

# “CLUBS AREN'T LIKE THAT”: Discos, Deviance and Diegetics in Club Culture Cinema

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers ways in which filmmakers have attempted to address the subject of electronic dance music culture on the big screen. In what ways have directors tried to visually represent EDMC in fictional narratives? And to what extent have they been capable of capturing the recognisable elements of this phenomenon, by expressing its tropes and spirit in a plausible and credible fashion? Is it possible to distil the energy of the dance floor and represent the actions, practices and attitudes of its participants for an arguably passive cinema audience? How, for instance, can a key component of this subcultural terrain—drug consumption—be effectively illustrated through the devices of the movie director? By providing textual analysis of two recent, and similarly titled, North American productions—*Ecstasy* (dir. Lux 2011) and *Irvine Welsh's Ecstasy* (dir. Rob Heydon 2012)—this account aims to describe, and critique, both the creative approaches and technical devices adopted to solve this artistic problem. With attention to the work of Sarah Thornton, Stan Beeler and Simon Reynolds, this study will also raise questions about authenticity and verisimilitude in an intermediary field in which the dance floor becomes the subject of the non-documentary storyteller and the focus of the camera lens. The article concludes that when a primarily sonic and social medium is re-configured in a visual format, the results, while superficially engaging and entertaining, struggle to capture the charged excitement of the nightclub, the inspirational potency of its soundtrack and, ultimately, the genuine experience of the individual clubgoer.

KEYWORDS: EDMC, cinema, rave, popularisation, diegesis, Irvine Welsh, house music, ecstasy, cult fiction, soundtrack

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## INTRODUCTION: HORIZONTAL DANCE FLOORS AND VERTICAL SCREENS

THE UK'S Second Summer of Love in 1988 and associated rave culture created, according to Matthew Collin (2009: vii), "the most extraordinary entertainment form yet invented". For many, raves seemed secret, magical places, devoted to the intensity—and perhaps the illusion—of the moment. So how, therefore, might you mediate that visceral experience, in terms of cinema or literature? How do you make objective sense of it all, when the chaos and beauty of the moment resists further reflection or contemplation? Crucially, how might you capture the energy and movement of a nightclub for an (arguably) passive cinema audience? It is only now, with the benefits of time, hindsight and an expanding canon of both academic works, and cult film and literary texts, that serious attempts can be made to understand the last great subcultural movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the secondary cultural forms that seek to tell its story.

I explore these questions by focusing on the transformation of a subculture—in this case, rave culture—from the apparent organic moment of its genesis to its development into something wholly other by way of this cultural production and distribution of knowledge. The mechanics of this process form a kind of creeping cultural osmosis, from niche to popular worlds. Sarah Thornton refers to this trajectory as the journey from "the private to the public sphere" (1995: 34), as rave culture emerges from the dark corners of the underground to the bright, projected lights (in this instance) of the high street multiplex, where the tropes and modes of this culture become more widely translated. Although there have been many studies on the history of EDMC and the subcultural implications of the rave scene in particular, there has been little consideration of its wider *cultural* implications. Beeler's *Dance, Drugs and Escape* (2007) was a welcome attempt to address this issue, but suffers from the restrictions of a descriptive approach which does not allow for deeper, critical consideration. My research therefore seeks to address what Sean Nye (2011) has identified in *Dancecult* as "a current lacuna in club culture scholarship—namely, the scarce critical-aesthetic engagement with filmic representations of EDM culture"<sup>1</sup>

In terms of methodology, this article will identify and then address the problems inherent in making filmic representations of EDM culture by focusing on two films—both titled *Ecstasy*. These films use club culture as context and therefore can be usefully compared and

contrasted. Both are principally Canadian productions appearing over 2011–2012. For the sake of clarity, each film will be identified by reference to its director. The film based on an Irvine Welsh story will therefore be referenced as “Heydon”,<sup>2</sup> the other as “Lux”.<sup>3</sup> In terms of verisimilitude and diegesis, textual analysis will reveal a great deal about the tropes and modes of EDMC film discourse. However, there are also challenges inherent to a purely textual approach and therefore in order to respond to the problems highlighted, the article also holds these cultural artifacts up against the interpretations of Sarah Thornton and Simon Reynolds to outline the gap Beeler defines as “the dialectic relationship between the phenomenon and its artistic representations” (2007: 182). Further, I use material from key personnel involved with both films to deconstruct the filmmaking process.

### EVERYTHING BEGINS WITH AN E

THE WARM THROB of an electronic beat could be felt long before the *Second Summer of Love*, and one need only consider *Saturday Night Fever* (dir. John Badham, 1977) to appreciate how club culture had already formed a suitable context for film. However, my research contends that in its nascent *rave* form, it formed the last of sociologist Dick Hebdige’s “spectacular subcultures” (1983: 97), with a latent homology formed of attitude and argot, music and fashion, dancing and drug consumption. From a basis of research and participant observation, the rave scene contained an implicit cultural and political agenda more evolved than that allowed by Simon Reynolds who argues, reductively, for the scene’s “sensations rather than truths, fascination rather than meaning” (Reynolds in Redhead, 1998: 91). The rebellion may have largely been a transcendental blending of the solipsistic and the hedonistic, and contained wholly within the parameters of the weekend, but in political terms... to party *was the point*. Further, the homology of that party held together well enough to form a cohesive context for viable secondary representation.

