conventional accounts of both play and resistance are inadequate in understandings of contemporary social formations. However, whilst I would agree with Gore (1997) in her suggestion that the description of rave as “a ritual of resistance” (Rietveld, 1993: 41) is a misnomer, I would also argue that her alternative conception, premised on the notion that this ‘ritual of resistance’ approach ignores “the explicitly apolitical stance of many of its participants” (Gore, 1997: 51), is also flawed. The flaw lies primarily in the simplistic construction of the political, a construction in which the political is inextricably linked to narrow preconceptions of the relationships between power and resistance, and between ‘authority’ and subordination.

The vitality that can be experienced through dancing takes the form of a sense of individual and communal euphoria, induced through the playful practices that constitute dancing as well as the specific contextual details that mark clubbing out as different from, say, line dancing, ballroom dancing, or even Disco (but that’s another story altogether!). The vitality experienced through dancing during clubbing is largely emotional in constitution, arises partly through the flux between self and the dancing crowd, and prioritises atmosphere, the affectual, proximity and tactility, and the here and now. The playful vitality of clubbing is communal, but unlike the communities ordained by politics, economics, and histories - in
short, by rationalism - the communalities of the dance floor are constituted by the instant and the ephemeral, by sociality, empathy and non-rationality.

Playful vitality, then, is not ‘resistance’ as conventionally theorised, especially with reference to so-called ‘youth cultures’ and their supposedly resistant practices - this is not a resistance to a parent or ‘dominant’ culture. Playful vitality is, rather, partly a celebration of the energy and euphoria that can be generated through being together, playing together and experiencing ‘others’ together. Yet playful vitality is also partly an escape attempt, a temporary relief from other facets and identifications of an individual clubber’s own life - their work, their past, their future, their worries. Playful vitality is found within a temporary world of the clubbers’ own construction in which the everyday is disrupted, the mundane is forgotten, and the ecstatic becomes possible.

[W]e have slowly come to appreciate that the realisation of resistance is not to be located in a prescribed future. It is already inscribed in the languages of appearances, on the multiple surfaces of the present-day world. There, re-working the relationships of power, resistance hides and dwells in the rites of religion, in the particular inflection of a musical cadence [...] it is where the familiar, the taken for granted, is turned around, acquires an unsuspected twist, and, in becoming temporarily unfamiliar, produces an unexpected, sometimes magical space ... [I]t is our dwelling in this mutable space, inhabiting its languages, cultivating and building them and thereby transforming them into particular places, that engenders our very sense of existence and discloses its possibilities.

(Chambers, 1994: 16)

higher than the sun
My brightest star’s my inner link,
let it guide me,
experience so innocent beats inside me,
hallucinogens can open me or untie me,
I’m drifting in a space, free of time -
I’ve found a higher state of grace, in my mind.
I have glimpsed, I have tasted,
fantastical places,
my soul, an oasis - higher than the sun.
(Primal Scream [1991] *Higher Than The Sun*)

Everything's entirely completely
wonderfully positive!
(Kim)

* * * *
Helen pushed her way out during the applause. She desired to be alone. The music had summed up to her all that had happened or could happen in her career. She read it as a tangible statement, which could never be superseded. The notes meant this and that to her, and they could have no other meaning, and life could have no other meaning. She pushed right out of the building, and walked slowly down the outside staircase, breathing the autumnal air, and then she strolled home.

oh, what a Night ...

Although we have left the various clubs the Night is not quite over. An important part of the clubbing experience is the period immediately following the clubbers leaving the club. This is often a time of physical and emotional exhaustion, yet this period of ‘afterglow’ can also be a time of and for reflections.

This final part of the Night blurs notions of theorisations and empirical detail. We first remain with the clubbers as they stay together and I present three stories of afterglow in which the clubbers concerned reflect upon their clubbing experiences. This period of reflection is central in consolidating, partly rationalising, and at times re-living the clubbing experiences just gone.

Secondly, in the light of the Night Out and in some ways following the clubbers’ reflections on their experiences, I re-address and reflect upon some of the issues raised in the three broad starting points which I sketched in the ‘Beginnings’. I make three points - about young people and resistance, about experiential consuming and communality, and about imaginations and betweeness.

I end by noting how clubbing, through its particular fusion of motion and emotion, is important in many different ways to those that enjoy its practices and spacings. This thesis represents an addition to our developing understandings of the practices and spacings that constitute clubbing.
1 Three Stories of Afterglow

The immediate post-clubbing period of the Night Out is often one of reflective recoveries - whether in small groups, or alone. While clubbers will have had unique experiences, it can be fun to establish common threads that have run through ‘their’ Nights. This can act to prolong the Night and somehow defy the temporal restrictions of licensing, the spatial restrictions of the venue closing, and the general march of time toward the notion of ‘morning’, even though dawn itself may have passed some hours previously. Other clubbers prefer to talk about and reflect upon the Night, in some way beginning to order the chaos of which they have been a part just a short time before. Although not part of the clubbing experience in the narrow sense, in that they do not usually occur within the club, these processes and practices of reflection and the attempts at interpretation and understanding that can occur in the immediate post-clubbing come-down, afterglow or ‘chill-out’ period perform an important role for the clubbers. This stage of the Night thus represents a vital transitional phase between the Night Out and the wider lives and other identifications of the clubbers.

Some of the post-clubbing activities and reflections of three clubbers or groups of clubbers have been selected in outlining the important yet varied nature of this period of ‘afterglow’. While each clearly differs, similar sentiments and attitudes - towards the Night just gone, towards the week or days ahead, toward each other and toward themselves - are recurring features. Three of the themes that arise in slightly varying form throughout the following stories are: the notion of a ‘world of clubbing’ opposed to a ‘normal’ or ‘straight world’; the notion of the spaces and spacings of clubbing opposed to the spaces and spacings of other forms of public spaces; and, the contrasting of clubbing with other facets of the clubbers’ lives. I return to these themes after the stories.

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1 I use the term ‘afterglow’ in connection with the oceanic experience after Laski (1961).
2 I will refer to these complex practices and spacings of this post-clubbing period in only brief detail for, as is the case with the pre-clubbing ‘rituals’ of scoring drugs, shopping for clothes and meeting in bars, a full engagement is beyond the confines of the current project. A recent short film called “Coming Down” (1997) and the accompanying soundtrack - both of which are directed and produced by Matt Winn - beautifully captures the mixture of reflection, excitement, euphoria, exhaustion, denial and the subtly different forms of group interaction and individuation which can characterise this period of the Night. Also, see further points, below, under “other lives, other identifications - clubbing in the city”.
3 These three examples have been selected not as ‘typical’ of other forms but as being different from each other and thus providing an indication of the scope and variety of clubbers’ preferred practices and spacings.
Kim, Valerie and John - holding on to the Night?

Kim, Valerie and John live in outer London, on the border of Kent. For them, the post-clubbing period is about reflection, recovery, sharing their experiences, and engaging in quite different forms of interaction to those of clubbing. This period is also dominated by travel and the impulse to get home - to find comfort - which is a forty minute train journey away.

BEN: What happens after you leave the club?

JOHN: Uh ... things like going to other clubs ... I mean I've only been to Vibrance twice, three times now - that's Gray's Inn Road. I don't know, you know that you can carry it on afterwards - or you can go out Sunday night or you can go out - you can go out any time you like. It's not just stretching it out, it's the fact that you can take your pick - like in Brighton, you want to go out late you go to the Zap, you go to London you can go to fucking anywhere - it's going to be open until four or five or six, there's always going to be somewhere to go. There's going to be a lot of people about going to these places [right] as well. Like walking through Leicester Square at three o'clock in the morning there's going to be millions of people everywhere. It blows me away that does. I .... I find it ... I was going to say exciting, it ... it's the fact ... it's dark, it's late at night, it's capturing the time that everyone else is asleep or .... [yeah] ... It's almost during the day, y'know, you can walk through Trafalgar Square, or whatever and you're just another person, but at night, there's people everywhere like you and it's YOU'RE place, your time.4

It is clear that the quality of the Night Out as a special or extraordinary experience does not abruptly finish with John's exit from the club. For John, and for Kim and Valerie, with whom he often goes out, clubbing is very much about travelling to and from the club as well as his time actually in the club. Having written off the local 'small-town' clubs these three and other friends of theirs from their town travel regularly to clubs in Brighton and in central London. The relative absence of the restrictions of club licensing hours in London is something that John values, partly because it means that he does not have to go home unless he wants to. This notion of John being in charge of himself - of the night-time spaces of London having a special aura of freedom and alterity that the day-time spaces seem to lack - comes through strongly towards the end of the extract. The inherent vitality of

4 An extract from the second interview with John (who often goes clubbing with Kim and Valerie).
clubbing - the blend of dancing, music, crowds, and friends - is experienced through a different lens once John leaves the club: late-night London appears to 'belong' to him - it is his place and his time - and he decides what he wants to do, where, how and with whom.

