The Plurality of the Night

visual insights on what the club means to club-goers.

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by

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Introducing different perspectives on nightlife

Living life, in many city centres in Western countries, has been related to the daytime (Bianchini, Living for the city, New Socialist, 1987). The liveliness around offices, shopping centres and schools makes place for a 'mysterious wilderness' after the afternoon rush hour. A wilderness, with both economic and social opportunities which, however, often receives clipping of the state's own bureaucracy (Bianchini, Living for the city, New Socialist, 1987). More and more people started to argue for the case for round-the-clock use of city centres to boost the city's nightlife economy. Aiming to see activities like going out and meeting people as potentially productive in terms of both wealth and jobs (Lovatt, 1994).

Nightlife districts have long played significant roles in cities but they have typically evolved on the outskirts, with little attention from the municipal government (Lovatt, 1994). However, the post-industrial landscape has opened up possibilities for cities to redefine themselves as sites of consumption, both during the day and at night. Cultural policies used to revitalise urban nightlife were implemented in many cities in The Netherlands but also Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and France in the 1970s and 1980s (Kong, 2010). While nightlife has always been 'there', these policies arose as a result of local officials recognising an increase in public desire for going out and having a good time at night in the city (García, 2004; Kong, 2010). A second significant factor was the emergence of several new urban social movements (García, 2004). Feminism, community action, and gay and black activism saw no clear distinction between "cultural" and "political" activity and, in some cases, induced local politicians to take cultural politics and policy seriously for the first time. *'Reclaim the Night*,' for example, was a key demand of the women's movement in many cities (Mackay, 2013). Some politicians believed that developing exciting urban calendars of cultural events, that would encourage people to go out in large numbers was the best way to make the night safer for everyone to enjoy.

While plenty link with the narrative of the urban renaissance, the imagination of a city centre being a comfortable, safe place to live, visit and consume, the narrative linked to problems accompanying the night receives a lot of scientific attention (Bannister, Fyfe, & Kearns, 2006; Eldridge; Hadfield, Lister, & Traynor, 2009; Helms, 2016; Judd, 2003). Indeed, the majority of popular existing studies and research are concerned with the dangers and negative consequences of nightlife. Nightlife, and the club, have frequently been connected to violence, disturbance, sexual assault, substance misuse, traffic accidents, and gentrification, in addition to contributing to the maintenance of social distinction and its associated difficulties (Hadfield, Lister, & Traynor, 2009; Parks & Kennedy, 2004; Grazian, 2009). While old, the following passage by Burke (1941) portrays some of these fundamental, almost philosophical, problems and their consequences concerning nightlife.

> *Night-life, night-club, night-bird. There is something about the word Night, as about the word Paris, that sends through some English-men {sic} 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 anteroom to Hell. This attitude towards entertainment after dark is held by most officials. Whenever they hear of some new development of night-life, they get a pricking of the thumbs, and give the impression that they would be happier if the universe had so contrived its system as to give the whole globe*

> *perpetual day [..] But all through the centuries boys {sic} have refused to stay*
> *at home. So, when authority found it could not keep them there, it set about*
> *making things as difficult as possible for them, by devising budgets and laws*
> *and bye-laws.*

'Making things as difficult as possible' is the most prevalent response to assumed night-time chaos (Helms, 2016; Roberts & Eldridge, 2012). This is often done by an increase in governing both through the implementation and management of stricter policies. Formulating policies on statistical correlations between nightlife and associated problems shows the demarcatinist angle governments often take (Marres, 2018). Demarcation ensures respect for factual knowledge through statement validation and de-validation. In Marres (2018) her own words: '*these selective operations on content normatively distinguish between "good" sources capable of producing valid statements and those that don't, and between "good" users capable of discerning valid statements and those who aren't*'. The 'factual' and 'valid' knowledge preferred by the government, in this case, is statistical, causal, traditional, and academic research. This risks reinforcing opposition between those capable of knowledge production and those not (Marres, 2018). Furthermore, it leads to neglecting content derived from 'invalidly' marked sources. Yet, a good deal of academic and non-academic content has been focused on the positive side of nightlife.