Cinema has always been preoccupied with contemporaneous concerns, seeking to project our subconscious fears and desires. Beyond these broader articulations of the *subconscious*, however, cinema is also interested in telling stories of the apparently nefarious, unknowable world of the *subcultural* underground. It follows, then, that the bright light of this spectacular subculture should, in turn, attract filmmakers—all keen, as indicated, to locate their narratives within the popular cultural landscape. And indeed, as the socio-cultural impact of this rave scene became clear, then EDMC did indeed come onto the radar of both fiction and documentary filmmakers keen to use contemporary preoccupations as source material for their discourse, ultimately forming a recognised subgenre, a cult canon of “EDMC films”. Although undeniably a broad church, to roughly outline this topos it includes such films as *Human Traffic* (1999), *Groove* (2000), *Sorted* (2000), *51<sup>st</sup> State* (2001), *24 Hour Party People* (2002), *Berlin Calling* (2008), *Beyond The Rave* (2008) and *Weekender* (2011). EDMC encompasses a wide range of cultures and musical styles, however these films—from both sides of the Atlantic, and from both the UK and continental Europe—choose to centre broadly on the house music sound and architectural environment more associated with the rave scene. Although the boundaries of these rather baggy EDM cultures are quite

porous, taken together these film texts highlight the ongoing permeation of EDMC itself, as a transnational, subcultural phenomenon. Indeed, one might even argue for a subset of Ibiza-based texts, including the comedic vehicle *Kevin & Perry Go Large* (2000), *Morvern Callar* (2002), *It's All Gone Pete Tong* (2004) and the as yet unreleased documentaries from Puff Daddy, and British actor Jimi Mistry's *And The Beat Goes On*.

To establish a starting position by which to consider the function of these film texts, let us turn to Beeler, who argues: "Club fictions have two important functions with regard to club culture and its aficionados; the first is to describe the subculture to the mainstream and the second is to allow the members of the subculture to celebrate their participation in ways other than clubbing" (2007: 25); in essence, a polarity between the subcultural voyeurs, and those already entrenched within the scene. For clarity let us refer to these two functions of film texts as Beeler's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> law. It is, I would argue, Beeler's 1<sup>st</sup> law that is the more pertinent. It is natural that clubbing films will be of interest to clubbers themselves, involved as they are in the primary activity. But it is this mechanic of cultural dissemination that contributes more broadly to the production of knowledge around EDMC—not only cinematic, but literary and media-focused—extending to those outside inner circles.

## FROM SCENE TO SCREEN

WE HAVE now outlined the subcultural environment with which this paper is concerned, and identified some examples of cinematic texts that use such terrain as their context. Now let us focus a little more closely, to consider some of the problems that arise when making cinematic vehicles from club culture—that laudable, if loaded, desire to capture the loose energy of clubland in celluloid—before focusing even more closely on the two *Ecstasy* films. Analytically, there are really two approaches one might take. Firstly, one might pull back to examine more broadly ideas of cultural production, and the context of the production of these film texts. Although I do make arguments for the socio-historical importance of these films, and discuss their production and soundtrack budgets, I am unable within the scope of this article to analyse both the film texts, and their audience. In choosing an approach, therefore, I felt it more productive to focus on particular scenes, and let a deconstruction of those scenes tell the wider story. Equally, my interest derives from the perspective of the dancefloor, of the cinema auditorium, and is therefore intuitive and empirical, rather than a more technical viewpoint that may have been obtained from behind the decks, or behind the camera.

Club culture itself very much represents a striving for that most problematic and elastic of concepts: authenticity. Sarah Thornton is particularly successful in defining the micro politics of authenticity in *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. She explains: "I've come to conceive of 'hipness' as a form of *subcultural capital*" (1995: 11, emphasis in original) and to adopt this financial model in cultural terms, clubbers would certainly consider their subcultural bank accounts flush with such capital which, according to Muggleton, is "obtained through being 'in the know' about what is 'in' or 'out' on the

subcultural scene” (Thornton via Muggleton, 2003: 9). In his article “Authenticity as Authentication”, Allan Moore moves this discourse forwards by incorporating the notion of subjectivity, arguing that authenticity is “interpreted by an engaged audience as investing authenticity in those acts and gestures” (2002: 214). In essence, it is the audience, not the text itself, that confers authenticity, and that is very much a mutable gift, dependent on the cognisance of the audience, whether participant or voyeur, in Beeler’s terms. In essence, everyone’s perceptions of the scene are always mediated in some way, whether through flyers and magazine adverts, or indeed through these “secondary artistic phenomena” (Beeler 2007: 153). As a direct consequence, for any film to succeed in terms of authenticity for a participatory audience—Beeler’s 2<sup>nd</sup> law—it must render a particularly believable environment, notably in its key nightclub scenes. Conversely, any slight divergence will quickly leave the film unbelievable, and therefore a failure, at least in terms of Beeler’s 2<sup>nd</sup> law: a choice between agony or ecstasy for a participant-cognisant audience. In conversation, the Hacienda DJ Graeme Park—someone with a quarter of a century of experience in clubland—comments on the plurality of the club experience in his comments about the presentation of the New York nightclub Studio 54, in the film *54* (dir. Mark Christopher 1998), as “amongst the worst club scenes I’ve ever seen in my life. You watch it thinking, clubs aren’t like that”.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the more axiomatic issues inherent in rendering a clubbing scene in cinematic form are very helpfully highlighted by the director of the American film *Groove*, Greg Harrison.<sup>5</sup> In his DVD commentary, Harrison pulls back the magic movie curtain to reveal himself in the more mundane robes of the Wizard of Oz, working the controls. There were, for instance, only 50 extras filmed for the club scenes, which take place over one night at a rave in San Francisco, and although the director carefully blends different shots, their sparse numbers create issues in terms of a naturalistic representation of a warehouse rave scenario. To divert attention, Harrison employs speed changes from 24 frames per second (fps) to 48fps to give a stylised, slowed down impression of the dancing and focuses on individuals, rather than groups. This technique was achieved manually, with the assistant camera personnel changing the camera aperture accordingly, to allow for more light. Harrison created a so-called “Spritz Team”, on hand to add sweat to the extras, to give them the look of the glistening raver. Most interestingly, Harrison explains the need to stop the music entirely to allow for dialogue. To counter the disruption to the flow of the scene, a “sync dancer” was employed out of shot, listening to music through headphones, to keep a beat that the extras could follow in silence, almost as a kinetic metronome.