Perhaps for the first time since they went into the club many hours previously, the group are now all together at once and can talk to each other in a group context. Thus, in addition to taking place against the backdrop of travelling, this post-clubbing period is also one of catching up and finding out about others' nights. It is a period of swapping stories of musical and perhaps chemical highs and lows, of how the Night just gone compares to others in the past, of who they have met, what they thought of the DJs and the atmosphere, of how they feel right now, what they want to do now, and where they want to go. The Night is by no means over as a 'Night' for Kim and Valerie (see below), although much of what remains of it will be set in one of their sitting rooms. For Kim and Valerie this continuation is inevitable because, at least on the occasions on which I accompanied them, they have taken ecstasy (MDMA). Sleep would be difficult if not impossible for perhaps another eight or ten hours, regardless of how much energy they might have expended on the dance floor. While they are no longer experiencing the ecstatic states that they talked about earlier, the effects of the drug upon them persist. Their perceptions of - and thus their relationships to - their surroundings and their experiences of themselves and of others, remain altered. Interactions between them are marked by a continuing openness and a closeness which, although obviously based partly within their pre-existing friendship, is magnified through both the shared experience of the Night Out and the continuing empathic effects of the drug ecstasy (MDMA) on their 'self-defences'.

It should again be emphasised that by no means all clubbing experiences involve a period of afterglow of precisely this nature. For example, most of the people in Laski's study group (1961: 62) “barely interpreted [their experiences] at all”, although most of their experiences were by contrast experienced alone. Indeed, it bears repeating here that many clubbers, including those who have taken drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) during the

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5 Marghanita Laski (1961: 58) is careful to point out how an ecstatic state will often extend beyond the ’tumescence and discharge’ of the ecstasy itself, suggesting that such a state “does often occur after an ecstatic moment, lasting up to an hour or so, sometimes more, sometimes less, and in this period the ecstatic moment may be realized, appreciated, interpreted, while the ecstatic recovers from the shock of the ecstatic moment”. It is during this period, adds Laski, that the person comes to appreciate “what it was he [sic] believed he had felt during the sense-disordered moment of ecstasy” (ibid: 60). It is not in the ‘heat of the moment’ that a careful consideration and interpretation of the clubber’s experience is attempted (or is possible) but rather in the post-clubbing period of reflection and come-down.
Night Out, will not have experienced any ecstatic or oceanic states whatsoever. In any case, and related to this first qualification, it should be noted that the oceanic and ecstatic experiences are not pre-conditions for reflection but rather simply represent a specific route into its practices; clubbers who have not had oceanic experiences may also engage in processes of reflection. In the cases of Kim, Valerie and John, the 'togetherness' of the Night, which acts as a foundation for these reflections, is usually carried forward deep into the following day.

KIM: Well, we all leave together, obviously, and get a train or taxi. Generally the next day is spent together.

VALERIE: This is what happens, right. We leave Banana Split and we’re all bollocksed and we generally get a cab back to Dartford and you get a cab driver who will either do your head in or they will ... [laugh] ...

KIM: ... sometimes when we’ve got a train and we’ve got a cab from Dartford, that’s really done our head in because the cab drivers in Dartford are just too straight - they haven’t got a clue.

BEN: Whose place do you go to when you get back?

KIM: My place .... usually drop another bit, usually a half or just a quarter, partly to help wind down, or finish the night off a bit so it’s not over too suddenly.

VALERIE: I prefer not to do any more when I get in and just to have a smoke.

KIM: .... I mean part of it is the staying awake and talking about it and we’ll sit and have a smoke and argue about who’s having to make the tea [laugh]. We listen to lots of music. From there it’ll kind of drift on .... you’ve had an excellent night, you feel physically tired but in a nice way - you’ve had a good night.

VALERIE: When we sit there we talk about all the people that we’ve met, all the things, all the hallucinations we’ve seen, how many times we went to the toilet, that sort of thing!

I want to highlight just three points from this extract which are of interest in further developing an understanding of the processes of reflection which constitute an important final chapter in Kim and Valerie’s Night Out. First, there is the notion that ‘others just don’t

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6 As I intimated earlier, a full-scale, intensive study of the psychological and social nature of clubbing would be needed in order to make any meaningful contention regarding the proportion of clubbers experiencing ecstatic or oceanic states.

7 An extract from the second interview with Kim and Valerie.
understand’, that, for Kim and Valerie, what they have experienced is beyond description or translation unless you were there. This comes across strongly in their description of the taxi drivers who, it seems, “don’t understand” and “haven’t got a clue” because they are from Dartford and not from London, rather than because they are taxi drivers. Second, the Night clearly continues as a special experience having left the club. More drugs can be taken at home to stretch the Night into the next day so “it’s not over too suddenly”, to deny the responsibilities of daytime, and the jobs and other routines which daytime represents. This further taking of small amounts of drugs - and especially the smoking of cannabis - may also aid the physiological processes of ‘coming down’ as the clubbers drift back into their lives outside of clubbing. Third, the post-club come down is used to reflect about the complete range of events and minutiae that together constitute the Night, from the smallest details (who went to the loo most) to the most personal and emotional accounts of, for example, hallucinations. Their thoughts are very much more on what has just been, as opposed to the week to come.

Antonio - collusion and reflection

We stumble out of the club at around 3ish - Soho is packed with people, crowding the pavements and roads, looking and laughing - everyone appears happy. Some are in groups, bustling their way along noisily - others are alone, silent and walking purposefully, on their way ... Cars crawl down narrow streets which are already impossibly full with cars, Vespas, people, thronging crowds. This wasn’t ‘late night’ for Soho - the night had hardly started.

Home was, stressed Antonio, completely out of the question - the post-clubbing coffee at Bar Espana is, I learn, an institution that had to be observed. Yet this isn’t so much about the coffee itself, as where and the way in which the coffee is consumed. It’s a ‘scene-thing’: it’s about seeing and being seen, about looking at and being amongst the cool people who are having a great time and thus being cool yourself just by associating with them, just by being there. Okay, you can get a coffee around the corner for £1 and have a seat, but it’s not cool. Here you may pay 50% more but you

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8 This second story is extracted from the entry in my research diary for this Night, spent with Antonio and two of his friends.
get 100% more cachet. *Bar Espana* was about the public display of coolness, about stretching the night out, saying that tomorrow doesn’t matter - tonight is all there is. It’s the here and now of inside the club again but this time outside of the club. The crowd, though relatively varied in constitution, are together, bound by caffeine and the cheesy Italian technopop that thumps through the crowded bar.

Everywhere you look in *Bar Espana*, open twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, are mirrors, TVs and coffee. One of the places most ill-suited to accommodate large numbers of people that I have ever come across, harbours one of the most hyped-up coffee-drinking crowds I have ever seen. It feels European, despite the distinctly un-Euro chill in the air, and, as my mind flicks back across the other clubbing come downs that I have endured in the course of this business, I feel lucky right now. I suppose I feel so good because I know that, while this isn’t really me either - I don’t wear this stuff usually, and I’m usually tucked up in bed by now - here I am laughing and even forgetting why I’m here. For a second, I don’t feel out of place at all.

