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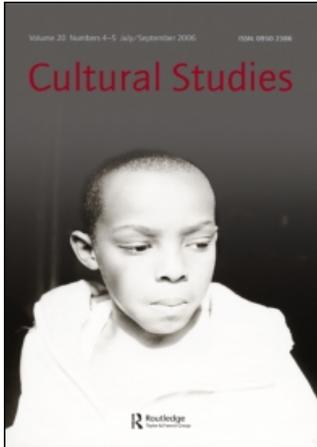
On: 14 March 2007

Access Details: [subscription number 769797814]

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713684873>

Shut up and dance: Youth culture and changing modes of femininity

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To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09502389300490281

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502389300490281>

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SHUT UP AND DANCE: YOUTH CULTURE AND CHANGING MODES OF FEMININITY¹

As Helmut Hartwig (1992) has described, I too feel a sense of acute anxiety at the thought of writing about youth. It is at once too close and too far away. I am too old. I have a daughter of fifteen who lives these experiences and in talking or writing about them I feel I am encroaching on her private space. Frequently, the difference between being a sociologist interested in youth, and being the parent of a teenage girl reaches a crisis point. Sometimes this entails the simple recognition of the huge gap between the loose and tentative sociological observations of my own early work carried out in Birmingham in the late 1970s, and the terrible psychological complexity of growing up, a process which now, as I see it happening on a day-to-day basis, causes me to question almost everything I ever wrote about teenage girls (McRobbie, 1991). At other moments, the crisis is of a different nature, more like that described by Dick Hebdige (1987) when he too is given cause to ponder his earlier writing on youth and his position now as somebody who, when kept awake for nights at a time by the loud music played by his young neighbours, eventually gets dressed and goes out in the middle of the night and angrily complains. Getting dressed and going out in the middle of the night and sometimes in the early hours of the morning to pick up my daughter from 'raves' held in empty warehouses on trading estates on the outskirts of north London precipitates the same kind of reaction in myself, though this time it is extreme anxiety rather than anger and frustration which I feel, driving out into the early light looking for the appointed spot at which I wait, as the sweat-drenched, pale-faced youths come out in straggly bunches.

In the final part of this paper I will return to the question of rave, bringing to bear on my analysis some of these new contradictions which emerge from this uncomfortable overlap of roles. Despite the acute feelings of anxiety verging on terror which I experience in my capacity as mother it still seems important to stand back and to ask the question of what is going on and why. How young people, male and female, experience the society around them and how they in turn express this experience, continue to be immensely

important questions. Youth remains a major point of symbolic investment for the society as a whole. What I will be doing in this paper is selecting out, from an immensely rich and complicated landscape of social change in Britain through the Thatcher years and beyond, a few critical examples in the field of youth culture and the youth mass media, where it seems to me that there has been a direct engagement with change, and where these changes are also indicative of new emergent modes of femininity, which in turn tell us something of real significance about the society in which we now live. I will also argue that these changes must prompt a revision of some of the ways in which cultural studies has defined itself in recent years. It is not that social change alone forces such a revision but that by returning, for instance, to the category of youth as I am doing here, one is also in a sense returning to those frameworks for analysis which came to characterize the field from the mid 1970s onwards, and as a result it is possible to see more clearly how these now need to be amended.

What I will be arguing is that in recent youth culture what can be seen is not just a response to some of the more oppressive aspects of life in Britain for young people in the 1980s and into the 1990s, for example the frightening reality of AIDS, but also that it is here that new and unanticipated social meanings are actively produced. This symbolic and aesthetic material is developed in what often seems like a frenzy of cultural production. It marks, in my view, an absolute engagement with the social. Youth cultures, in whatever shape they take, represent to me a staking out of an investment in society. It is in this sense that they are political. One rather clichéd way of putting this is to say that they make 'statements'. But these statements take different shapes under different historical conditions and they keep on being made. It is this activity which has of course provided the raw material for the study of subcultures, but it seems to me worth both repeating the exercise of looking at subcultures and also worth taking this analysis further and also in a slightly different direction. Of course, it is also the case that the intensity of the subcultural activity means that it almost immediately spills out of its youth cultural 'home', becoming part of a wider popular culture which is continually looking to the innovative elements in youth culture so that it can claim a dynamism for itself. While it was important, in the early days of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) subcultural theory, to draw a line between youth culture and pop culture, crediting the former with a form of symbolic class authenticity and the latter with all the marks of the consumer culture, in reality the two were always merged, always in an ongoing relationship with each other (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976). But now that the search for the fundamental class meaning underpinning these formations is no longer the rationale for their cultural analysis, we can also afford to be more speculative, more open to reflecting on the meanings other than those of class. It is not so much that these meanings can now also be recognized as including questions of gender, sexuality, race and identity, but rather that what is significant is how in different youth cultural 'venues' there are different permutations of class, gender and racial meanings being explored. In each

of the examples I look at in this paper, some or other of these will be recognized as occupying a position of prominence.

For example, in relation to changing modes of femininity, I will not be saying, here we can simply see evidence of progress, i.e., girls are more independent than they were in the late 1970s when I first started working in this field. But neither do I endorse that argument put forward recently by the American feminist Susan Faludi, that after a short period of gains, women (and by implication young women) are now experiencing the full force of a backlash led by the emergent 'new right' and moral majority movements (Faludi, 1992). I will be offering here neither a narrative of progress nor one of backlash. Instead I will be suggesting that there has been a dramatic 'unfixing' of young women in British society over the last fifteen years which has been effected in the social institutions and can be seen in the field of commercial mass culture and in the various youth subcultures. There is now a greater degree of fluidity about what femininity means and how exactly it is anchored in social reality. I know of no major study which has assessed with any precision how things have actually changed for girls and young women in and across the main social institutions of the family, education and employment. As is often the case for cultural studies, where there is a complete absence of sociological material which would in effect do the work of illustrating or acting as evidence in support of an argument, it has to be a question of relying more loosely on less hard evidence and of looking to some of the most widely available 'texts' of youth culture for the clearest expression of these changes.