Next we must abandon all tenets of naturalism and instead move into a world of supernaturalism to consider the film *Beyond The Rave* (dir. Matthias Hoene 2008). *Beyond The Rave* is British horror company Hammer’s take on the rave scene, which some might argue cashes in as drugsploitation, but actually stands as a statement about the ubiquity of the culture. The film details an illegal rave promoted by the undead—vampire promoters and blood-sucking DJs. Here, nightclub becomes abattoir, playing on the subcultural connectives of rave *underground* and supernatural *underworld*, both cultures concerned

principally with life after dark. The arrival of dawn means the end of party for the ravers; the end of immortality for the vampires. Despite this rather preposterous proposal, the club scenes themselves are amongst the most successful and accomplished of any of the films listed, largely down to the efficacy of the art director Chris Rosewell and production designer Alex Lowde. The setting for the party scene is a warehouse in Plumstead, East London, playing the part of a rural barn. However in terms of *mise-en-scene*, to turn the vacuous space into a believable rave, a DJ booth is constructed from scaffolding, as well as podiums and the fixtures and fittings of a rave environment. In terms of the key club scene itself, the use of green lasers, firebreathers and the visual projections of the film's Visual Jockey, are points of detail with which a clubbing audience would feel familiar, reinforcing the cinematic presentation of the rave experience. Director Matthias Hoene employs wide shots to establish the context of the rave, along with pull backs and camera swoops to engender a sense of activity. In addition, hand-held cameras weave amongst the crowd to allow viewers to become immersed in the dance floor milieu.

Cremona (2004) usefully distinguishes between ludic and paidian styles of cultural performance, where a ludic performance is defined by an onstage activity, and paidian is much more an immersive, participatory event. The dance floor of a rave is a decidedly paidian, chaotic formation, something DJ Dave Haslam describes as the "reaction between the music and the crowd" (in Redhead 1998: 160); where, for Thornton, the "liveness" in club culture is displaced from the stage to the dancefloor" (1995: 29). To successfully translate that experience in visual terms, a director needs to enter that world, to get amongst the tangle of bodies and pile-up the shots in order to disentangle the linear and disorientate the viewer. Perhaps more than anything, for the rave scenes to succeed their soundtrack must register. In *Beyond The Rave*, the beat of the music matches the pulse of the vein, blood flowing through the body like the mellifluous movement of dancers across the floor. To further engender this reach for an apparent authenticity, the producers turned to Pete Tong, a DJ, producer and record label executive with great heritage in the music industry (his own name, in fact, is *cockney rhyming slang* for "wrong", referenced for comic effect in the film *It's All Gone Pete Tong*). Tong recalls the request from the film's producers as a call for "really dark, cutting edge, electronic music".<sup>6</sup> In the judicious supply of hard, dark, techno beats, his choices—channeled via the actor playing the DJ within the rave scenes—undoubtedly contributes to their overall effectiveness. As he goes on to detail in his explanation: "the wonderful thing about electronic music is that so much of it is filmic, and so much of it is crying out to be married to footage in a film".

The need for extras to populate these fictional dance floors is also foregrounded as an issue within this film. From the perspective of participant observation, this is an aspect I find especially interesting. I was an extra in the filming of the Michael Winterbottom film *24 Hour Party People* (dir. Michael Winterbottom 2002) which, in part, details the rise of the rave scene in the northern English city of Manchester, and I therefore enjoyed the rather peculiar ethnographic position of researching EDMC in a club that was actually a film set; fictional fieldwork in the very insides of the movie machine.<sup>7</sup> The actual Hacienda

nightclub at the heart of the film had been only recently knocked down. In a sense, its demolition represents in architectural terms what subcultural theorists like Reynolds refer to as a “post-rave fragment” (in Redhead 1998: 85)—the dissolution of the homogenous and spectacular into the disjointed and postmodern—as the club was sold off, brick by brick. As a consequence of this architectural deconstruction, the film’s producers reconstructed the cavernous nightclub in a nearby warehouse.

In the *Winterbottom* film, details of architectural verisimilitude are used as rivets with which to construct the physical set. Almost on a 1–1 scale, nearly everything was in the right place: the alcove seating, the balcony and perhaps most importantly... the bar, which was serving alcohol and certainly contributed to the “naturalistic” flow of the evening. The soundtrack to the party was supplied by actual Hacienda DJs—Mike Pickering and Dave Haslam—to further engender this sense of authenticity. As Graeme Park explained in our interview: “TV and film, I think, are generally not very good at getting club scenes done and that’s because people have to pretend they’re dancing to music, whereas in those *24Hour Party People* scenes everyone *was* dancing to music”.

### THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE ECSTASY

HAVING USED these previous films to identify some of the key problems inherent in the production of EDMC cinematic discourse, let us now move on to consider, together, the *Ecstasy* film texts. The fact that both films are Canadian-financed productions and either in part (Heydon) or entirely (Lux) filmed in Canada, highlights the very strange coincidence of their concurrent release.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the connections highlight the on-going penetration of club culture within more dominant culture/s, servicing what Redhead describes as “a young, cinema-going audience’s experience of the weekend” (2000: xxii), and this connection is only accentuated when you note the decidedly similar URLs for the websites of the two films: <http://www.ecstasymovie.com> (Heydon) and <http://www.ecstasyfilm.com> (Lux). Indeed in conversation with Rob Heydon, he explains that copyright conflicts with the Lux project meant they ultimately had to change the name of their final project to *Irvine Welsh’s Ecstasy*.<sup>9</sup>