The four of us chat about the Night just gone, laughing about the atmosphere which was more like that of a cocktail or cabaret bar than a club - the venue is an ‘adult’ revue bar during the day - about the bizarre Russian accordionist, Igor Oetkin, playing a version of *Fernando*, by Abba, and the immaculately dressed Count Indigo with his ridiculous cover version of cult-60s classic *Woman In Love*, about the G&T’s at £3.50 a whack, about my huge tie, Tim’s ‘The Saint’ suit, and the leggy transvestite drinks waiters/waitresses, about Jonny Del Rio performing a live cover of Neil Diamond’s *Money Talks*. It may not have been a dance club but it managed to completely transport us to another time and space, although being cynical, after paying seven quid for that kind of kitsch I think one’s imagination is primed for overtime. Prompted by the knowledge that I am supposed to be doing a thesis on it and the notion that they thus want to help me the best they can - they say they’re jealous but I don’t believe them - us four chat about the Night and come up with the idea that the whole thing was essentially a collusion, a staged event that relies on everyone for its success, from the people up on stage to us dressed for the occasion and
willing to suspend our sense of disbelief for a few hours, and pay hotel
prices for drinks. And I get thinking and connect that with what happens in
other clubs, which are also about collusion and the suspension of disbelief,
although the mode may be different, the stage less obvious, the distinction
between producers and consumers more blurred.

We sit around for a while, talking about how long we will go on coming out
for these types of evening, wondering how long we will belong here, and
how long we will keep up this kind of performance. Are we getting too old?

Bruce - holding on ...

Reflections are often based upon and include recollections of previous Nights Out. These
reflections may veer toward thinking about the future, about their place within clubbing
cultures and upon how long they see themselves continuing to go clubbing in the way that
they presently do. This latter point is especially evident with older or more experienced
clubbers.

BEN: Well, how old are the others?
BRUCE: .. oh let's see, they're roughly sort of my age, in that they're 24, 25,
26 up to sort of mid-thirties, and when I e-mailed you something I mentioned
this in that I think there is very much a whole generation of people who started
clubbing when I did and even before who don’t want to grow out of it and don’t
want it to stop. I was going out with someone who was 33 and she went
clubbing and so did all of her friends you know and ... so there are a lot of older
groups going ... I'm sure that a lot of people my age have now got to a stage
like me where they have a regular thing that they go to and that they're happy
with and their contemporaries go as well and it is subsequently an older scene
and it will continue to go that way until we're like 50 and then God knows
what will happen ...

BEN: So how does the clubbing thing fit in with your wider life, especially
what you're doing at the moment [trainee documentary film producer]?
BRUCE: A lot of it's in the open - obviously in my immediate peer group
there's someone there who goes clubbing anyway and there's someone else who
goes clubbing quite a bit and so we talk about it quite a lot and that's an
obvious instant thing that we’ve got in common [yeah] and a sort of mutual subject that you can discuss. Umm, as for the people that I work for, I obviously wouldn’t tell someone in a very senior position that I had a great E at the weekend, however ... I’m working on something at the moment and the producer’s about 29 and doesn’t go clubbing but was asking me about it before and I told him and I don’t feel I’d be in jeopardy because I’ve told him because he’s of a similar age and knows that this goes on and can see that it doesn’t rule my life. However it has weaved its ways into my work in that I’ve made one film about clubbing - I would like to make more and you know I very much would like the two things to join up like that because I’m interested in clubbing more than just because I like clubbing. I’m not a DJ, I can’t mix.

BEN: What’s the drive behind the desire to make another film?

BRUCE: It’s definitely driven by the lack of something there - if there were a weight of films, all about clubbing and they were very good then I would probably be looking for another subject. It’s very much I think that I can possibly say something about clubbing that would ... that hasn’t been said before or could be said very well. At the same time I’m not a DJ and I don’t particularly want to put club nights on, and I enjoy going to a club, and that’s what I want to reflect. I wouldn’t want to do clubs myself but a lot of people that I know have done that and they’ve thought, “I’m going to put a night on or I’m going to make music”. I’m not musical in the sense that I haven’t got that side to me so ....

BEN: Is this work any form of a quest for answers for yourself?

BRUCE: Not really because I think I know why I go clubbing and I know why I like it.

BEN: Do you feel then that you know what’s happening in others’ minds?

BRUCE: I think I know how my friends feel about it because I think that they feel very similar to me and I know that some of them feel stronger about it because they have different links with it but I know, yeah, I think I know the position that it holds within my peer group, definitely. And that’s tied up again with this thing about it not being a political statement in the sense that we were saying. It’s something that you do and you get on with [yeah]. If that’s what it is then that’s fine - there’s no problem about that.9

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9 An extract from my first interview with Bruce.
During this conversation with Bruce it became clear that his relationship to clubbing went further than just being ‘something for the weekend’. For Bruce, clubbing had started to intersect with aspects of his work as a trainee film producer. Within this extract, there is a sense that clubbing is a form of identification for Bruce which extends beyond the physicality of the club itself. Not only is clubbing an experience through which he and his friends are electively and affectually bound together, but it is also a form of shared tie-in with others whom he does not know so well, like his workmate - a “mutual subject of discussion”.

As I suggested earlier, post-clubbing reflections and recoveries are often bound up with a broadly common set of concerns, thoughts and sensations which arise from the socio-spatial disjunctures experienced by the clubbers on leaving the clubs. First, in all three stories the clubber narrating compares and contrasts notions of the clubbing world from which they have just emerged with the ‘straight’ or ‘normal’ world into which they’ve stumbled. For Kim and Valerie the discrepancy of this experience is marked socially and spatially - the taxi driver in Dartford was “just too straight” and did not “have a clue”. In contrast, in my narration of the aftermath of my Night with Antonio, I was struck instead by how far the suspension of disbelief - some of the codes, styles and atmosphere from the inside the club - was prolonged spatially, temporally, and socially, into the city outside the club. This clubbing / straight contrast clearly becomes blurred when (for example, in the case of Kim and Valerie, and in a different way for Antonio and I) some of the spacings and practices of clubbing - loud music, drug use, crowds, night-time - were juxtaposed with some of the structurings of the world ‘outside’ clubbing. For Kim and Valerie this juxtaposition occurred in terms of their domestic space, for me it occurred in terms of the ‘city’.

Second, clubbing seems to somehow constitute a qualitatively different form, experience or ‘mode’ of social space (privatised, enclosed, safe) than the world ‘outside’ (public, open, dangerous or ‘other’). John is especially struck by this: “it’s your place and it’s YOUR time”. Also struck, although in more subtle ways, is Bruce who almost seems to reflect upon clubbing as a secret life - “it’s something that you do and you get on with it”- yet one through which empathy can be generated with others outside of clubbing.

A third theme encompasses both these previous points and this is the tension between the clubbers’ experience of clubbing and the clubbers’ lives more broadly. Bruce’s clubbing world is now important enough to be overflowing into his career, and yet he does not see
this as a problem but rather as an opportunity: “I think I can say something about clubbing”. For John, the anonymity of his everyday experience of Trafalgar Square is contrasted with a different experience of this anonymity - not as individualising from, but as belonging to - that characterises his everynight experiences of the Square. Finally, in my role as diarist for the Night spent with Antonio and friends, I noted the tension between my clubbing persona and my researcher persona - a tension which the promptings and questions of those I was with served only to magnify.

other lives, other identifications - clubbing in the city

These points about other identifications within the clubber’s lives and the placing of clubbing within the social life of the contemporary city illuminates what I perceive to be the major theoretical limitation of the thesis, and an area into which future work could fruitfully contribute. With only a small number of exceptions - for example, Bruce’s career, above, and the story of Seb, below - the clubbers whom I interviewed did not spend any significant time discussing their lives beyond clubbing, their jobs, background, and other social interests. This absence was due in part to the restrictions of time and my interest in the practices constituting clubbing itself. However, a third interview concentrating solely upon the clubbers’ lives outside of clubbing, and the associated relationships between these ‘other’ lives and clubbing, would undoubtedly have proved extremely interesting in terms of contextualising emerging notions of identifications, ‘self-resistance’, and personal and group vitality.