My use of the phrase 'changing modes of femininity' will be used here as a reminder of just how fluid gender practices and meaning structures are. Even in adverse political circumstances (i.e., throughout the Thatcher years) it can by no means be assumed that, for example, the position of women, and young women, simply worsened. Despite the hostility of the tabloid press, feminism has had a dramatic impact on almost every level of social life in Britain. It has made issues around sexual inequality part of the political agenda in both the private sphere of the home and in domestic relations, and in the more public world of work. Likewise, the institutions themselves (particularly education) have been alerted to the question of women and young women as economic agents, participants in the economy for the greater part of their lives. Altogether this kind of heightened activity around questions of gender has had the effect of radically undermining what might be described as the old domestic settlement which tied women (and young women's future) primarily to the family and to only low-paid or part-time work. There is, as a result, a greater degree of uncertainty in society as a whole about what it is to be a woman. This filters down to how young women exist within this new *habitus* of gender relations (Bourdieu, 1984). It might even be suggested that, in Britain, girls both black and white have been 'unhinged' from their traditional gender position while the gender and class destiny of their male counterparts has remained more stable.²

This state of flux in relation to what now constitutes feminine identity can certainly be detected in the new girls' magazines as well as in the whole

expansive field of the mass media. It is in culture, above all, that there has been a discursive explosion around what constitutes femininity and its ambiguous relationship with feminism. Feminist issues are now firmly implanted in those traditional spheres of femininity, e.g., women's magazines, radio programmes like *Women's Hour*, but also in other less gender-specific areas of radio and broadcasting, in arts programmes and drama in particular. Nor is such a shift restricted to culture for a middle-class female audience or readership. In mainstream television, thanks to writers like Carla Lane and others, feminist topics are now a standard part of the staple of 'sit com' material, soap opera, plays and series. But this does not mean that younger women now identify themselves as feminist. They are more likely to resist such a label and assert for themselves, at least as an image, an excessively conventional femininity. At the same time they frequently express strongly feminist views in their day-to-day discussions. What they are rejecting is a particular image of the feminist which they associate either with an older generation or else with a stereotypically unfeminine image. In other words, the old binary opposition which put femininity at one end of the political spectrum and feminism at the other, is no longer an accurate way of conceptualizing young female experience. Maybe it never was. It is no longer a question of those who know (the feminists, the academics) against those who do not, or who are the 'victims' of ideology. As Charlotte Brunson (1991) has recently argued, a quite dramatic realignment between feminism and the lived experience of femininity (and its textual representations), has taken place. As feminist ideas have slowly worked their way into the material and ideological structures of society, and have become part of the general culture of femininity, so also has the fragile unity of feminism (or feminist theory) itself been challenged and disputed from within as black women, for instance, ask the question of what the women's movement or the feminist theory of the 1970s meant for them. While it is as yet impossible to predict whether a new 'sexual settlement' will emerge from this fragmentation and realignment, what is clear is that there is a good deal more noise, there are many more voices eager to participate in this postfeminist cultural field, and anxious to be listened to. Charlotte Brunson (1991) has pointed out how these shifts have real consequences for what we, as feminist academics, teach, for how we engage with our students, male and female, and for how we define and pursue our chosen objects of study.

How should youth culture in Britain in the 1990s be approached, bearing in mind not only the late 1970s' feminist critique of subcultural theory (McRobbie, 1990), but also those shifts in gender relations outlined above which have traversed the whole society? One way of proceeding is to look to a number of particular examples and to draw from them those elements and developments which seem to be most significant. Now that class no longer underwrites the critical project of cultural analysis, and with ideology also recognized as too monolithic a category, too focused round the explanation of social passivity and conformity to be usefully alert to the more micrological level of dispute and contestation, space becomes available to

scale down the field of study and to relinquish the claim on unity or totality in preference for pursuing what Laclau (quoted in McRobbie, 1992) has called the 'dignity of the specific'. With this in mind I will offer here three snapshot studies, all of which illuminate some feature of my own chosen problematic of femininity and youth culture.

Girls, cultural production and youth culture

Let us start by saying that there have been some key changes in youth culture in the last decade. In fact, things were never the same after punk. The turning point it marked was one where youth subcultures, in whatever guise they had taken, no longer could be seen as occupying only a 'folk devil' position in society. There were too many of them, they were increasingly able to counter whatever charges were made against them by the mass media since they had at their own disposal, partly as a result of the availability of cheaper technology, the means to defend themselves and to discuss the issue with at least a wider audience than themselves. These means of communication were not restricted solely to fanzines and to the self-generated style magazines, since spaces were opened up for 'youth TV', first in Channel Four and more recently in BBC2's *DEF II* programmes. With a clear commitment to employing young people on these programmes, they continue to reflect a different image of youth than that found, for example in the *Daily Mail*.³

The increasing interest among a wider selection of the population in style, and then in 'design' in the 1980s, saw a situation develop where youthfulness became virtually synonymous with subculture. Earlier subcultures were revived for the umpteenth time. Some, like heavy metal, remained unchanged in appearance but continued to recruit new followers from boys aged thirteen upwards. Hippie culture, with the new interest in vegetarianism, the environment and peace, proved ready for not just revival but for a permanent place in this 'endless' youth culture, with a black inflection too as the connection was celebrated by musicians like De La Soul in the US, and Soul II Soul in the UK, between mid sixties black liberation and civil rights, and the language of radical politics it spawned for white students and hippies soon after.

Out of punk, goth, hippie and reggae, 'crusties' (white, palid Crass fans with 'dreadlocks' literally encrusted on to their own unkempt hair) emerged, marking the place of the underdog, the right to the streets or the common land, the desire for disenfranchisement from the legacy of Thatcherist values, the rejection of clean consumer culture in favour of 'ecological' dirt. Accompanied by decrepit but much-loved mongrel dogs, these 'convoys' continue to occupy key spaces (with a can of beer in hand and dog in tow) in the urban environment, like outside the Sainsbury store at Camden in north London for example, a building celebrated as an example of the best of postmodern architecture. Crusties often merge with squatters, young anarchists and with homeless young people, and with such a dramatically 'dirty' visual style they stage 'homelessness' or 'the end of welfare'. These

groups continue to make an extraordinarily strong impression on the urban landscape. They contribute directly to our experience of social reality. They play back a particular version of that reality, and they function as strong social texts, signs of response which indicate an active registering of broad social changes over which groupings otherwise have no control.