In narrative terms, both films demonstrate the discursive traits that haunt many EDMC texts—the same parabolic storyline arc that carves the trajectory Thomas Pynchon famously described as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in reference to V2 rockets. This arc maps the genesis, zenith and the nadir of the narrative: the anticipation... the actuality... the aftermath that orientates us through the story of the film. However, in itself this structure is also the journey of a night-out: going out... coming up... coming down. Indeed, it is the story of club culture itself: the first flowering of the rave scene up to 1992... through the vainglorious commercial mutations of the 1990s... to a demise Dom Phillips (2009) very precisely pinpoints as 31 December 1999—the commercial club scene now bloated, solipsistic, mired in money and violence. Kembrew McLeod, as with other commentators, links this parabolic journey with that of the (first) Summer of Love as “the subcultures of the rave scene (and their music)

grew darker and more negative as the initial drug-enhanced utopianism wore off and the drugs and relations between ravers became more harsh" (2001: 64).

Although these films take place in an indistinct near-present they are certainly not focused, like *Weekender*, on the pre-1992 nascent rave scene form, the "genesis" (a word that itself gave the name to one of the original main raves). However, as narratives moored in a post-rave context and located in legal nightclubs rather than illegal warehouses, they are nevertheless mindful that, to function as subcultural narratives, they have to cohere to certain cultural signifiers—what Middleton refers to, in rather reductive terms, as the "different elements making up a socio-cultural whole" (1990: 9) that can be quickly understood as signposts by both audience and filmmaker. Hebdige discusses "subcultural stylistic ensembles"—subcultural clusters—formed of "those empathetic combinations of dress, dance, argot, music, etc" (1983: 101) that provide what Middleton refers to (again reductively) as "structural resonances" (1990: 9). Consider the titles of the films highlighted previously—*Groove*, *Sorted*, *Weekender*—all of these phrases lifted directly from clubland, utilising the argot of the dance floor to allow for what Saussure describes as language that "blends with the life of society" (in Hebdige, 1983: 90) or, for Thornton, "cryptic shorthand, innuendo and careful omission" (1995: 146). Clubbers are used to linguistic nods, to semiotic winks. In the film *Sorted*, for instance, the "straight" character Carl has to divine, then define, what is even meant by the word "sorted". As he drifts further into the world of the nightclub and its sleazy semiotics he begins to understand, as his stock of subcultural capital rises.

In semiotic terms therefore, even the titles of these two *Ecstasy* films build bridges of experience and understanding between creator and consumer, and it must be assumed there is an agenda—at turns both provocative and promotional—behind the choice of the word "ecstasy" as the title for a film. First patented as Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), street level marketers realised they needed a more immediate and powerful street name and settled on, in the words of Collin, "a seductive new brand name—the word ecstasy" (2009: 28). Such is the ubiquity of EDMC that the potential audience for these two films—the so-called "Chemical Generation" (Redhead 2000: xxi)—would be well aware of this connotation of the word, beyond its dictionary definition. There is therefore a level of assumption that to even pay your money and enter the cinema we are "in the know", in Thornton's terms, the title functioning as codified shorthand *for* that audience, a signifier of the film's subcultural content and intent.

However, if we now return to the two films, the use of the word "ecstasy" becomes somewhat problematic. In the case of the Lux text, the red pills that form the focus for the film's drug consumption are pharmaceutical rather than recreational, and stolen from a mental hospital, and are therefore not MDMA. In the case of the Heydon film, the issue is less to do with acuity of pharmaceutical verisimilitude and more broadly to do with the marketing of the film itself. The film is based on an Irvine Welsh short story entitled "The Undeclared" and subtitled "An Acid House Romance". The film, therefore, appropriates the title of the actual collection, *Ecstasy*, rather than the novella within. As argued above, one

might assume that this is for the greater marketing impact of the final product, only further reinforced by incorporating the name “Irvine Welsh”, an author Collin argues is “the most extraordinary literary phenomenon of Ecstasy culture” (2009: 302) becoming “its icon and its bard” (2009: 303); the author Beeler calls “the most prominent writer of the Chemical Generation” (2007: 56). The novel *Trainspotting* (1993) and subsequent film adaptation (dir. Danny Boyle 1996) provided Welsh with immediate and substantial credibility. His name, therefore, remains a guarantor of a certain countercultural intent, in terms of content, soundtrack and cinematic style, and that cachet is transferable, as evidenced in the marketing poster for *Irvine Welsh’s Ecstasy*, which echoes *Trainspotting’s* own poster:

BBFC [18] Consumer advice:  
Contains strong sex, frequent  
drug use & very strong language!

Perfect chemistry –  
Methylenedioxymethamphetamine  
[Keep out of reach of children]

## Irvine Welsh’s **Ecstasy**<sup>18</sup>

18 VIDEOS MAY BE AVAILABLE

Artists: Stephen Kinross, Frank, Billy Bragg, Natalie Brown, Carlo Riva, Anthony Power & Oliver Anderson. Directed by Rob Heydon.  
Written by Rob Heydon & Paul McCafferty. Based on the novel by Irvine Welsh. Published by Vintage Books.  
Publisher – Random House Group Ltd. Produced by Rob Heydon. Executive producer – Jon Cusack. Michael Heslop  
& Andy Hines. Production designer – Peter O’Donoghue. Hair – Craig McClelland. Makeup by David Heston.  
Editing – Andrew Macrae. Photography – Richard Sillitoe. Film by Smith. Design – Mark Barrow. Book available – Vintage Books.  
Discover a lot of books on [www.randomhouse.com/vintage/ecstasy](http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/ecstasy). Follow us [@vintagebooks](http://twitter.com/vintagebooks).