SEB: It’s strange but ... clubbing - and in that I mean clothes, music, drugs whatever - is such an essential part of my life, it is the main part of my life [uh-huh] that I have to think of it in such a broad context. It’s difficult for me to talk outside of what I know and this is what I know - if I was into football or sport or if I was doing amateur dramatics it would be the same, but this is what I do. Now, some people associate clubbing with being a bit shallow [uh-huh] and the drug culture ... and if that’s all I can talk about then I really can’t be up to much, but, there’s much more to it than that, and you can also tell from me that that’s the case ... I mean for example ... there’s more to me, like I’m 26, you know that, ummm ... I don’t see myself doing what I’m doing now when I’m 42, and I think right now I think I’d be sad if I was still doing that because I have traditional ambitions and values and obviously the priority is to get a job
and secure that job, I want to be married, I want a family, I want to do that kind of thing, when it’s right ... when it falls into place.\textsuperscript{10}

Significantly, Seb was my last clubber-interviewee. By this stage in the research process (late-August 1996) I had started to mentally refine my notion of playful vitality and more explicitly search for connections between different facets of clubbers’ lives. My belated interest in the lives of clubbers beyond clubbing just happened to coincide with my Night Out and interviews with Seb, who had perhaps the most to say on these matters anyway. Aside from the broadest of biographical snapshots which I compiled mostly during our first meeting (see Appendix 1), the individuals whom I interviewed and with whom I accompanied clubbing presented themselves to me - and are thus largely understood - as ‘clubbers’. Except in very few cases - and Seb’s narration, above, was the most evocative - clubbers did not appear keen to talk about less pleasurable or differently demanding facets of their lives, such as work, their personal lives, or their hopes for the future, while they were clubbing or talking about clubbing. This is perhaps not surprising - I did not discuss other aspects of my life with them either.

At the same time, it became gradually more clear throughout the thesis that the clubbing identification, while and partly because experienced as different from many other facets of the clubbers’ everyday lives, was inextricably linked to these other facets or identifications and in certain cases constituted a reaction against them. This is a point made eloquently by Hollows & Milestone (1998: 96) in their discussion of the historical and geographical development of ‘Northern Soul’ music in northern England: “members of musical scenes are not simply ‘teds’, ‘mods’, ‘punks’ or ‘northern soulies’, but also mothers, sons, husbands and workers”. A priority for future work on clubbing would therefore seem to be the re-placement of the clubbing experience which I have attempted to set out in some detail into a broader and equally subtly nuanced understanding of the clubbers’ everyday lives. These other identifications are especially important in furthering understandings of the development of playful vitality, and should not be ignored nor glossed over.

One of these ‘other’ identifications which has in most respects remained just beyond the experiences of the necessarily narrow focus of the Night Out is the city. In Chapter One I discussed the notion of clubbing as partly resulting from the need for belongings in the contemporary city - the city of fleeting encounters with different others who are mostly strangers. Yet, it has only been in this final chapter of the Night Out in the stories of

\textsuperscript{10} From first interview with Seb.
‘afterglow’ that I presented above that the city has re-emerged to any significant extent. To put it another way, it is only now that the clubbers have again found themselves back in the city in which they began.

Although my interest in this thesis has been upon the clubbing experience itself, the Night Out is clearly both of such critical importance to many young people and very much an urban phenomenon that it poses significant questions about our understandings of the social life of the city more generally. In particular, the Night Out forces us to question ‘which city’, ‘whose city’ or ‘whose cultures of the city’ researchers of contemporary urban living choose to illuminate, for clubbing remains largely unstudied. As I have intimated throughout the Night, there are numerous reasons for this apparent absence of interest: clubbing is of the night, of darkness, of the shadows; the music is often constructed as meaningless, lyricless, and even senseless; the dancing that is so central to clubbing is frequently represented as primitive, carnal, and not worthy of serious study in any case; the moments of ecstasy that can, on occasion, characterise the clubbing experience and that appear to be able to engender such vitality within those that experience them, are seemingly even less worthy of study than the dancing practices of the clubbers.

Furthermore, the social researcher is frequently ill-equipped (or too old!) for forays into what is often perceived to be the “ante room to hell” (Burke, 1941: v).

However, what Finnegan (1989) might refer to as these ‘hidden cultures of clubbing’ are constitutive of the city in the same way as the equally complex but somehow, for the researcher, more accessible, more respectable and more relevant city of working nine-to-five, of transport networks and environmental problems, of tourism and tradition, of architecture and planning, and of shopping and commerce. Paralleling de Certeau’s (1984) contrasting of an ideal or plan of the city versus an experience of walking in the city, future studies might re-place clubbing not only back into the other identifications and personae of the clubbers concerned but especially back into the social life and spaces of the city. Together with the more formal understandings of city life there exist countless imaginations of the city which are imperceptibly fused to constitute what de Certeau (1984: 107) calls the “sieve-order” of the city - the city of everyday and everynight life. Deepening our understandings of the dark areas between the grids that form this “sieve” would appear to be a potentially tricky yet conceptually crucial process, and one which I hope I have at least signposted through this study.
reflecting upon the Night Out

While significant, the rather nebulous conception which I have developed of how clubbing intersects with the wider lives of the clubbers and the city in which they live and work does not detract from the powerful theoretical and conceptual resonance of the Night Out itself. Just as the clubbers engage in various practices of reflection about the Night just gone, so I, in terms of this thesis and my many Nights Out which have formed part of it, want to reflect on where the Night has taken us and how we might progress and deepen an evolving understanding of clubbing in terms of the starting points I set out in the 'Beginnings'.

* * * *

2 Playing — Consuming — Fluxing

Clubbing matters to many young people. There is little stylistic or musical unity across the cultures of clubbing, and the already countless genres of clubbing continue to fragment and multiply. Yet for those that enjoy clubbing it continues to constitute one source of vitality and an important form of self-expression within their wider lives, whatever the beats or other clubbers involved. Theorists and academics interested in clubbing cultures have begun to recognise this significance of clubbing for young people and - with varying degrees of success - have attempted to present understandings of how and why the practices and spacings of clubbing matter to the clubbers. Remarkably few attempts have managed to evoke the interactional complexity, the communality, the technical and stylistic demands and the emotional and imaginative constitution of clubbing. Ethnographies of clubbing are especially scarce.

It is no surprise that the experiences of the Night Out which we have just traced provoke many more questions than they provide answers - this is not something of which to be wary if one is searching for textured understandings as opposed to notions of 'truth'. However, in terms of our understandings of clubbing for eighteen clubbers in London during the mid-1990s it is possible to make a number of connections with and progressions from the 'starting points' outlined in the 'Beginnings', as well as drawing together a number of themes which subsequently cut through the four chapters of the Night Out.
Therefore, I now make three clearly related, overlapping, but as I present them distinct sets of points which spin out of the Night Out. First, I address issues relating to understandings of young people having fun. I propose that the playful vitality experienced through clubbing is no less significant to the lives of those who experience it than, for example, the so-called 'resistance' experienced and expressed by 'youth cultures' and student movements in the late-1960s. Second, I return explicitly to debates and questions about the relationships between identities, identifications and the practices and spacings of consuming as I further open out a conception of 'experiential consuming'. Third, I revisit discussions about betweeness and the understandings of diversity which I began to critique in the previous chapter, highlighting the imaginative construction of clubbing as otherworldly. I end by proposing that this thesis has begun to map the ecstatic geographies of which clubbing is largely constituted.

(i) young people, fun, and vitality

Energy is eternal delight!

First and most importantly, 'play' is implicated in the everyday lives of people in ways that have not been given adequate recognition in existing literatures (Thrift, 1997). Far from being a meaningless and peripheral activity which academics largely treat either as an 'optional extra' or - and even worse - as not mattering at all, play, in this case in the form of clubbing, can be seen to constitute an important context of and for sociality in the lives of many young people. For some of the clubbers to whom I talked and with whom I went out, clubbing was currently the most important aspect of their personality, impacting upon their work both directly (in the case of Bruce) and indirectly (in the case of Seb). Play, then, appears to be about far more than simple notions of 'pleasure' or 'recreation'. Play is also tied up with further and more complex notions of identity and identifications, and of vitality.

Second, previous understandings of young people and their so-called 'sub-cultures' have often conflated notions of shared appearance, and especially of similar attire or shared tastes in music, with those of identification and (thus) possible subversion. Theorisations premised upon the crude use of semiotics are particularly guilty in this respect (Hebdige, 1979). Many understandings of the ways in which young people have fun - in groups and individually - appear to prefer a distanciated understanding, from afar, from above, and
usually from outside. Much less has been written about the detailed practices and spacings through which this playing is actually comprised. The practical techniques through which young people differentiate themselves from - and thus simultaneously affiliate themselves with - others, and from and with other groups during group encounters have been neglected or crudely over-simplified. These practical techniques and their spacings deserve further recognition and a more detailed understanding.