Despite the longevity of subcultures like these in the British urban landscape, none the less, even during the heyday of subcultural theory in the late 1970s, there were quite straightforward questions which for some reason were never asked. For instance, who was doing what? Where did the style come from? Where was it purchased, who was selling it to whom? More abstractly, what were the social relations which informed the production of the subculture? What pre-existing skills were called upon to produce the graphics and the posters and even the music itself? In my own earlier work so much effort was put into attempting to problematize the marginalized experience of girls in youth culture, that it never struck me to explore this further, and find out what exactly they were doing on a day-to-day basis. Likewise in Dick Hebdige's (1978) work, so much attention was put on the final signifying products of the subculture and the permutations of meaning produced by these images, that the cultural work involved in their making did not figure in the analysis.

In my article 'Second hand dresses and the role of the ragmarket' (McRobbie, 1990), I argued that subcultural theory was resistant to investigating some of these processes because they brought an analysis, which itself was dependent on notions of class and resistance, directly up against a set of practices which seemed far removed from the politics of class and resistance. Buying and selling and participating in subcultures as consumers represented to subcultural theorists only the moment of diffusion, the point at which the oppositional force is incorporated or 'recuperated' back into society through the processes of commodification. As the subculture is commodified for a mass market so also is it de-politicized and made palatable for popular consumption. The problems with this model have now become a familiar strand in cultural studies with contributions from Erica Carter (1984), Frank Mort (forthcoming), Mica Nava (1992) and myself (McRobbie, 1984), each of whom have in different ways confronted the complex pleasures and the politics of consumption. But introducing the practices of selling clothes and records and other items to those involved in the subculture was also to bring to bear to the analysis the reality of an infrastructure in the subculture which involved both production and marketing. The assumption implicit in subcultural theory was that those who did this sort of thing were simply 'hustlers' who pushed their way into the subculture from outside, making a profit from something which in reality had no interest in or connection to commerce. The music and style and other related activities as a result sprang on to the subcultural theory stage as though from nowhere.

It soon became clear, particularly after punk, that this kind of romanticism of authenticity was a false and idealized view. Not just Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, but the whole punk phenomena used the

predatory, easily exploited and above all open-ended mass media for publicity, and actually set itself up, right from the start, in a string of shops selling clothes direct to young people.⁴ Since then the old model which divided the pure subculture from the contaminated outside world eager to transform anything it could get its hands on into a sellable item, has collapsed, even though there still remains an ideology of authenticity which provides young people in youth cultures with a way of achieving social subjectivity and therefore identity through the subcultural experience.

However, my concern here is with the way in which the magazines produced by fans, the music produced by DJs, the clothes bought, sold and worn by subcultural 'stylists', do more than just publicize the subculture. They also provide the opportunity of learning and sharing skills, practising them, making a small amount of money and more importantly they provide pathways for future 'life-skills' in the form of work or self-employment. To ignore the intense activity of cultural production as well as its strongly aesthetic dimension (in graphics, in fashion design, in retail and in music production) is to miss what is a key part of subcultural life, that is the creation of a whole way of life, an alternative to higher education, (though often a 'foundation' for art school), a hedonistic job creation scheme for the culture industries. The point is then that far from being merely the commercial, low ebb of the subculture, as far removed from resistance as it is possible to imagine, these activities can be seen as central to them. They are also expressions of change and of social transformation. De-industrialization, class re-alignment, the changing place of women, and the consolidation of black people at the bottom end of the labour hierarchy, have all affected young people during the 1980s. The turn to fashion and music as career rather than consumer choices (no matter how shaky these careers might be) represents a strong preference for the cultural sphere. My suggestion is that this involvement can be an empowering experience, particularly for young people with no access to the skills and qualifications acquired as a matter of course by those other young people destined for university and for the professions. Subcultures are often ways of creating job opportunities as undocumented, unrecorded and largely 'hidden economy' sector subcultures stand at one end of the spectrum of the culture industries, and the glamorous world of the star system and the entertainment business at the other.

This whole area requires a good deal more attention. But if, for the moment, we deconstruct the notion of resistance by removing its meta-political status (even when this exists in some disguised, magical or imaginary form, as it did in CCCS theory), and if we re-insert resistance at the more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices and choices about how to live, then it becomes possible to see the sustaining, publicizing and extending of the subcultural enterprise as a way of attempting to earn a living within what has been described as the aestheticization of culture (against a backdrop of industrial decline) and to do so in a way which directly expresses the character of its producers in a way which is frequently in opposition to those available, received or encouraged images or identities (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976).

The buying, selling and producing do not take place in a vacuum. They are integrally connected to much longer chains of meaning and value systems. Second-hand clothes and the recycling ethic which goes with them, for example, produce not just 'retro' images on the streets, they also provide a counterpoint to over-priced high-street fashion. Selling such clothes requires organizational skills as well as imagination. Selling usually exists alongside designing and making up new clothes as well as restoring and selling old ones. The shop assistant is also therefore a fashion designer. Involvement often develops into a proper career choice. At the same time the interconnection in the subculture between fashion, image and music can be seen as reflecting more generally what Helmut Hartwig (1992) has described as a 'longing for art'.

This can also be understood as a preference which exists against the provided 'training' pathways for young people in Britain today. While self- or semi-employment in the world of subcultures could be interpreted as examples of the enterprise culture of the Thatcher era at work, they are, in my view, better considered as angry ripostes to the rhetoric of Thatcher. If *she* said be enterprising then *their* enterprise was pursued in precisely those 'soft' art areas, relatively unprofitable but personally rewarding, which have always found little favour with the Conservatives. If *she* abandoned substantial sectors of the youth population to the forces of the free market and thus to unemployment, they refused such subordination and carved out spaces for themselves in the interstices of the *hidden* cultural economy, by setting up a stall selling retro clothes, for example at Camden Lock in London. Or by setting up at home with a turntable and learning the skills of DJing.