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**Ecstasy is the first romance  
film of its kind...  
a great movie from my book**  
Irvine Welsh – Author

**Chemicals crackle in this film  
Love and Ecstasy fizzing  
across the screen  
More chem-rom than rom-com**  
Simon Morrison – MixMag

Based on the #1 book by Irvine Welsh  
author of ‘Trainspotting’



FIG. 1. MARKETING POSTER FOR IRVINE WELSH’S ECSTASY BY HEYDON (2012).

Both films subscribe to what film critic Mark Cousins, in his work *The Story of Film*, refers to as “Closed Romantic Realism”. In other words, the fourth wall is very much in place and the drama is contained entirely within the construct of the film. Cousins references the word *romance* as “emotions in such films tend to be heightened” and *realism* because

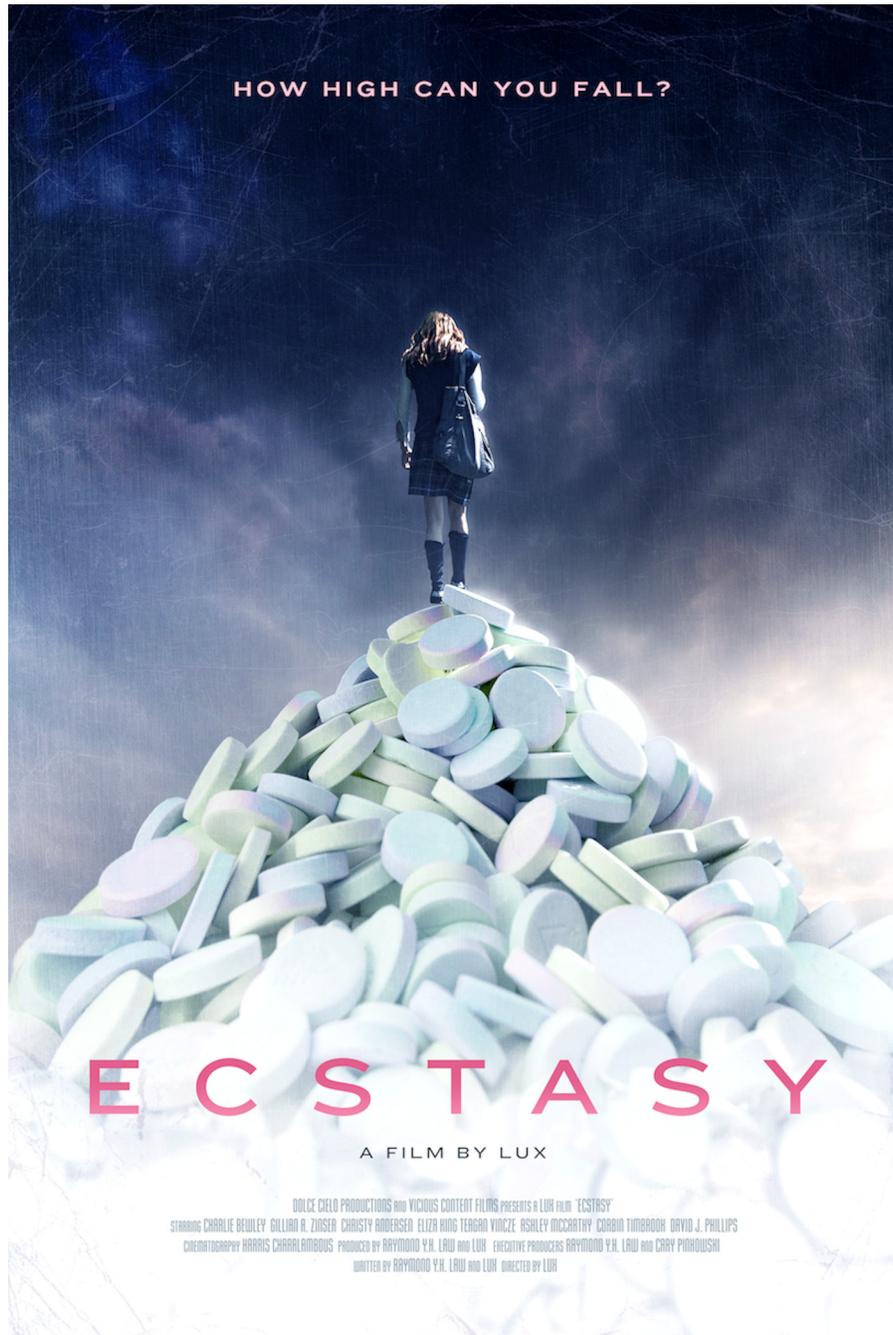


FIG. 2. MARKETING POSTER FOR *ECSTASY* BY LUX (2011).

“people in such movies are recognisably human and the societies depicted have problems similar to our own” (2004: 494). Within the realistic construct of the nightclub, emotions certainly are heightened when accelerated artificially by drug consumption. There are, of course, humans within these texts, and love stories at the heart of both films. However, it could be argued that the most intriguing character in both narratives is the drug itself;

the most interesting relationship being that which unfolds between the characters *and* the drug. In the Heydon film, a voiceover towards the beginning of the film recounts the various street names for MDMA: “eccies, disco biscuits, white doves, the club drug, a love drug, X, MDMA, 100% pure ecstasy”, almost assembling argot like the mountain of white pills that forms the marketing poster for the Lux film, on top of which stands a girl in her school uniform (see fig. 2).

Elsewhere in the Heydon film, white pills fall through the air, in slow motion, like chemical confetti, suggesting oversupply and overconsumption, that the underlying driver of both films’ narrative is excess, as the characters imbibe, indulge, OD.