The Night Out infers the centrality to the clubbing experience of clubbers’ understandings of the rhythms, beats and lyrics of music, and their expression of these understandings particularly through the use of their own bodies in dancing (Frith, 1996; Hanna, 1987). Not only does music act to intensify the emotional and imaginative impacts of being within the clubbing crowd in a manner proxemically and sensorially different to most if not all other facets of their everyday lives, but, partly through these processes of intensification and their alternate nature, the music can also act as a focus for an identification, almost in a totemic fashion (Hetherington, 1996; Maffesoli, 1995). It is thus less the music itself than the clubbers’ responses to that music - their understandings of it - which are important. The complex interactional spacings - the mediations, territorialisations, bodily practices and emotional resonances - that together constitute dancing add to the identificatory power that the clubbing crowd can exert upon individuals. The consuming of empathogenic ‘dance drugs’ such as ecstasy (MDMA) appears to further magnify these sensations of identification.

Through its privileging of music and dancing, clubbing demonstrates how young people’s social identifications go way beyond simplistic notions of clothing and even style. Clubbing is constituted through a complex inter-weaving of continually unfolding practices, spacings and timings which, beyond a certain stage - and always less for some than for others - have less to do with distinction and the forging of notions of individuality and perhaps more to do with belongings and the establishment of identifications (Crossley, 1995; Goffman, 1963).

Third, and taking up these points about vitality and identifications, clubbing may not represent ‘resistance’ in the terms that Tariq Ali (1998) means it (see also Ali & Watkins, 1998). Yet this general lack of engagement with Politics does not infer - and must not be confused nor conflated with - a general lack of engagement with ‘the political’ (Pile, 1997); I would strongly contest Ali’s (1998: 15) assertion that today’s youth is “dumbed down”. Clubbing may not change the world in the sense that previous ‘youth movements’
attempted (and there is scant evidence that any of these movements succeeded), but clubbing certainly temporarily but significantly alters the social worlds of those that enjoy it. Furthermore, the alternate interactional orderings through which clubbing is constituted do impact upon the identities of the clubbers concerned, as well as being - by definition, through their very preference for clubbing - important identificatory experiences. The ‘different form of revolution’ which clubbing can represent for some is constituted through the immanent vitality of the crowd and the strong emphasis upon the ‘here and now’, through the entwined notions of movement and emotion, and especially upon the imaginative spaces opened out through excessive sensory stimulation.

In this sense, clubbing seems to be much less about rather rigid conceptions of ‘resistance’ and notions of authority that must be tirelessly battled and fought, and more about notions of gaining ‘strength to go on’ through the sharing of a crowd ethos, about fluxing between notions of (egocentric) identities and of (lococentric) identifications, and about finding a space in which - even if just for a fleeting instant - to forget oneself (Maffesoli, 1995; Pile, 1997). Pitched in the terms of the existing debates, the Night Out suggests that if clubbers are ‘resisting’ anything (and this is by no means clear) then it may be other aspects of their own lives - aspects in which the experiencing of ‘flow’ is more problematic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a), the ‘burden of identity’ is less easily (and/or less beneficially) eluded (Bauman, 1995b), and the ecstasies of this unburdening - the ‘going beyond’ of the self - are less powerfully experienced, if at all (Laski, 1961; 1980).

(ii) experiential consuming

[... when places of consumption themselves evoke the feeling that they are unreal, magical, impermanent, and inauthentic, then the very grounds for experiencing reality are shaken.]

(Sack, 1992: 4)

Clubbing is an example of experiential consuming - a form of consuming in which nothing material is ‘taken home’ but which can nevertheless produce important memories, emotional experiences and imaginaries (remembered imaginations) that can be sources of

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11 For counter-arguments to this notion of inwardly-directed politicisation see McKay (1996); he argues that in rave, traveller cultures, eco-protest, and Reclaim the Streets, Britain has contemporary versions of the 1960s “culture of resistance” (ibid: 6), although (after Redhead [1993] and Rietveld [1993]) McKay does question the extent to which a political critique is posed by rave. For further discussion of traveller cultures as a form of social movement, see Hetherington (1996; 1998).
identification and thus of vitality. In narrow terms, the product of clubbing - what clubbers ‘purchase’ - can be understood to be the imaginative and emotional spaces that clubbing provides. These spaces are used by clubbers to think, to reflect upon oneself and one’s life, but also to experience others (and ‘otherness’) in a form unlike that possible in most other social spaces of everyday life, and to inhabit a world which exists in the uncertain space between imagination and performance. The intensity of the clubbing crowd and the elective and affective identifications which can spin out of this intensity mark out the clubbing crowd as qualitatively different from many other forms of group togetherness.

Firstly, the ways in which the clubbing experience is synchronously produced and consumed by the clubbers through a fusion of bodily practices, emotions and imaginations is as important as what it is that they are consuming. Thus, the clubbers’ evocations and descriptions of techniques, skills, notions of competency, belonging, and identification, and the sensations of freedom and of inhabiting an alternate, and in part imagined, world are partly what is being consumed in the clubbing experience (and I discuss this further below).

Secondly, it follows that theorisations of consuming which privilege moments of purchase alone are completely inadequate in providing effective understandings of clubbing. They provide only a meaningless ‘snapshot’ of purchase, little context for that purchase in terms of the processes involved prior and subsequent to that purchase, and reduce consuming choices to a prescribed and inflexible lifestyle affiliation. Clubbing is experienced through on-going practices rather than as a fixed ‘state’ which is simply inhabited. Clubbing is experienced through unfolding processes and negotiations rather than through simple notions of possessed properties. In being crowd-based, clubbing is experienced through continual dialogues and interactions, as opposed to soliloquies and solos. Clubbing is better evoked as a dynamic process of consuming rather than a fixed consumption relation, moment or state. Clubbing does not ‘happen’ but is experienced.

Third, while at first glance apparently chaotic and without ‘rules’, clubbing is actually heavily imbued with processes and practices of social and spatial ordering. These geographies of clubbing are never fixed but rather always in a process of becoming; they are also always open to practices of subversion and re-negotiation. This ordering is present in clubbing in the form of the sociality that runs through and underpins social life more generally: the intricacies of style(s), the hierarchies of ‘coolness’, techniques of dancing, and the spacings of all the constitutive elements and moments of the Night - the door and the dance floor, to give just two examples. Furthermore, it appears that, certainly for some
women, this sociality of clubbing offers a more attractive, less intimidatory and potentially more liberatory experience than many broadly similar experiences such as 'pubbing'.

Fourthly, and related to this point about sociality, conceptualisations of the processes and spacings constituting consuming crowds - especially those of the shopping throng and those involving sports or music fandom\textsuperscript{12} - are beginning to become more prominent. However, understandings of how consumers actively produce - or at least assist in the production of - the experience which they simultaneously consume remain limited and sketchy. The Night Out provides an example of how the different clubbing experiences of the clubbers are both selected and constituted through the tensions between notions of belongings and notions of differentiation. The rules, customs and rituals that together constitute the sociality of clubbing and provide the foundations for the practices of belongings and distinctions are also structured through spatial (and thus also temporal) orderings. This is most clearly exemplified in the case of dancing.

Fifthly, these intricate social-spatial formations which constitute clubbing question apparently neat and tidy theorisations of 'new' forms of communality. While, as I noted in the 'Beginnings', sociality has often been presented as the glue that holds temporary communities such as those of the dance floor together - in that what goes without saying makes the community (Amirou, 1989; Maffesoli, 1993a) - it is a mistake to conflate the communality of clubbing with simplistic assertions about sociality. It takes so much more than knowing the rules of a game to be able to play it effectively - practices are about more than 'knowing how'. Clubbing is constituted through the skills, competencies and shared knowledges which only repeated participation can instil. Clubbing is not just about wearing specific clothing but also the way that clothing is worn, not just about presence within a space at a certain time but also the way in which this space is inhabited through one's use of the body, not just about dancing in an acceptable way but also about dancing in an acceptable space at the right time, and possibly with the right people.

Some have suggested that the sociality through which experiences such as clubbing are partially constituted is indicative of new or revived forms of communality premised upon notions of 'neo-tribalism', in which individuals are free to move between the many social groupings with which they wish to feel an affective identity (for example, Maffesoli, 1995). Yet, this glosses over the usually demanding practical negotiations and learning processes that affiliation with these social groupings infers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a; Goffman, 1967).