Alternately, they stayed on at school or at college on BTec fashion and design courses. In education and in the art colleges, far from finding an outright rejection of these subcultural ideas, young people experienced instead reinforcement, since, as Frith and Horne (1987) have argued, the British art schools, despite the lingering influence of the great traditions, have shown themselves in the post-war period to be at least open to pop and to the blurring of the distinction between high art and low culture. Art-student culture itself, often as a result of access to the art colleges in the post-war years, in contrast to other institutions of higher education, of working-class, particularly male working-class students, meant that there was a direct line between adolescent youth cultures pursued in leisure and what these students brought with them to their art education. Where this overlapped with the interests of the younger teachers and lecturers in the institutions (perhaps from the same background and experience themselves) there often emerged a rich output incorporating music, graphics, magazines and fashion as well as 'fine art' pop art.

I focus at length on buying and selling clothes because it is here that girls and young women have been more active. The male bias of subcultural analysis has relegated these activities to the margins, just as it has elevated style to a special place while locating fashion at some lower level. But when we look at these activities we can see not just their key importance to youth

culture, but also their lasting contribution to the particular integration of fashion and subcultural style which exists in Britain. Fashion in Britain, because of its roots in youth subcultures (rather than in *haute couture*) is a more popular form. It is in the 'designs' and in the 'fancy dress' often inspired by what once again Helmut Hartwig (1992) calls the 'crazy fantasies' of youth culture, that we see those ideas which find their way into the vocabulary of high-street fashion. That these images have no clear-cut point of origin, that they belong to no one person, that they emerge from the space of the subculture, tells us something important about the creative process itself and about the rich aesthetic opportunities afforded by subcultural involvement. (For black people whose expressive cultures have been so consistently marginalized and disregarded by the art establishment, this is a particularly intense struggle, which once again is carried out all the more insistently in popular black youth culture.)

Coding the feminine in the 1990s

Where subcultural theory concentrated on the final signifying product (the punk, the mod, the hippie, the bike boy, the new romantic, etc.) rather than on the material processes of cultural production involved in the creation of subculture, feminist readings of girls magazines, including my own, concentrated on the seamless text of oppressive meanings held together by ideology, rather than on the disruptions and inconsistencies and spaces for negotiation within the magazines. Where an emphasis on cultural production (and on ethnography) can reveal a much greater level of involvement on the part of young women in subcultures, i.e., in fashion and style and in other creative processes, so also can a more open-ended reading, particularly of the new girls' magazines like *Just Seventeen*, reveal a whole world of changes in the construction of femininity. Let me summarize both new ways of conceptualizing these popular texts and the new ways they themselves have found of coding the feminine.

As I describe at greater length in the chapter, 'From *Jackie* to *Just Seventeen*: girls' magazines in the 1980s' (McRobbie, 1991), *Just Seventeen* has replaced *Jackie* as the top-selling magazine among a female readership aged approximately between twelve and sixteen. If we look closely at the magazine, it is immediately clear how different it is from its predecessor. Most strikingly, the girl is no longer the victim of romance. She is no longer a slave to love. She no longer waits miserably outside the cinema knowing that she has been 'stood up'. She no longer distrusts all girls including her best friend because they represent a threat and might steal her 'fella'. She no longer lives in absolute terror of being dumped. She is no longer terrified of being without a 'steady'. In fact, she no longer exists because the narrative mode in which she appeared three or four times over every week, i.e., the picture love story, no longer exists. Romance is an absent category in *Just Seventeen*. There is love and there is sex and there are boys, but the conventionally coded meta-narratives of romance which, I argued in my

earlier work on *Jackie*, could hardly do anything other than create a neurotically dependent female subject, have gone for good.

Launched in the early 1980s, *Just Seventeen* took a risk in doing away with the stories. But they did it because they detected a new climate of confidence and self-esteem among their potential readers. They commissioned a detailed market research study which confirmed these feelings that the readership of popular girls' magazines no longer wanted to be 'talked down to'. They did not want 'silly' love stories and they did not want to be portrayed as 'boy mad'. The editors and staff, themselves young graduates, many of them familiar with debates around feminism and representation and the politics of pop, attempted therefore to create a publication which was highly commercial, exciting to look at, easy to read, but which also confronted 'real issues' and which abandoned the patronizing and condescending tone which had characterized girls' magazines in the past.

We can stop here for a moment and make a couple of points. Judging from the evidence of the market research, it seems that girls have changed. They do not want to be represented in a humiliating way. They are not dependent on boys for their own sense of identity and well-being. Magazines (like *Jackie*) which continue to offer this passive stereotype of femininity will simply lose their readers. As young consumers girls are therefore able to exert some power in the marketplace. They will buy a magazine as long as it presents an image of themselves which is compatible with those selves which exist outside the text. These other changing modes of femininity, in the school, in the family and in other leisure spaces, would therefore have to be considered in relation to the changing textual representations in the magazines and in pop culture, if we were to be able to build up a more coherent account of changes in femininity. While a single piece of market research can hardly be relied upon as a guide to social change and transformation, what is important are the social relations of cultural production inside the magazine which see such a survey as a necessary part of the process of creating a popular product.

The second point is that this dimension of cultural analysis lies outside the sphere of textuality. Looking at a magazine only as an inter-related series of texts can produce a 'reading' which does indeed pick up and respond to new and emergent modes of femininity, in the image or in the written text, but what it cannot do is to understand the complex and contested social processes which accompany the construction of new images. Looking not only at the finished products, the visual and verbal texts, but also at the professional ideologies which create the conditions of their existence, which are their prerequisite, alerts us to wider social changes, to social connections across otherwise conceptually separate spheres like the media and higher education, and to the magazine form itself as a non-homogenous entity, a system which 'openings'. Helen Pleasance has recently described this non-monolithic approach to popular magazines in the following terms:

There are all sorts of people involved in making meaning out of *Smash Hits* and *Just Seventeen*. Even within the company of EMAP Metro there

are different kinds of producers, different kinds of power, which might not sit easily together, and are, at best, in contingent alliance. . . . Theirs is only one of the many relationships which are played out across the magazines' pages. Journalists, photographers, advertisers, the music industry (with all its own groupings and differences), and for *Just Seventeen* the fashion and beauty industries all contribute to the final product (Pleasance, 1992: 79–80).