### THE DIEGESIS OF THE DANCE FLOOR

A CLOSER reading of particular scenes from these two texts will reveal structural issues particular to EDMC film discourse. As Hebdige remarks, music (in film terms, the soundtrack) is of paramount importance to subcultures, and therefore the films that fall within the EDMC film canon, and have music itself at their core. So let us now consider the use of diegetic codes within the Lux film, pausing first to define what is meant by diegesis, a key element of film grammar. Diegetic and non-diegetic music can broadly be defined as follows: diegetic music is that which occurs *within* the environment of the film—for instance a car stereo, a radio or, more pertinently, the music a DJ is playing in a nightclub, what Gorbman describes as “music originating from the narratively implied spatio temporal world of actions and characters” (1987: 21). This is set against non-diegetic music, likely to be the underscore or incidental music to the piece, designed to be detected by the audience in the cinema but not the actors within the narrative.

In one of the early foundation scenes of the Lux film, the four principal female leads are in the nightclub where one of them works as a DJ. All consume the red pills that one girl, Dianna Meyer, has stolen from her mother Alison, a nurse at the aforementioned mental facility. To convey the impression of the drug taking hold, the director makes sharp cuts in the edit to denote excitement and heightened sensation: eyes are dazed, sweat drips, heads are thrown back in a sexualised display of ecstatic rapture. However, perhaps even more important than the director’s schema is how the transformative effect of the drug is conveyed *acoustically*. As Monaco remarks, our eyes choose what we see, whilst our ears have no such choice (2000: 155). Thus, in diegetic terms, the music bulks up and throbs, sounds melt, voices are distorted and there is a ringing in the ears. This is a key signifier of EDMC film texts as we, as viewer, *share* the muffled tones of the beat perceived subjectively by Dianna’s sister, Chantel, mediated through a soundsystem and then through the pharmaceutical filter of her drug consumption. Therefore the ringing sound might be said to cross the diegetic divide—not only diegetic but *metadiegetic*—a bridge of shared, subjective experience that links audience with action, to build this connection. In this scene, we not only share Chantel’s point of view, but also her auditory equipment. This is the key scene for the drama that follows; however it also reflects an essential and peculiar issue in EDMC films: how

to convey the transformative effects of a powerful drug for a passive film audience. It is not simply a matter of *mise-en-scene* as geometrics: in the process of rotating a horizontal dance floor onto a vertical cinema screen, it seems heuristically that the intensity of the experience dissipates, and an uneasy tension appears between the audience's desire for a good time, set against cinematic representations of *other peoples'* good time.

This dislocation is illustrated by consideration of the film's soundtrack. The composer of the film's diegetic underscore, Nick Hussey, had to retrospectively fit his music to the movements in this club scene; for instance, to the tempo of the dancing and the movements of the DJ, to give the impression that her physical actions have sonic consequences. Hussey was given time-coded scenes in isolation and without any postproduction sound, to then imagine and compose the music that might have been played in the club at that time. Different takes of the same shot would use different dummy tracks and therefore Hussey had to write to the rhythm of the movement he saw, which results in music ranging from 126–140 beats per minute. In an interview, he explains:

You have to make it fit—you have to find the certain tempo of the scene and work it out so there's no singing where there's any talking and vice versa. When you're writing a song that's easy—there's two verses, the chorus and outro, all in a set order. But when you're doing a film you can't. You've got to cram it in when you can—get the best bits from the scene, not necessarily the best bits from the song. It's challenging.<sup>10</sup>

In a subsequent interview, Hussey remarked that the process was further complicated by subsequent re-edits of the film. Such edits have re-cut certain scenes and therefore further thrown out the synergy between the *mise-en-scene* and diegetic soundtrack.

Moving onto the Heydon film, these issues of authenticity and *mise-en-scene* also come to the fore. Here, the clubbing scenes fall into two distinct categories. Firstly, there are the principal club scenes portraying the Edinburgh nightclub at the centre of the piece, The Sanctuary, which were filmed on a set in Northern Ontario. In conversation, Heydon agrees that for the film to translate, "you have to make it as authentic as possible"; in other words, the audience has to buy into both the story and the situation. Principal male lead Adam Sinclair, who plays Lloyd, agrees that it is hard to convey the energy from the dance floor and still "capture that club element".<sup>11</sup> A film set can be an unnaturally artificial environment, with long pauses between moments of high activity. Sinclair explains: "I've danced for four hours before but it's very rarely that I've danced for 20 hours". This is an environment where you very quickly have to find your way to "the moment", whilst the director must bear in mind very practical issues, for instance the fact that the bass from a speaker may be enough to make the camera shake.

In one of these set-based club scenes, the two protagonists meet on the dance floor and fall in love. To convey this process, Heydon incorporates circular dolly shots as the dance floor beyond the two dissipates. The music, which up until this moment throbs and pulses, now cuts as they approach one another, other dancers melting out of focus as we centre on their connection and the chemical reaction between them. Whether the effect of actual love,

or merely the love drug, the objective for the director is to convey this intense experience in visual terms. As Heydon himself questions in our conversation: “How do you show visually what happens internally—with your brain, your cerebral cortex—everything glowing and lighting up? We tried to do it with the music, with the editing. But then pouring water over someone’s head in a club really just showed this overwhelming emotion of coming up, of melting”. As opposed to these more staged scenes—a Northern Ontario set doubling up as an Edinburgh nightclub—Heydon also employed guerilla tactics, taking his actors undercover into the Liquid Rooms nightclub in Edinburgh, and filming clandestinely with Canon 5DMKII cameras, fitted with prime lenses. Essentially a hand-held camera and therefore relatively inconspicuous, Heydon describes such cameras as “technology that would be able to capture the essence of that scene”. These scenes are undoubtedly more successful in terms of the more aggressive machinations of *cinéma vérité*, taking the dramatic action into a working nightclub, and overlaying fiction upon a genuine, and therefore automatically authentic, club experience.