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example: Bale & Philo (1998); Glennie & Thrift (1996); Miller (1998); Miller et al (1998).
Belongings do not magically present themselves but must be worked at, even for those for whom it would appear belongings arise ‘naturally’, such as the apparently ‘cool’. In a similar vein, others have proposed that “we now exercise relative choice in selecting the kinds of communities with which we would like to be involved” (O’Connor, 1997: 153). The Night Out has clearly demonstrated that these choices about which Nights are preferred or are possible are always relative. Individual clubbers will find certain clubbing crowds more amenable than others with some clubbing crowds (literally) trading on their exclusivity while others sell themselves as all-inclusive and without restrictions. The neo-tribes thesis (Maffesoli, 1995) is useful in beginning to understand the less rigid structurings to which moves beyond narrowly prescribed identities can give rise, but it must be qualified by noting how notions of ‘freedom’ are always contextual. Belongings and identifications are thus about much more than questions of cultural capital and social structure (Bourdieu, 1984; Warde, 1994a; 1994b). Belongings and identifications also involve, and, crucially, demand, competencies, techniques and an awareness of the timings and spacings - the contextualities - of sociality.

(iii) imaginations and fluctuations

Self-expression is less a matter of mood, energy, practice, and pep pills than it is of feeling that the people around you are with you.

(Albert Goldman, 1978)\textsuperscript{13}

The communality that can be experienced through clubbing arises through imagined notions of belonging and especially through associated fluctuations between a privileging of self and a privileging of the crowd. The spacings of clubbing, and of dancing above all, are critical to these emerging notions of communality in a number of ways.

Firstly, clubbers not only actively perform their involvements within clubbing through their roles as embodied actors who are also responsible for the consumption of that experience. Clubbers also actively imaginatively construct the clubbing experience in terms of their understandings of themselves, of their changing relationships to others within the clubbing crowd, and of the varying socio-spatial demands of the Night.

\textsuperscript{13} Reprinted in Goldman (1993: 286; emphasis in original).
The practical techniques of bodily control which a clubber deploys in clubbing are related to that clubber’s understandings of himself or herself and the meanings that he or she is investing within those practices at that moment. What a clubber does with his or her body is inextricably tied up with why s/he imagines s/he is doing it - body and mind are inseparable. The oceanic and ecstatic sensations which clubbers experience to varying degrees and at different times in varying ways as the climax to the Night Out, providing the clubber with a sensation of extraordinary euphoria and joy, are particularly good examples of this relationship between body and imagination (or emotion), between movement and meaning.

During my discussion of playful vitality in Chapter Four, I noted how falling back on notions of communitas (Turner, 1969) or unicity (Maffesoli, 1995) in developing understandings of clubbing would be to assume a diversity of clubbers within that crowd. I argued that the temporary unburdening of identities that membership of the clubbing crowd can facilitate does not necessarily infer that those identities were dramatically different from each other to begin with. I also argued that the notion of communitas (Turner, 1969) suggests a process of conformity and a social similarity which is much too neat to be applied successfully to clubbing crowds. That said, and as Dyer (1993) infers so succinctly, to some extent it does not matter whether the clubbing crowd are actually diverse in terms of identities or not. Rather, in one sense what matters is that many clubbers understand the clubbing crowd of which they are a part to be diversely constituted, and they crucially find this understanding a rewarding and enriching experience. The imaginative construction of the clubbing experience, as being premised upon this inclusion of different identities in the establishing of a sense of communality, is thus equally significant to these same notions of communality as are the practices and spacings of the body. The practical and imaginative construction of clubbing are in this sense one and the same.

Secondly, the complex negotiations involved in clubbers’ continually evolving understandings of style and coolness suggest that, as well as being about notions of belonging, membership of - or, put another way, identification with - a clubbing crowd can also be about notions of differentiation. Vitally, these differentiations are present both between but also within clubbing crowds. This further suggests that it is simplistic to assert that identities somehow magically dissolve within the identifications that the clubbing crowds can certainly provide, as the communitas thesis infers. Each clubber within a clubbing crowd will fluctuate between experiencing that crowd in terms of an identification and in terms of being a discrete person within it. At any one moment, aspects of an
individual's identity or aspects of an individual's identification with the crowd will take precedence. One moment a clubber will be literally self-conscious while the next they may be feel as if they have ceded control of their body and even of their mind to the clubbing crowd, the music and the atmosphere. This fluctuation between self and crowd is a defining feature of the clubbing experience.

So far, these reflections on the clubbing Night Out have stressed notions of vitality in contrast to those of resistance, notions of consuming experiences rather than acts and moments of consumption, and notions of imaginaries and betweeness rather than, or in addition to, ‘realities’ and fixed states. Together, these three notions - vitality, consuming and imaginaries - problematise existing understandings of the relationships between self and others in a crowd and between an individual's identity and their identifications. The betweeness that characterises clubbing can provide the reflective space for sensations of vitality and alterity, as well as for imaginative - albeit also often idealistic - constructions of diversity. This 'going beyond of the self' - this exstasis - is the foundation of the ecstatic geographies which form one understanding of the practices constituting, the cultures, spacings and mediations influencing, and the vitality that can be engendered through, the clubbing experience.

The seemingly unreal yet also extremely vivid experiences of clubbing can allow clubbers to go beyond themselves. Yet, and seemingly paradoxically, through this going-beyond, they may find something more of - as well as something of extraordinary value within - the very self outside of which they may temporarily slip.

* * * *
3 Clubbing

If disco is emblematic of where it’s all at today, then the stunning profusion of lights, sounds, rhythms, motions, drugs, spectacles, and illusions that comprises the disco ambience must be interpreted as our contemporary formula for pleasure and high times. The essence of this formula is the concentration of extremes. Everything is taken as far as it can be taken; then it is combined with every other extreme to produce the final rape of the human sensorium. Why?

(Albert Goldman, 1978)¹⁴

This thesis represents only the beginnings of an understanding of the countless meanings, interpretations, practices, rewards and experiences of clubbing. The Night Out and the ecstatic geographies that I have traced through it have represented the first tentative motionings towards a fuller conceptualisation of what and how clubbing can mean something significant to those that enjoy it. Through drawing out and developing notions and conceptualisations of ‘play’, of ‘vitality’, and of the complex relationships between clubbers’ identities and their clubbing identifications, I have attempted to evoke the clubbing experience. I have also attempted to engage and progress certain existing literatures and understandings of the constitutive elements of clubbing: music, dancing, performance, crowds, communality. The Night Out has started to provide some answers to the question posed by Albert Goldman twenty years ago: Why?

Clubbing is a form of consuming in which the clubbers also partly produce the experience they consume. Through clubbing the potential exists for a temporary and partial release from what for some represent the shackles of their identity. Through clubbing a sense of identification with those co-present can be established, and may become predominant. Notions of play and of its constitutive practices and spacings are clearly central to understandings of the clubbing experience. It would appear that feeling ‘good’ at playing, through experiencing what can be described as ‘flow’, is as important to clubbing as it might be to other activities such as sports, as well as being implicated in the enjoyment of work.

In terms of why clubbers go clubbing and the associated questions of orientation - what, if anything, are clubbers resisting? - few broad assertions are possible. The dialogical understandings of clubbing that I have presented suggest that, approached one way, clubbing might be conceived of as simultaneously intrinsically rewarding - directed inwardly rather than outwardly - and non-politicised in conventional terms. Clubbing may also be conceived of as being socially and culturally constituted through the practices and spacings (the sociality) of the crowd, and through notions of play and competency at that playing. A further point is directly related to these notions of competency and a stress on intrinsic (or autotelic) rewards: clubbing is also constituted - and indeed, inhabited, performed and imagined - through multiple and relatively fluid hierarchies of style and 'coolness', and the belongings and distinctions which can arise through these inhabitations and their understandings.

Through dancing and processes of expressive listening clubbing can instill important yet seemingly paradoxical notions of bodily control within clubbers who at times feel as though they have relinquished command of their bodies to the music and the sensory overload. As members of the dancing crowd, these clubbers are themselves both partly constitutive of and responsible for this sensory overload. Clubbing can provide a sensory experience of extraordinary intensity and unusually lengthy duration, particularly where recreational drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) have been consumed. Clubbing can initiate powerful moments of ecstatic and oceanic reflection which are redolent and live on as sources of vitality and as vivid moments of both identity-formation and identification within the biographies of those that experience them.