In *Just Seventeen*, femininity does indeed emerge as an altogether less rigid category. It is still predicated round the pursuit of identity (in beauty), the achievement of success (through fashion consumption) and the search for some harmony or stability (through happiness). There is more of the self in this new vocabulary of femininity, much more self-esteem, more autonomy, but still the pressure to adhere to the perfect body image as a prerequisite for the success in love which is equated with happiness. However, even here prettiness has given way to strikingness, models are chosen from the world of real readers, they are no longer all excessively tall and exceptionally thin. There are black, mixed-race and Asian models appearing on the front cover as well as on the fashion and beauty pages. There is also a redefinition of the feminine self. It can be endlessly constructed, reconstructed and customized. No longer lavishing attention on the male partner, the girl is free to lavish attention on herself and she is helped in this task by the world of consumer goods which is at her disposal. In love, the new female subject can expect to be treated like an equal or else feel quite entitled to 'dump him'. Pictures of boys, from real life and from the world of entertainment, are found on many of the pages of the magazine, but the self-mocking tone of the accompanying copy indicates a playful attitude.

How complicated and ironic this all is. The enslavement of romance is escaped partly, though not exclusively, through the freedom of the commodity. Images of bold, assertive and ambitious girls leap out in their Doc Marten boots from the pages of the magazine. Far from having to relinquish their femininity to achieve 'equality' these girls have demanded their right to hold on to it intact, even excessively (take note of the new love of cleavage in Kylie Minogue's pop video for her hit single 'Give Me Just a Little More Time' and in the sudden rising sales of the Gossard Wonder Bra). The chains of meaning which emerge from these bold, confident and strongly sexualized images interact with all the other new modes of femininity found beyond the world of the text or of popular culture. The more general meaning of these hyper-sexual modes of femininity will be something I look at in more depth in the concluding section of this paper.

But focusing for the moment on the magazines, it would be impossible to ignore the presence of various of the strands of postmodern culture on the pages of *Just Seventeen*, and this too is relevant to the construction of femininity in the 1990s. If the meta-narratives of romance have gone, they have been replaced by an avalanche of information. Fragments of 'info' about favourite pop stars, film stars and TV celebrities are now the raw material of fantasy. They too can now be customized to fit the reader's own

unique desires. She no longer needs the story format when she can simply be given the information. There is an absolute excess of information and 'gossip' about the stars in *Just Seventeen*. But even here, in this ecstasy of communication, there is a detached ironic tone. The reader is expected not to take it all too seriously. 'We know it's silly' is what the editors seem to be saying, when they announce this week's celebrity pin up, 'but it's fun and it's harmless'. In this sense, superficiality and pastiche allow readers to position themselves at a distance from the subordination of being 'just' a fan or just a silly girl. Trivia presented in a knowing guise, seems to mark an advance on the awful cloying claustrophobia of conventional romance. *Just Seventeen* is not anti-love or anti-sex but it does express a new horizon of possibilities in the field of sexual and social relationships for its readers. Girls are encouraged to think clearly about whether or not they want to have sex with their partners. They are given all the available information about contraception, protection from AIDS, and about how to make sense of love. Having friends of both sexes is given a prominent place however, and it is this new, more equal climate of sexual relations which girls are encouraged to enjoy.

This begs a final question which I will return to in the final section because it has clear repercussions for feminists and academics working in the field of Cultural Studies. If feminist academics have done a great deal to restore the status of romance by reclaiming it as a hidden pleasure of femininity, how historically specific is this pleasure? (See, for example, Radway, 1984; and Modleski, 1985.) Do girls now simply have to look elsewhere for romantic narratives? Or do they no longer need them? Do they no longer serve a useful as well as a pleasurable function? My feeling is that romance has indeed been dislodged from its place of cultural pre-eminence. The pleasures of popular narrative are now found in TV soap operas like *Brookside*, *Neighbours* or *Home and Away*. But these are hardly romances. There seems to be a shift away from the fixity of gender relations inscribed in the romance. It may well be that young women today prefer the quirky postmodern subjectivities offered to them in films like *Heathers* and in *Twin Peaks*. While the TV series deployed an intensely heightened sexuality in its cast of exceptionally beautiful female characters and good-looking men, it was sex, danger, terror and 'strangeness' rather than love or romance which held the fragmented structure of the programmes together. Yet for all the weirdness and the violence, the postmodern style of *Twin Peaks* seemed to address its audience adventurously, as knowing, intelligent consumers of postmodern culture rather than as hostages to the realist text. Perhaps one of the problems with romance in the 1990s is that its subject positions of masculinity and femininity no longer tally either with the more fluid subjectivities of the postmodern mass media, or with the ways of making sense of sexuality now required by young people in the post-AIDS era.

Rave, gender and cultural studies

In the first part of this paper I advocated an approach to youth culture which emphasized the role of cultural production. Not only would such a

perspective offer a more active picture of the involvement of girls and young women, particularly in relation to fashion and style, so also would it encourage a more longitudinal dimension which would connect being in a subculture with what happens next especially in the world of education, training or employment. It was also my intention to emphasize the aesthetic element in youth cultures, particularly the creative interplay between music, dance, fashion, graphic designer and other forms of visual image-making. While it would be unwise to suggest that involvement in these spheres alone facilitates a shift from being a consumer to a producer of culture on the part of the young person, that transition into culture-related areas has been and continues to be (perhaps at an accelerated rate) part of a broader social trend which has gone relatively unrecorded in the sociological literature on young people.

In the second section I argued for an analysis of those cultural forms associated in this instance with young girls (i.e., magazines) which was open to extra-textual factors including both the views and ideas which young editorial staff brought to the magazines and to the tensions inside the magazines between the various different departments and sections. This was a way, I argued, of allowing for the changing views and experiences which do find expression in culture (in this case in the magazines) to be recognized and understood. It was therefore a way of gauging the parameters of change in the popular representations of femininity.