The diegetic soundtrack is key—and must connect both sides of the cinema screen—if the audience is to buy into the scene, be part of the party and feel the effect of the beat. Gorbman accurately takes issue with the term “incidental music”, arguing “the moment we recognise to what degree film music shapes our perception of a narrative, we can no longer consider it incidental or innocent” (1987: 11). With films that focus on the tropes of electronic dance music as narrative focus, the importance of the soundtrack is even less “incidental”. Here creativity and artistry can be reduced to numbers, where the commercial imperative is keenly felt. Heydon secured 51 tracks for the soundtrack for under \$20,000 which, as he himself points out, compares rather favourably to a single episode of American TV series *CSI*, where the budget is more likely to be \$30,000 per track. It took eight months to secure permissions for the music used and even then, some pieces that were used as dummy tracks for the club scenes were not ultimately secured, causing, once again, slight discordance between diegetic soundtrack and the kinetic flow of the scene. Heydon explains that their solution to this issue lay, quite simply, in: “the magic of filmmaking—editing and lighting and having them dancing to a certain BPM and finding something with a similar BPM that we do have permission to use and just cutting so that it works”.

The club scenes in the Heydon film detail a coherent homology of effects that mark that film out as an EDMC text. Indeed, the character Lloyd himself describes life’s cocktail, comprised as it is of “the clubs, the drugs, the music”. It is for directors like Heydon to mediate, in order to turn the loose homology of this primary phenomenon into Beeler’s commercially-viable “secondary artistic phenomena”. Once again, the energy is lost the further removed we are from the white-hot heart of the dance floor itself. The fecund mind of Irvine Welsh, for instance, had to impose a structure in order to turn club myth into the story “The Undefeated”. As Monaco remarks, “the great thing about literature is you can imagine; the great thing about film is that you can’t” (2000: 158) and director Rob Heydon therefore imposes further order, not only visually but in terms of narrative—for instance making the principal male character Lloyd an international drug dealer—to create a more

dynamic story, in keeping with other tropes of the neo-gangster genre (the nightclub milieu, it seems, is as natural habitat for the criminal as it is for the vampire). As such texts evolve, they become more coherent narratives, rather than impressionist renderings of a chaotic subcultural scene. In that process, however, it might be argued that Heydon's film suffers from being *too* ordered, the romantic realism too neatly "closed off", in Cousins' terms.

In conversation, meanwhile, the author of the piece, Irvine Welsh, luxuriates in the abject, the ugly detritus of the dance floor, revealed once a nightclub's illusory glitter glow dissolves and reality's lights come back on. That world is undeniably hard to capture in cinema. Even Welsh remarks: "There's nothing you can do in fiction that does justice to the experience of going to a club".<sup>12</sup>

### AND THE BEAT GOES ON

ASIDE FROM these very practical issues in conveying the club culture experience to a movie viewer, there are also more broader, moral issues to consider, in terms of both content and context. Some theorists take umbrage at the cultural colonialism that such films represent. For instance, Beeler remarks such cultural products mark a "selling out to the established entertainment industry" (2007: 49), as the quotidian world seeks to take ownership (and thereby profit), in telling stories about its darker, nefarious underbelly. In such terms, "the idea of deviance becomes just another marketing tool" (Calcutt and Shephard 1998: xvi), beset by "the contaminating processes of commercialization, commodification and diffusion" (Muggleton in Redhead 1998: 91). Muggleton differentiates between the superficial and the subcutaneous. Club culture locates itself in a cultural, often physical (and, some might say, mythologised) underground—a bank vault stacked with bullion bars of subcultural capital. Some would argue that to render that world in two-dimensional celluloid is the ultimate betrayal, where the cinema screen represents the very height of superficiality. At this point, club culture becomes a subcultural carnival where, for the price of a ticket, the *overground* world can gawp at the *underground*, as though at an exhibit in a freakshow. Moore remarks "this commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives" (2002: 218). Nevertheless, it is hard to counter this viewpoint, especially when, as detailed in this article, the representation is inauthentic or flawed, in which case the text fails both of Beeler's laws: unable to either educate the noncognate, or entertain the initiated. Equally, EDMC films fail when the morality of the narrative is unconvincing and overwrought, for instance in the Lux text, which adopts the rather reactionary standpoint of establishing a nightclub (Saturday) in counterpoint to a church (Sunday)—the one nocturnal, the other diurnal. Such films reinforce a moral panic—"so prevalent around 'ecstasy' and dance culture in Britain in the 1990s" (Redhead 1998: 3)—in cultural terms. Thornton describes this as "a form of hype orchestrated by culture industries that target the youth market" (1995: 136).

It must be assumed that the *Ecstasy* films, in their representation of recreational drug consumption, diegetic and non-diegetic music codes, reference to clubs, and especially in

their provocative referencing of MDMA in their title, are indeed placing themselves centrally within the EDMC film canon. Taken together, aside from the coincidence of their title, the release of the two films demonstrates the on-going cultural penetration of club culture and its relevance as a subject matter for a contemporary cinema audience. Furthermore, it might be argued that the texts mirror the recent resurgence of EDMC in both Canada and the USA. It is commonly understood that, despite the fundamental importance of cities like Detroit, Chicago and New York in the early evolution of house music and club culture, it remained more a fringe subculture on that side of the Atlantic as compared to the UK, where it took a very deep hold. However, ubiquitous stories in British media such as Simon Reynolds' recent article in the *Guardian*,<sup>13</sup> and Luke Bainbridge in the *Observer*, are now quick to detail how America has fallen back in love with a scene it no longer calls "house", but "EDM", reinforcing McLeod's notion that "the ongoing, accelerated process of genre naming speaks volumes about group identity formations" (2001: 59).<sup>14</sup> The narratives of these two films might therefore feel more vibrant and contemporary in North America, compared to other territories, where they may conversely seem dated. A continually shape-shifting, evolving construct, EDMC has arguably enjoyed a deeper, and certainly longer, impact than any culture since the late 1960s—for Thornton "bigger than punk and akin to the hippie revolution" (1995: 136)—although some theorists will be quick to resist Thornton's standpoint. Certainly in terms of longevity, many in the audience for either *Ecstasy* film, even with an 18 certificate, will not have been born during the flowering of the Second Summer of Love in 1988 and yet will be cognisant of the tropes and modes of club culture referenced within the discourse.