Understood in this way, clubbing is both extraordinary and ordinary. Clubbing is at once a special and yet also for many currently a fundamental facet of their lives. Clubbing is a blending of physical and emotional movement: the vitality and unspeakable feeling of strength that may be experienced through the drop of the bass, the first beats of a favourite track, a fleeting instant of belonging within a ceaselessly moving crowd, a welcoming glance of warmth from a stranger, a letting go, a going beyond, a simultaneous affirmation of self and of belonging through motion and emotion - through motion as emotion.

That was how it seemed to Glen. His pill was kicking in, and the music, which he had had a resistance to, was getting into him from all sides, surging through his body in waves, defining his emotions. Before it had all seemed jerky and disjointed, it was pushing and pulling at him, irritating him. Now he was ready to go with it, his body bubbling and flowing in all
ways to the roaring bass-lines and tearing dub plates. All the joy of love for everything good was in him, though he could see all the bad things in Britain; in fact this twentieth-century urban blues music defined and illustrated them more sharply then ever. Yet he wasn’t scared and he wasn’t down about it: he could see what needed to be done to get away from them. It was the party: he felt that you had to party, you had to party harder than ever. It was the only way. It was your duty to show that you were still alive. Political sloganeering and posturing meant nothing; you had to celebrate the joy of life in the face of all those grey forces and dead spirits who controlled everything, who fucked with your head and your livelihood anyway, if you weren’t one of them. You had to let them know that in spite of their best efforts to make you like them, to make you dead, you were still alive. Glen knew that this wasn’t the complete answer, because it would all still be there when you stopped, but it was the best show in town right now. It was certainly the only one he wanted to be at.\footnote{Extract from Ecstasy, by Irvine Welsh (1995: 26-27).}

DIONNE (An extract from “The Moment”\footnote{The final paragraph from a short story called “The Moment” by Dionne, which she enclosed with her letter replying to my request for volunteers.}): Arms in the air, not waving and whooping like a silly kid, just moving and feeling it all through my body. We look out over a sea of faces, pulsating colours, beautiful music. I’m smiling like a smiley thing ... this is it ... I hold my breath ... this is the moment.

* * * *
Appendix 1

Biographical Snapshots of the Clubbers

Antonio
A 26-year old English teacher who lives and works in north London, Antonio particularly enjoys “jazz-funk, easy listening and soul clubs”, although he admits that he does not venture out into a wide variety of places but instead “tends to play safe”. He notes how he is now going clubbing less and less regularly, instead picking out special nights very much for the DJs who are playing that night; he “probably like[s] the idea about going to a certain sort of club as much as being there”. Antonio first went clubbing when he was 18, “just after I left school”. He volunteered in response to my letter in *i-D* magazine and is distinctive amongst the clubbers whom I interviewed in that he claimed to have never taken ecstasy (MDMA).

Bruce
Bruce is 26, a trainee producer for a large television broadcaster, and lives in north London. Bruce made contact with me as a result of my letter in *i-D* magazine. He has been clubbing for seven years and this interest has impacted upon his work, where he has “made one short film about clubbing and [is] trying to get another financed independently”. Bruce claims that “clubbing and its associated trappings has really altered my life. Not only by changing the music I listen to but it affects the clothes I wear, the people I see, the books I read and the way I feel about myself”. Bruce started clubbing in earnest while he was a student at university and prefers clubs playing “house” music. He particularly notes how he enjoys the post-clubbing part of the night, when “you quite often end up going home with strangers almost... so they’ll be an interesting thing going on there and you’ll have someone you don’t know who’s very off their face in your flat". Bruce values his clubbing experience greatly and currently has “little intention of giving up”.

1 These biographical sketches were accurate at the time of the interviews.
Carmel
Carmel is 25, works for a large telecommunications company in London, and contacted me through the uk-dance discussion list. She lives in south London. Carmel was introduced to clubbing by a friend of a friend and was immediately struck by the quite different atmosphere she experienced during her first Night Out: “the one thing I remember from there is a girl pushing past me and saying ‘I’m really sorry’ - y’know everyone was so nice”. Although Carmel enjoyed mostly free usually illegal parties at the very start of the 1990s, she now also goes to “house” clubs. Carmel is currently completely absorbed by clubbing and her free party memories, but she can envisage a time when she might not be “so into the scene”. On a number of different occasions Carmel spoke about wanting to start a family and wanting to be friends with her parents again, about “growing up and moving on”.

Carol
Carol is a 21-year old accounts clerk working and living in London. She contacted me through the uk-dance discussion list and enjoys a variety of clubs but especially those that play mostly “house” music - “it’s happy music, it gives you a bit of a buzz, it makes me feel happy”. Carol contrasts her earliest experiences with dance music at raves when she was 16 - “we’d meet in a field” - with the “proper clubs” that she has now been going to for about two years. This distinction between raving and clubbing is crucial for Carol - “if I go out to a club then I don’t say that I’m going raving, because I associate raving with people dressed in white gloves and their whistles [whereas with] clubbing you just get people who go out to enjoy themselves rather than people who just go out to go raving”. The music is central for Carol - she cannot understand, for example, why “people go on about DJs” and describes a moment in one night where “a DJ came on and we thought he might be quite good - everyone was like ‘Yeahhhh!’, screaming and whistling and everything, but I thought it was crap”.

Dionne
Dionne contacted me after seeing my request in The Face magazine. She is 28 and works in Local Government in central London. Dionne lives in north London but was brought up in Surrey. She did not start going out properly until she went to university: “my mum and dad wouldn’t let me […] I usually had to ask permission and they said ‘no’ “. Before her interest in clubbing developed, Dionne was into live music - she has been to the Glastonbury festival every year since 1986 - and she has retained and developed this interest in parallel with her clubbing experiences. Her first experience of what she would
call “clubbing” came during the Edinburgh Festival in 1988, although she did not come across drug-use in the scene until the 1993 Glastonbury festival, where she took ecstasy (MDMA) for the first time: “that’s late compared to other people [...] the Summers of Love [1989 & 1990] just passed me by completely”. Although she enjoys clubbing very much, especially “underground techno nights”, Dionne also enjoys football, live events of any kind, and cinema. She was the only clubber-interviewee to discuss her other interests in some detail, and notably without any prompting: “I think to have anything as the be all and end all of your life, whether it’s work, clubbing ... I think that it’s very sad and if you can’t be a balanced person with loads of facets in your life then you’re really really sad”. Dionne enclosed a personal yet very evocative short story - “The Moment” - with her reply to my request for volunteers.

**Dwayne**

Dwayne is a 28-year old working in computers and living in central London. Dwayne was born and brought up in Germany. He contacted me through the uk-dance discussion list. Dwayne started clubbing at a relatively young age after promptings from friends and on hearing rumours of what clubs were supposed to be like: “I was probably about 15 or 16 and my friends started going [...] I had always thought of clubs as being incredibly exciting, and places where I wanted to be ... they were dark, they were loud, attractive girls. I found it immediately extremely attractive, ummm, and it was doubly exciting for me because at that age my parents wouldn’t allow me to go out late so I had to climb out of the windows - my parents were very religious”. Dwayne now goes to mainly “jungle and techno” clubs in central London. The “coolness” and the music that constitute clubbing are important motivational features for Dwayne - he admits to being very picky about which nights he likes: “I’d say, checking all of the clubbing experiences in my life, 90% of them were not really good”. Dwayne adds that, partly because of his age, he particularly dislikes nights where there are lots of younger people.

**John**

John is a systems maintainer for a sizable City firm and he volunteered to help through the uk-dance mailing list. John is 24, lives in Dartford in Essex, and has been going out for eighteen months, since a friend at work introduced him to London clubbing. He enjoys mostly “house” and “happy house” club Nights, but is “open to anything”, and particularly likes “meeting like-minded people - people who are pretty much the same as me”. John’s first “proper clubbing” experience - in central London as opposed to local clubs in Dartford - coincided with his first experience of the drug ecstasy (MDMA): “I became very aware of
myself, aware that I was in different surroundings, different situation, different people, didn’t quite know what was going on”. After an initial explosion in the number of times he went out during which he went clubbing and took drugs every weekend, John is now trying to “have a month off every now and then”.