When it comes to my third example, rave culture, both of these arguments, first about the aesthetics of subculture and second about changing modes of femininity, are less easily reached. Indeed, rave seems to overturn many of the expectations and assumptions we might now have about youth subcultures and for this reason reminds us of the dangers of looking for linear development or 'progression' in, let us say, the sexual politics of youth. Girls appear, for example, to be less involved in the cultural production of rave, from the flyers, to the events, to the DJ'ing, than their male counterparts. We can be in no way certain, therefore, that the broader changing climate of sexual politics is automatically reflected in rave. It is precisely the unexpected social relations and cultural practices which give the subculture its distinctive character. For example, just at the point at which class has receded as the conceptual key for understanding what subcultures are really about, and as questions of race and gender as well as those about cultural and aesthetic practice have come to the forefront, as they have done in this context, suddenly there appears from some unspecified site in the symbolic landscape of youth a subculture which rescues working-class youth from the distant memories of the sociologists and provocatively stages working-class masculinity shirtless, sweating, *en masse*, in the vast hangars of the rave party.

The scale is huge and ever increasing, the atmosphere is one of unity, of dissolving difference in the peace and harmony haze of the drug Ecstasy. The trope of masculinity is visually one of largely white, unadorned, anti-stylish 'normality'. But laddishness has been replaced by friendliness. Indeed, the second irony of this present social moment is that working-class boys lose

their 'aggro' and become 'new men' not through the critique of masculinity which accompanies the changing modes of femininity I referred to above, but through the use of Ecstasy they undergo a conversion to the soft, the malleable, and the sociable rather than the antisocial, and through the most addictive pleasure of dance they also enter into a different relationship with their own bodies, more tactile, more sensuous, less focused round sexual gratification. The orgiastic frenzy of dance culture also hints at the fear of AIDS among young people. Rave dance legitimates pure physical abandon in the company of others without requiring the narrative of sex or romance. Rave favours groups and friends rather than couples or those in search of a partner. The culture is one of childhood, of a pre-sexual stage, pre-Oedipal stage. Dancing provides the rationale for rave. Where other youth subcultures have focused on street appearances, or have chosen live rock performances for providing the emblematic opportunity for the display of style, in rave everything happens within the space of the party.

There is always something arbitrary and almost absurd about the objects or favoured ritualistic practices of subcultural choice. The spray of spit which showered on those standing near the stage at punk performances was as obviously 'meaningful' as it was shocking. Likewise the sight of rave girls in hot pants and bra tops dancing with a 'dummy' in their mouths, and a whistle round their necks, is as unexpected as it is unprecedented in the visual repertoire of stylish femininity. (The rave equivalent perhaps to the laddered fish-net tights and suspenders of punk.) This is a drug culture which masquerades its innocence in the language of childhood. Ice lollies help the 'revellers' to chill out or cool down. Whistles and babies' dummies hang round the necks of the participants. All three of these objects also mediate between the drug E and its absorption by the physical body. The symbols and imagery are self-consciously childlike and direct. Primary colours, psychedelic doodles, images taken from familiar advertisements, phrases and tunes lifted from children's TV programmes like the *Magic Roundabout*, *Sesame Street* and others; all of these along with electronically produced music with a dance-defying beats-per-minute ratio are crafted together, creating a rapturous response on the part of the 'revellers'.

Some features of rave are of particular significance in relation to the questions I have posed above. What kind of image of femininity, for example, is being pursued as female ravers strip down and sweat out? Dance is where girls were always found in subcultures. It was their only entitlement. Now in rave it becomes the motivating force for the entire subculture. This gives girls a new-found confidence and a prominence. Bra tops, leggings and trainers provide a basic (aerobic) wardrobe. In rave (and in the club culture with which it often overlaps) girls are highly sexual in their dress and appearance, with sixties TV stars like Emma Peel as their style models. The tension in rave for girls comes, it seems, from remaining in control, and at the same time losing themselves in dance and music. Abandon in dance must now, post-AIDS, be balanced by caution and the exercise of control in sex. One solution might lie in cultivating a hyper-sexual appearance which is, however, symbolically sealed or 'closed off' through the dummy, the whistle,

or the ice lolly. This idea of insulating the body from 'invasion' is even more apparent in the heavy-duty industrial protective clothing worn by both male and female fans of German techno music, a European variant of rave. In both cases the body signifies sociability and self-sufficiency. The communality of the massive rave crowd is balanced by the singularity of the person. Subcultural style is in this instance a metaphor for sexual protection.

The attraction of rave can partly be explained through the way in which in the 1980s club culture (which itself emerged out of black culture, the gay scene, and punk, and was symbolized in this country in the figure of Boy George) had become exclusive in terms of 'in' clubs, places, people and other 'insider' knowledge. Getting into clubs had become so difficult that many dance and music fans ended up staying away. At the same time the other club scenes had fragmented into so many specialist interests around music, race and sexual preference, that choosing where to go in this segmented dance market depended on an already stable cultural identity. You had to know exactly what you liked and who you wanted to be with and then you had to know where to look for it. But for sixteen-year-olds, growing up and going out is at least partly about exploring what sort of person you are, and who you want to become. In rave, even though it too, as it grew out of acid house, had developed its own 'underground of authenticity' and as Sarah Thornton (1990) described, its own VIP culture, this cultural foreknowledge was never a precondition of entry. Likewise, the selective door policies which had characterized the club culture of the late 1980s were also swept away in favour of the 'mass rave'. As the venues grew bigger, so did the crowd and so also the takings at the door and behind the bar. Rave promoters have become wealthy businessmen employing large numbers of people, including DJs, technicians, security staff, bar staff and professional dancers. This kind of level of organization put rave alongside the mainstream of club and concert promotion and removed it from the kind of small-scale entrepreneurialism associated with youth subcultures and with the level of cultural production which has allowed young people to play a more participative role in music. For raves to succeed they have to attract a large number of people. Rave organizers as a result tend to be older, male and already have had some experience in club promotion, often starting as DJs in smaller clubs and in illegal radio stations. Girlfriends help on the till, behind the bar or else do 'PR' by going round pubs distributing flyers. The rave culture industry thereby reproduces the same sexual division of labour which exists not just in the pop music industry but in most other types of work and employment.