The role of film has contributed—and will continue to contribute—hugely to the popularisation of EDMC. UK rave culture began very much as a scene for a cognisant 1980s in-crowd, emerging then quickly evolving in key cities like London, Manchester and Nottingham, mediated through style magazines such as *iD* and *The Face*. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the scene had burrowed deep enough into cultural consciousness to form a viable subject matter for mainstream UK TV series such as *Morse* and *Men Behaving Badly*, as well as comedic vehicles such as *Kevin & Perry Go Large* (dir. Ed Bye 2000).<sup>15</sup> "We are DJs", says Kevin, early on in that film. "And where do DJs go for the summer?" What once was the inside secret of Ibiza has become an in-joke, and it's a joke everyone can get in on. Perry knows the answer and by 2000, so did everyone in the audience.

For many participants congregating around Beeler's 1<sup>st</sup> law, these films will stand as unreliable narratives. In a sense, however, the subjective, qualitative question of whether these texts are accurate and authentic as subcultural artifacts is less important than the central truth that they exist. Indeed, when something is parodied, it actually says a great deal about the subject of parody, as well as the execution itself. For it is within these fictional ethnographies that the landscape of the nightclub is revealed, as well as the habits of casual and recreational drug consumption and the hitherto secret, almost magical machinations of the DJ; revealed not merely for a restricted number of participant clubbers, but a potentially infinite crowd of global cinema goers. Their interest is piqued, I would contend, because

such cult film texts afford a glimpse over “the edge”, a position backed up by Calcutt and Shephard who argue such films allow us to enjoy “the experience of extremes vicariously without having to leave our mundane mainstream experience” (1998: xi). Thus, in the darkness of a cinema auditorium, such cult cinematic texts provide a voyeuristic glimpse at the abject, without having to get one’s own hands dirty.

In conclusion, therefore, I would contend that we need these film texts, in order for EDMC to fully register in the broader cultural sphere. Although the key texts under consideration in this paper are restricted releases and undeniably minor films (as EDMC films, and indeed many cult films, tend to be); whatever the limitations of their cultural or box-office impact; whether documentary or fiction; whether good, in fact, or bad; such films will ultimately combine to form a cohesive, evolving, visual-historic EDMC archive. Moving forwards, the discussion of such a canon may inform a fresh rubric by which we can decode other subcultural scenes, via reference to such secondary artistic representations; these films and books, that orbit a scene like cultural satellites.

In terms of verisimilitude, this paper has demonstrated that it is difficult to replicate the nuanced tropes of the dance floor in film form; a difficulty further complicated by the fact that audiences are likely to be seated in a quiet, dark cinema, far removed from the heightened emotions of a club experience. A cinema audience is expected to be quiet and still; a complete anathema to the vibrancy and movement of a club dance floor. As discussed, EDMC is a paidian construct and therefore also not suited to the style of documentation that, for instance, the rock scene enjoyed. Instead, some participants may prefer to close their eyes and project personal clubland memories onto the screen of their own unconscious. However for the majority, it is the projection of the films discussed within this article that functions as an invitation from across the symbolic, though fragile, divide of the movie screen. Despite their failings, such films provide the keys to the underground for voyeuristic non-participants, subcultural tourists and neophytes of Beeler’s 1<sup>st</sup> law.

For in the warmth of the cinema, we are invited to exchange our tokens of subcultural capital for drinks at the bar; to step onto an imagined dance floor, built of celluloid.

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## NOTES

- 1 In his review of *Berlin Calling* and *Run Lola Run*.
- 2 In terms of the Heydon film, my journalism work led to invitations to two screenings prior to distribution (one in London and one at the Glasgow Film Festival) as well as the opportunity to spend time with the author of the source material, Irvine Welsh, the film's director Rob Heydon and principal male lead, Adam Sinclair.
- 3 The Lux film has had a limited release in North America, via DVD and streaming methods. I need also point out that, although the copy I have is marked as a final cut and will be the one I refer to, it appears the film has subsequently been re-edited.
- 4 Graeme Park, interviewed at the home of the author, 23 March 2011.
- 5 This interview can be found in the DVD extra entitled "Behind The Scenes Featurette".
- 6 In the documentary extra to the DVD, entitled "From Script to Screen".
- 7 This experience was recounted in a chapter in my book, *Discombobulated* (Morrison 2010).
- 8 Although in terms of Heydon's film, one must also remember the importance of Irvine Welsh's source text, and the central role of Edinburgh and Edinburgh characters.
- 9 Rob Heydon, in conversation with the author for a feature for the UK music magazine, *Mixmag*, in the Novotel hotel, Glasgow, 19 February 2012.
- 10 Nick Hussey, film score composer, interviewed by the author, All Bar None, Manchester, 25 March 2011.
- 11 Adam Sinclair, actor, interviewed by the author for a feature for *Mixmag*, in the Novotel hotel, Glasgow, 19 February 2012.
- 12 In conversation with Irvine Welsh, Molly Malone's, Glasgow, 19 February 2012.
- 13 "How Rave Music Conquered America", 2 August 2012
- 14 The 22 April 2012 edition of the *Observer* magazine carried Luke Bainbridge's cover story about the DJ David Guetta and the penetration of EDM in the USA.
- 15 The *Morse* episode referenced is "Cherubim and Seraphim" (1991), directed by Danny Boyle, who would go on to direct both *Trainspotting* and *The Beach*, both of which have EDMC resonances. The episode of *Men Behaving Badly* was "Cardigan", from series 5.

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