**Kim**

Although she lives in Dartford and goes clubbing in central London, Kim is currently at university in Northern England, where she also goes clubbing. Aged 21, Kim contacted me through the *uk-dance* discussion list. Like many other women, Kim draws distinctions between pubs and suburban clubs on the one hand and “proper clubbing” on the other. Kim enjoys mainly “house” music clubs and takes ecstasy (MDMA) on about “half the times” that she goes out, although she had been clubbing for about six months before she first tried ecstasy (MDMA). At the moment Kim cannot see an end to clubbing although she suggests that it will probably fade away: “not completely, but it just won’t be so regular ... like every couple of months and then maybe like two, three times a year, something like that”.

**Lucy**

Lucy is close friends with Carol, with whom she goes clubbing regularly. She is 21 and works in police administration in central London, where she also lives, and she contacted me through the *uk-dance* discussion list on the internet. Lucy draws out what for her are important distinctions between clubs and pubs, and especially picks out the different sense of visibility and personal comfort she feels in each as significant in her enjoyment of clubbing: “you get more locals down the pub, whereas at the club it’s everyone isn’t it [...] you walk in a pub and you’re looked up and down [whereas] in a club it doesn’t matter if you haven’t been there before - you feel at home”. Lucy enjoys “happy house” clubs, tends to go out “in spurts” - “sometimes I’ll go out every weekend for two months and then I won’t go out for like three months” - and, while she often goes clubbing with Carol, Lucy also goes clubbing with different groups of friends, sometimes just her boyfriend. In a similar way to Carol, Lucy is more impressed with the music itself than the DJs who play it. Lucy currently sees no end to her clubbing.

**Luke**

Luke is 21, works in publishing in Holland, and contacted me in response to my request in *The Face* magazine. We had originally planned to meet in London and talk about his experiences in London but, while this never actually happened, we had developed an
interesting discussion over the internet and we decided that Luke might be able to recount an interesting set of experiences anyway. I ‘interviewed’ Luke twice over the internet, although we exchanged mails much more frequently, and we are still in touch with each other in mid-1998. Luke started clubbing when he was 16, and once he had discovered “mellow house” music this interest really took off: “it was really one of the best summers I have had ‘til now. Everything was new, I met lots of people, I really liked to go out”. Luke enjoys meeting people at clubs and will often go clubbing alone with the intention of making new contacts at the club. For Luke, the music “gives me energy, quite literally”, and combined with ecstasy (MDMA, or “XTC” as Luke often referred to it within his e-mails), this energy “makes [him] feel good, so [he] has good thoughts”. He adds: Clubbing represents a “very good way for me to forget my daily problems and other things I’m struggling with and a good night can give me the energy to continue to do things”. While he continues to enjoy clubbing as much as he presently does, Luke can see no reason to stop.

Maria
A 24-year old secretary living and working in central London, Maria contacted me after seeing my letter in *The Face* magazine. Maria continually drew comparisons between Southend, where she was born and brought up, and London; she started clubbing much more often when she moved to London to go to university, although she found it very difficult to afford ‘London clubbing’ as a student. As part of her university course Maria lived in Amsterdam, where her interest in clubbing grew. Maria now goes most often to clubs playing “funky sort of uplifting techno music [...] some hard house, some sorts of acid jazz [and] punk stuff”, having tried other musical and clubbing genre and not liked them as much. Maria often takes ecstasy (MDMA) and the amphetamine speed when she goes out and this constitutes a significant aspect of her clubbing experiences: “I’d say that 90% of the time I will have an enjoyable evening, whatever the music - I think that has to be something to do with the drug”.

Mark
Mark is 26. Although he lives in Slough, Mark works for a large central-London-based financial consultancy - a fact which he finds continually amusing in an “if only they knew!” fashion. Mark responded to my request for assistance made on the internet discussion list *uk-dance*, and is “crazy” about the internet: he has his own website on which he advertises club Nights he likes. Mark uses the *uk-dance* discussion list in making new contacts who “share an interest in trance music” for, as he explains, “there’s not a lot of trance going on
in Slough, as you can imagine”. While Mark’s interest in clubbing was triggered by his arrival in (or near) London, post-university, his fascination with clubbing - and especially his love of “Goa” trance nights - was prompted by travelling experiences in Japan and Thailand. Mark has also travelled to India on numerous occasions, mainly for the Goa beach raves around Christmas.

**Roger**

Roger contacted me as a result of my letter in *i-D* magazine. He is 24, works as a buyer for a large clothing chainstore in central London, and lives in east London. Roger first became interested in clubbing while at university. He particularly likes “house” clubs in which he can spend most of the time dancing, although he has recently started to cut back on his clubbing as a result of increasing work pressures.

**Sarah**

A 26-year old nutritionist, Sarah lives and works in north-west London. She responded to my letter in *The Face* magazine requesting volunteers. Sarah started clubbing when she was 16, through a mixture of “peer pressure” and “curiosity”, and now goes clubbing about once a fortnight. Although Sarah goes to a variety of different clubs she tends to favour one particular club over all others: “the first time [...] I just walked through the door and it was like [...] excuse my language but it was just like: ‘headfuck’ - this is the place for me [...] it was totally different to that other place that I had been to and I knew that this was the place that I was looking for”. Sarah enjoys meeting friends at the club, which she describes as a “glorified pub” for this reason, but is currently finding herself going to the club, and to other clubs, much less - her friends she met there have become more important than the club itself.

**Seb**

Seb was quite unlike the other clubber-interviewees in the intensity of his almost fanaticism for clubbing. An extract from his initial letter, in response to my letter in *The Face* (or *i-D*, it is unspecified), provides some personal details and reads as follows:

Dear Ben

*Do I enjoy clubbing in London? ... Sit back, relax, and let me tell you how much!* My sister wrote to me having read your letter. Quite simply she and I are of the same opinion - if you’re looking for help/information to complete your thesis, you need look no further. I’m 26 and have been clubbing in one form or another for the past five years. In that time I’ve travelled from Aberdeen to London and taken in Glasgow,
Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool and other places in search of a good time. As you can see I currently live in Liverpool, though I’m trying to find work in or around London, but this doesn’t stop me travelling to London 2/3 times a month for some exceptional parties. I’ve got a lot to say on the subject of clubbing - probably more than your average clubber. Indeed I intend to write a book on the subject at some point in the future and have been collecting ‘stories’ to include in that for the past couple of years. If you want to know why I go clubbing, the answer’s simple - because I can! (though I’d be happy to elaborate on this answer if you want me to!).

[...]

I’ll leave things at that for you now though I could go on for hours ... if you think I could help at all, I’d be delighted to hear from you.

Yours in anticipation

Seb

Simon

Simon is 27 and while when I met him he was working on a PhD in Maths, he subsequently joined a large globally-based investment bank. He lives and works in central London. He became interested in clubbing while at university and has been clubbing regularly since he was 20. He particularly likes “jungle and techno” nights, although he also frequently goes to clubs playing “Asian dance music and jungle”. Simon’s use of drugs such as ecstasy (MDMA) varies between nights - while he would “hardly ever take drugs at a drum’n’bass night, mainly because I wouldn’t see it as an essential part of it”, he would more usually take some form of drug - usually ecstasy or the amphetamine speed - at “techno” nights. He spent large sections of the interviews talking in detail about all aspects of the music involved and was one of two clubber-interviewees who had DJing experience that they told me about.

Sun

Sun is a 25-year old financial journalist who works in central London and lives in south London. He came to be into clubbing over a period of time rather than as the result of a single Night Out: “it’s a bit like losing your virginity in that people say it happens overnight but actually it fades in over a period of time”. Sun enjoys most clubbing genre with the exception of trance-based clubs, which he hated, but describes himself as a “jungle fanatic”. Sun’s parents moved to London from India when he was much younger - a feature of his early life which undoubtedly comes
through in the three conversations we had together. Sun responded to my request for assistance made on the *uk-dance* discussion list.

**Valerie**

Valerie is 22 and is works in stage lighting; she used to be an actor and a lecturer in Drama. She contacted me through the *uk-dance* discussion list after my request for volunteers was drawn to her attention by Kim, her close friend. Both Valerie’s parents are Greek and she has travelled to Greece for a month every year throughout her life. She lives in Dartford but works in central London. Valerie’s favourite music is “happy hardcore, hardcore, ambient trance, Goa trance, garage, and many others depending on my mood”. Valerie enjoys one particular club above all others - it provides a “guaranteed good night out”, which she feels is important.

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