In academic research, the cultural nightlife is expected to bring numerous separate, yet intertwined values, including economic, social, and mental benefits. According to Glaeser, Kolko, and Saiz (2001), the welfare gain of clubs in cities has increased considerably, and cities' future economic strength is dependent on their ability to become "consumer havens." Cultural nightlife has economic significance aside from its influence on the city's image. Important to consider is its spending in the hospitality sector (hotel stays for artists), and transportation charges (for both artists and viewers) (Glaeser, Kolko, & Saiz, 2001). It also creates job opportunities for other culture-related positions such as photographers and graphic designers as well as job opportunities created by artists for non-nightlife companies (Markusen & King, 2003). Nightlife for the club-goer, is generally argued, to be a producer of cohesion, assisting individuals in their desire for communal identity. According to Calafat et al. (2003), nightlife is "an antidote against anonymity, a type of ritualisation of disorder that functions to question and also to protect order," as well as "a crucial ingredient for collective identity and health" (Calafat, et al., 2003). Moreover, it is demonstrated that nightlife provides individuals with "a prospective area in which identities may be constructed and changed, tried on and abandoned" (Lobato, 2006).

Non-academic content on nightlife has been increasing in the past years. This is primarily due to the corona measures that clubs were required to follow. The authorities sought to contain the contagious coronavirus due to the established closing hour. A noble goal, although not everyone is satisfied with this method, appearing to make little attempt to appreciate the value of night culture. Voices have been raised about the night-time license mismanagement and bureaucratic errors that have resulted in cancelled plans. The claim that the national governing bodies are neglecting its cultural nightlife has been vocalized through '*de nacht staat op*' protest (VICE, 2022). The size of this demonstration is the embodiment of the importance of nightlife to people. Another loud and clear response came when the municipality of Rotterdam unveiled its plans for the Schiekadeblok on Instagram. The negative reactions are disproportionate in comparison to other posts that rarely receive more than 50 responses. The nightclub's identity as a "safe space" where "various communities come together" is emphasised in the comments. Other ways to make this value publicly known

include interviews, documentaries, and publications. The book *'Zonder nacht geen dag'* was recently published to explain what the night means to thirty night bearers (Boer & Dekkers, 2022). They underline the nightclub's strength as a space where taboos are broken and new music, fashion, and lifestyles are created. It also emphasises the role of nightlife in identity construction and formation; it is seen as a tool for reinventing who they wanted to be, and with whom. In the ADE special documentary called 'Children of the Night' focus is placed on what the night means to DJs (NTR, 2022). To them, the night is `the time of nobody'. It is a period of time reserved for personal growth. It is a time of friendship, passion, and communication. It is less constrained by social limitations, norms, and persecutions than daylight; the night functions as an escape, the club functions as a home, and music functions as a healer.

The fact that there is significant disagreement in results and perspectives in both the academic and non-academic world, while these should be intertwined, indicates how practical solutions to both order and knowledge are not yet settled (Venturini & Munk, 2021). For the sake of convenience, it appears that governing bodies frequently rely on sources based on the pursuit of their political or economic objectives and interest, resulting in the disappearance of controversies (Venturini & Munk, 2021). To be listened to, to be voiced, and to be portrayed as controversial means to be acknowledged. It is, therefore, I decided to shed light on the underexposed side of the medal, the view of the club-goer. On a personal level, having partaken in nightlife for about 10 years, I have always appreciated its variety of functions. To me, nightlife represents community, cohesion, identity, creativity, love, and freedom in its broadest sense. It's a place to both discover and lose myself, a place where I can connect and detach. With this range of personal interpretations, I got intrigued as to what the club symbolizes to others. As a result, this study attempts to answer the following question: *What is the visual perception of the club's value among clubgoers?* Meaning, I will use the participants' visualisation of their perspective of nightlife via a photograph taken by them. Why? I hear you think.

How to capture different nightlife perspectives

Since the human perception of society is primarily visual, experience and knowledge can be further enriched by the act of seeing (Harper, 2012). Sociology being at the centre stage of big and small politics, keeping one's distance, and regarding the world as a laboratory is not enough. Sociology can be used to inspire change, to engage in social movements, and to explore new ways of living (Harper, 2012). Making sociology visible is to make society visible, which, in its turn, leads to engaging in social realities through fieldwork. Giving people, in this case club-goers, the platform to express their perspective and vision on nightlife allows us to see past statistics and into someone else's reality. This world that exists behind statistical data is a rather abstract reality that is typically taken for granted in social science research. The world as portrayed visually differs from the world as represented by words and statistics. As a result, visual sociology links to other realities than traditional empirical study methods, and it leads to unique understandings and discoveries (Harper, 2012).