Who supplies this market with clothes? Is this where young women might be found? Once again the answer to this lies in the 'mass subcultural' market for rave. The kind of outrageous styles which have in the past been linked with subcultures and therefore emphasized the line between subculture and mainstream, now reflect the disappearance of this divide. Rave style is the style of the moment, neither mainstream nor marginal, but both. Catsuits, leggings, bodies, 'playsuits' and trainers are available on the rails in Miss Selfridge or in Pineapple. Rave style for girls is provided at every level of the

fashion chain. It can be purchased in Camden Market and in other similar new and second-hand markets around the country, it can also be found in the high-fashion stores as well as in the small designer outlets. Pam Hogg, for example, designs largely for club and dance culture. Her clothes are worn by pop stars like Shakespeare's Sister. Helen Storey's best-selling beaded bra tops were also bought for wearing in the sweated atmosphere of the club. What this means is that as dance culture has expanded so also have the variety of activities involved in the production of fashion and style. There is still space for setting up a stall and selling new and second-hand clothes, but there is less of a gulf between the items found in the markets and what is available on the high street.⁵

The scale of rave applies not, however, just to the hugeness of the events and parties but also to the scale of cultural plundering which makes it so expansive. From black culture here and in the US it takes over two fundamental forms and practices, the dance party and the pre-eminent role of the DJ. These supply, with the help of new music and sound technology and pirate radio, a huge world of possibilities. The DJ with all of this at his (and nine out of ten are male) disposal becomes a kind of magician, creating a 'total experience', a controlled exercise in crowd excitement. The music generates this effect through combining an accelerating but monotone beat with a much lighter, often highly melodic fragment (taken from TV soundtracks like *Twin Peaks*, or else from a Phil Collins record, or even from a James Bond soundtrack) 'laced' on to the underlying beats-per-minute. Just as some strands of the drug culture of the late sixties enjoyed bringing into its musical repertoire 'silly' children's theme tunes and strains of popular 'ditties', this drug culture eschews social or political comment in favour of a kind of simple, happy music (happy hard core) which articulates with the 'smiley' logo of the early phase of Acid House. This in turn raises the question of the politics of youth culture in a post-Thatcher but also seemingly post-socialist moment.

The other attraction of rave is that, unlike the concert or 'gig', it goes on, it doesn't stop. This hyper-reality of pleasure, this extension of media (one which is found also in 24-hour TV and radio) produces a new social state, a new relationship between the body, the pleasures of music and dance, and the new technologies of the mass media. Rave takes pleasures which have sustained black and gay cultures and makes them available to a predominantly white, working-class and middle-class audience. It also transports this dance, drugs and music 'cocktail' into a distinctively British landscape, one which uses and celebrates a geography of small towns, new towns, motorways, and rural 'beauty spots', for not just all night or all day but for up to three days at a time. Not surprisingly, these raves, especially during the summer, begin to look like the hippie gatherings, or festivals of the late sixties. The sight, in summer 1992, of working-class male football fans converging in secret rural locations to dance out of doors and sleep in their cars before returning, after this saturnalia of mind and body experiences, to Liverpool, Leeds or wherever, is a strong statement about the appropriation of pleasure and the 'right to party' on the part of this particular (but expansive) group of young people.

I would suggest in conclusion that in rave there can be seen a series of social tensions (including those around gender and sexuality) which are manifest in the particular aesthetics of dance, music and drugs which come to characterize the phenomena. If there is, as Maria Pini (1993) argues, a 'text of excitement', an intense and relentless desire for pleasure which finds gratification in the combination of the sociability of the event, the 'friendliness' of the drug and the individual physical pleasure of its effects, there is also not just a 'text of anxiety', one which, out of fear of AIDS, results in the downgrading of sexual pleasure in favour of a childlike body pleasure (polymorphous perversity) but also a 'text of avoidance'. There is nothing like the aggressive political culture found in punk music. It is as though young ravers simply cannot bear the burden of the responsibility they are being expected to carry. There are so many dangers (drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, unprotected sex, sexual violence and rape, ecological disaster) so many social and political issues which have a direct bearing on their lives and so many demands being made of them, to be fully responsible in their sexual activity, to become good citizens, to find a job and earn a living, and find a partner and have a family in a world where marriage has become a 'temporary contract', that rave turns away from this heavy load and dips headlong into a culture of avoidance and almost pure abandonment. It does this in as visible and as spectacular a way as many of its subcultural predecessors and thereby provokes a strong social reaction. As a result, a dialogue is established, one which, as in the past, includes the intensification of policing and social control. The question then is the extent to which a subcultural aesthetic which asks of its fans that they 'shut up and dance' produces in the haze of pleasure and enjoyment a cultural politics of any sort?

But just how possible is it to talk about a cultural politics of youth in the 1990s? While I have insisted throughout this paper on the importance of positioning young people as active negotiators and producers of culture rather than simply its consumers, the very notion of a cultural politics implies a unity of focus and a direction which it is difficult to find in youth culture and which perhaps is not what we should be looking for in any case. Youth is not a stable undifferentiated category. Instead, it is cut across by ethnic, gender, class and other differences. What, therefore, it is more realistic to look for are cultural forms and expressions which seem to suggest new or emergent 'structures of feeling' on the part of sections of the young population, for example among young girls.⁶ Such a confluence of change can be seen, I have argued, in a magazine like *Just Seventeen*, where patterns of meaning which were once emblematic of the experience of teenage femininity, i.e., romance, have disappeared and have been replaced by a more diffuse femininity, one which has been set loose from the firm underpinning provided by romance. What results from this process of detachment from the poles of identity provided by romance is that femininity is constructed as the product of a number of less stable, emergent subject positions. Femininity is no longer the 'other' of feminism, instead it incorporates many of those 'structures of feeling' which emerged from the

political discourse of feminism in the 1970s. But it also, and perhaps most powerfully, exists as the product of a highly charged consumer culture which in turn provides subject positions for girls and personal identities for them through consumption. Finally, the subject of the new femininity also enters into social and sexual relationships from a different position than she occupied ten or fifteen years ago. Here too there has been contestation and change. Friendship, equality and difference are all now part of the vocabulary of relationships, alongside love, sex and pleasure. What remains to be explored is the way in which being 'emancipated' from romance co-exists, however, with new anxieties and fears from AIDS and through a clearer understanding of the dangers which young women confront in a world where they no longer look for or believe in the prince who will come riding by and protect them from such dangers.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to conclude this paper is to return to the 'micrological' level and to the subject position of parent which I hesitantly took up in the opening paragraphs. What, for example, are the debates and dilemmas which go through my head as I wait anxiously for my daughter to return from all-night raves? I find that the pleasure and excitement which my daughter and her friends experience as they discover new clubs and locations for raves, as they get to know new people inside the raves and as they uncover places and spaces where raves carry on and wind down when the clubs shut, are all clouded by my own fears and even panic about a number of things including drugs ('Is it possible to enjoy the music without the drugs?'); the people (i.e., men or boys) they meet; the dangers of being in cars driven by boys who have taken E; the dangers of being in such large crowds of people ('Do they have fire and safety regulations, I ask, nervously?'); and in fact almost every conceivable part of rave which contributes to its attraction, and to the threshold of thrill and excitement it provides.

And yet, of course, I am both interested in and pleased by her absorption in culture, by her coming home telling me she wished she had had a camera with her to show me what it was like in the car park after 'Coast to Coast' in Birmingham.⁷ I had also forgotten the wide range of knowledge about music which such involvement in a subculture produces. Television fades in interest as Kiss FM and many of the other illegal radio stations take over, broadcasting direct to this audience. Subcultural novels and video films, usually mythologizing some earlier subcultural or underground moment, like *On The Road* or *Ciao Manhattan*, begin to circulate among the group of friends. The first and only time I have witnessed my daughter interested in translating from her school German into English was when she came across a lengthy piece of reportage in a German newspaper about 'German techno music'. The cultural politics which emerges for these middle-class girls and their friends from the experience of rave fixes them in a space of identity which knows first and foremost what it is not. It is not 'square' and conventionally middle class. It is not too tightly bound to the 'parent culture'. Instead, this is a cultural space dominated by the experience of mostly working-class young people, black and white, and it is their culture and language as well as their creativity and work which establishes the

subculture in the first place. It is also a place of spectacle and display, as one club or rave tries to outdo the other in the special effects or theme-park attractions or videos it offers. ('At this point in the song', my daughter tells me, 'the lasers sweep down across the floor and the professional dancers also do this wide kind of sweeping movement'.) This interplay of dance, music and image produces a powerful popular aesthetic. Immersion in rave also influences patterns of love and friendship. Despite being ostensibly open to all, the codes of 'rave authenticity' which include 'white label' tracks, fanzines, flyers as collector's items, well-known DJs, famous clubs, legendary raves, double meanings in music lyrics, argot, ritual and special items of clothes, are continuously drawn upon as resources for constructing who the raver is, or in this case who my daughter and her friends are and who they are likely to get to know.

Perhaps the emphasis on authenticity is a pre-condition for acquiring subjectivity and identity in adolescence, one of the attractions of subculture being precisely that it offers strong subjectivity through the collective meanings which emerge from the distinctive combination of signs, symbols, objects, styles and other 'signifying texts'. These are not experienced in isolation from other more commercial teenage texts such as those of TV soap opera or series like *Twin Peaks* or films like *Flatliners* or other 'brat pack' movies. But the subculture far outstrips other forms of youth entertainment because of where it takes place. Outside the regulatory space of the home or school, the more autonomous space of the subculture contributes directly to the weakening of these other institutional ties. For this reason the attraction to subcultures lies partly in the modes of empowerment they offer. It is the extent to which such cultural forms and practices exist and take shape outside the controlling and defining gaze of otherwise more powerful others, including parents, which also accounts for the feelings of anxiety, fear and powerlessness experienced by conventional 'moral guardians' and also by parents. Sociologists have described and explained the power of youth subcultures as resistance, and the social reaction to these phenomena as 'moral panics'. These often nebulous terms find clarification and confirmation when the positionality of the parent, or mother, is taken into account.⁸

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Sarah Thornton for discussing this paper. See Thornton (1993) for a much fuller account of club culture.
- 2 Only a detailed research study would reveal the precise shifts and changes in the youth labour market along the lines of sex, class and race. What evidence there is shows that black working-class young women are more likely to return to further and higher education than their male counterparts. While middle-class girls continue to move into professional fields like law, dentistry and medicine, it is more difficult to find material on white working-class young women's training and employment.

- 3 See, for example, TV programmes like BBC *DEF II*'s Reportage series, edited by Janet Street Porter, which addresses the question of drugs seriously while avoiding the sensationalist reporting of the tabloid press.
- 4 There has always been a direct link between small shops and boutiques selling specifically youth-culture styles before they get into the high street and the club scene. For example, flyers and publicity leaflets for clubs and raves list these shops as the places where tickets can be purchased. Clothes shops like these, as well as record stores, will also supply information about local clubs and raves.
- 5 For example, the Revive Clothing shop in Coventry sells rave-style clothes which include new designer club clothes in rubber, lycra and cotton, but also 'restored' second-hand items, as well as new, 'perfect' copies of old classics, e.g., American silk bomber jackets.
- 6 Raymond Williams (1961) used the term 'structure of feeling' in his best-known writings on culture.
- 7 In this instance National Car Parks in Birmingham, along with the local constabulary, turned a blind eye to hundreds of ravers using their car sound systems to keep the party going for up to three hours after the club above the car park had ended.
- 8 Drawing on the work of Foucault, E. Carter (1984) uses the term 'micrological' to describe exactly this interface of power and powerlessness between mother and adolescent daughter. Carter is referring to conflicts over particular items of clothing, and in so doing offers a more local and contextual description of 'resistance'. Far from reducing the scope of the term, Carter's analysis brings into play questions of gender and the family, both of which were conspicuously missing in the model of 'resistance through rituals' developed by CCCS (Hall and Jefferson, 1976).

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