To explore these unique understandings, an analogue film camera was passed among club-goers. These club-goers were both instructed on the fundamental of the camera options as well as the assignment. Instructions on the assignment included the question to capture what comes to mind when they thought of the club; transforming the photograph into a translation of that thought, feeling, or action. Meaning that they were not bounded to take a photo during the night or at the club. The analogue camera makes reasonable images in bright light and it has a flash for low-light situations. These images require skills to create outcomes

of medium visual quality due to the analogue's higher difficulty level with respect to a phone, resulting in a few poor-quality photos. Some participants exchanged photographs taken with their phones to facilitate the process.

This form of visual sociology also referred to as 'photovoice' by Douglas Harper (2012) is intended to motivate people to reflect and grasp personal perspectives. Photographing one's world is a form of empowerment as it leads to higher awareness of both problems and assets of communities, in this case, the club-goer. What the camera sees, the photograph of someone's reality, reveals its underpinnings and leads to an enlarged understanding of the club and its interpretations (Harper, 2012). Although the title of their work or the commentary of the images is occasionally used within photovoice, it has been decided to leave this element out. The conditions, location, and anonymity of the club-goers did not allow for this.

It is important to question if these photos taken, used as empirical evidence, represent the 'truth'. That they reflect only what was there and all that was there? Can they still be considered empirical data if this is not the case? These questions are not limited to visual data and serve as a reminder that all data, visual or otherwise, is produced (Harper, 2012). Numeric data are, in fact, abbreviated ways of describing content that is frequently ambiguous. We label reactions to an idea or experience as similarly spaced attitudes ("strongly agree," "agree," "no opinion," "disagree," "strongly disagree") when, in fact, they are not equally spaced and are not even equivalent in intensity (Harper, 2012). As a result, it is critical to emphasise that I am not attempting to reflect the truth. What I am trying to do is to end the dialogue given to a one-sided perspective in which theories get the power to become instruments and statistical results can be transformed into facts. What I am trying to do is to re-start the conversation between non-academic and academic by visualising the personal value of the club to people labelled as "bad" users "incapable" of producing and discerning "valid" statements.

The illustration of different perspectives on nightlife
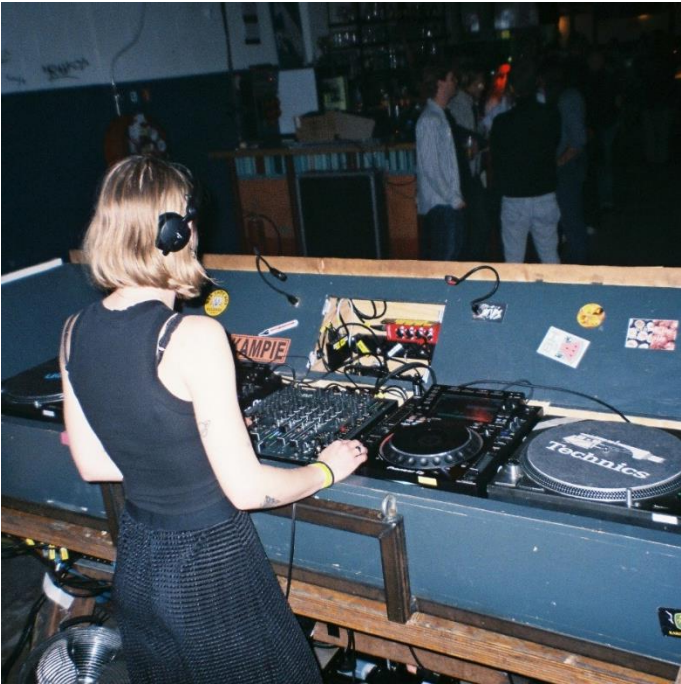

Photo 1: *Untitled*

Photo 2: *Untitled*

Photo 3: *Untitled*

Photo 4: *Untitled*
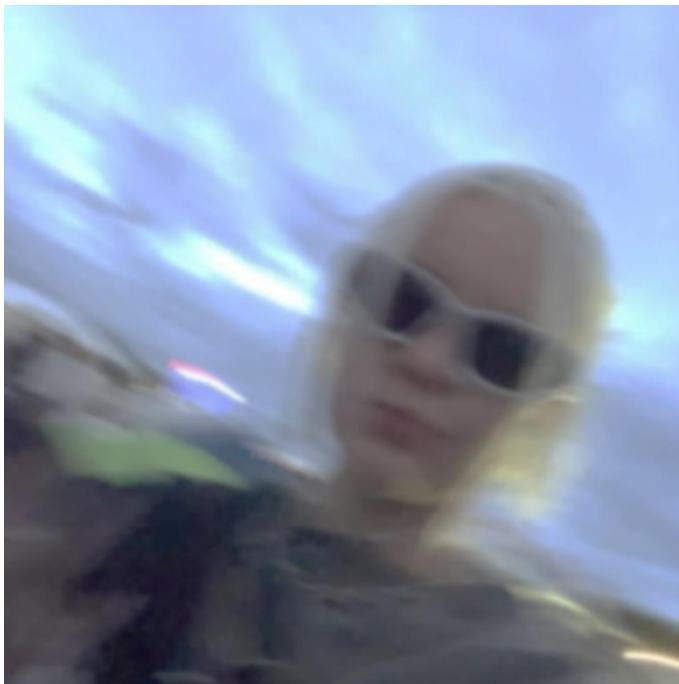
Photo 5: *Untitled*

Photo 6: *Untitled*

Photo 7: *Untitled*

Photo 8: *Untitled*

An analysis of different perspectives on nightlife

Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of the process was the number of questions raised regarding the number of photos that could be taken per person. It was frequently stated that it was tough to think of only one thing. This already demonstrates that the club's purpose and worth are multidimensional rather than singular.

Because no title has been given or any words have been added to the pictures, we can only assume its meaning. Nevertheless, there seem to be different types of photos taken by participants, reflecting the value of different aspects of the club. Some images of mundane objects are unique due to their role in the lives of club-goers are being documented. The venue of the club is important for those identifying with a specific community, who often go to the same venue. Just like the visualisation of a speaker, turntable or mixer could show the identification of people to a specific genre of music, or music being their main important aspect of the night. Some images are distinguished by their strong attachment to a specific identity or community. A photo of people dancing in front of a DJ shows the urgency for club-goers to move their bodies. Photos taken of other people show how the club lends itself as a location to meet others, a location for communication, and a location for friendship. A photo taken of themselves is important for identification means. Such a photograph might show who they want to be in relation to which group. The photographers also visualized metaphors and emotions in their images. The phrase "ok boomer" is intended to imply that someone is from or acts like a member of the baby boomer generation (Lim & Lemanski, 2020). An image of this quote could suggest that the club's members do not care for the opinions of this generation. However, it may also imply that the club serves as a safe haven at night for them to disconnect from the political and career-bound pressures frequently coming from this generation during the day. A photo of a person holding a cigarette in front of a "no-smoking" sign directly states that the night is a time without rules, a time of no one. While it can also represent the club as a space of freedom to break taboos. Pictures taken of friends might represent a person's secure social existence, and so on.

Final thoughts on the different perspectives on nightlife

The plurality of the valued aspects of the nightlife is highly visible in the visualisation of club-goers. For them, the club mostly seems to have social and mental value. As a physical space, it is suitable for different individuals and communities to come together which produces unity. It assists individuals in their longing for communal but also individual identity. The photos demonstrate that nightlife provides individuals with a space in which their identities can be constructed and expressed. A place where political beliefs can be revealed and rejected. While these people are labelled as "poor" users who are "unable" to provide "legitimate" claims, their visualisations highlighted the academic benefits of the night and provided insights into meanings beyond what is recognised in the academic world. It is important for further research to not merely stay with photovoice but to expand on it by means of e.g. interviewing or observation. It is fitting to say experiencing the role of a student in the process of being a researcher is acknowledging our role. This gives space to a more adaptable, open-ended, comprehensive, pluralistic, innovative, and possibly more cultural approach.

This report shows that there are numerous questions at stake during the night. It is not just club culture, music, or performance that draws the attention, but rather the nightlife of the city and the passing of a specific timeframe in that life. In this sense, the club is not so much a research object yet a location to identify and investigate a specific crystallisation of a larger thing, the social phenomenon called 'the night'. Considering this phenomenon as the object of

research requires more engagement in the historicization of 'enlightening' cities during the night. The development of its night lives is not a recent activity as governments have for a long time aimed to enlighten the night. In the most literal sense, installing gas and electric illumination to minimize the darkness of the night. It is important to address these conflicts between infrastructures of light and infrastructures of darkness to locate the club and its function but also its opportunities within the larger tensions.

Resources

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