

Clubbing in the afternoon: Dancing on a Nico Nico Caravan in Osaka

Later on I learned that the pre-party had started at 9.30 ... 9.30 AM that is! We arrived at 3PM, but even then it was a surprising sight, as I would normally associate dance ecstasy in a club with night time, but not with Sunday afternoons. But here we were, in a club in Osaka in the middle of 250 Nico Chuu, who danced frenetically, while two screens showed a constant stream of videos, which originally emerged on Nico Nico Douga. This was less a Karaoke-, but a club-event, though there were Karaoke elements in it. Dancing, and not singing was at the centre, and the atmosphere was ecstatic.

What about this event was specifically Nico Nico Douga? In this post I try to answer this question by conducting a little thought experiment: I want to extract everything that is not Nico Nico Douga, and see what is left. First I extract the amount of euphoria, which you encounter in any good club night. This is quite easy, but it is not enough. There is still euphoria left. What I saw was an unusual amount of euphoria. So as a next thing one might have to extract the energy of any fan movement on the rise. I have not been there at the early days of soul, punk, techno or whatever you might think of, but I guess the atmosphere was more electric than on any normal club night, and as electric as here.

However, almost all of the examples above would use some sort of intoxication to reach this euphoria. Here, hardly anyone drank alcohol,

¹ In this series of short and preliminary (!!) texts we publish first results of the Metadata Project's ethnographic research on Nico Nico Douga. You can find more under "output" on <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project2.php> and on our research blog: <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/metagold/>.

let alone take any other drugs. The drug of choice seemed to be the combination of video and dance. Thus the next thing that I have to look at more closely is the relationship of dance and video. First I have to extract VJing, which is nowadays a pretty standard ingredient of many club events. What is left is the peculiar relationship of the Nico Chuu to the screen. I am still not sure how to read this, but one thing struck me especially: Nico Chuu dance with the screen in a particular way. When the avatar character on the screen moves to the right, the fan, who copies the moves of the character, would move to the left. From their subjective point of view, both parties – the fan and the avatar – move to the same direction, which then, as they are standing opposite to each other, results in moving into the opposite directions.

I remember that in German clubs in the 80ties it was quite a common thing to dance in front of mirrors (where, of course, the mirror image would move always in the same direction as oneself). This is definitely something different (and we should all be glad about it, as mirror-dancing encapsulated all that was bad about the 80ties). So in a way, one argues that here we have a transition from mirror image to avatar. The avatar is not a mirror image of the dancer. The avatar takes an own position. But the dancer is not a mirror image of the avatar either. Even though the dancer copies the avatar, he or she does so not do it as a mirror image. So is this really dancing together with the avatar?

But again, one has to be careful to assign all this directly to Nico Nico Douga. Dancing with screens has another important trajectory in the arcade dance games, where you compete by copying the choreographies on screen as exactly as possible. The close and intimate, almost dialogical, yet still immersive relationship with the screen has also a tradition in karaoke, where the singers directly address the screen, while they read the lyrics and sing along.

Most of the dances were collective – that is: all Nico Chuu dance alike, whilst they line up looking in the same direction. The moves are often theatrical: Big gestures, hands stretched out, a bit like the moves of cheerleaders. Boys and girls do the same moves, which sometimes results in boys dancing in quite a camp way, and at other times in girls doing some pretty martially looking theatrical moves. So I guess, once more I have to see how much I can extract when it comes to this form of collective dancing. I was told that this form of theatrical collective dancing is part of the Japanese club culture in a much bigger way as it is in the West.

The majority of dances are fully collective. However, there is at least one dance, which puts one girl in the centre. At the end of this dance, all other dancers kneel down, so that only one girl is still posing in their middle. I am not sure whether this girl is selected in advance, or while the Nico Chuu dance the dance. In any case, we have here a combination of collective dancing and star cult of the amateur.

What else should we extract? I guess the next thing would have to be cosplay culture. At least one third of the Nico Chuu on this event was cosplaying. However, this subtraction is especially tricky. A lot of the cosplayers were playing characters that emerged or changed on Nico Nico Douga. A cosplayer that I met at this event told me that Nico Nico Douga seems to have brought about major changes to the cosplay culture. Cosplay has become more popular, and changed its quality. In this interview I also learned that cosplayers enter the stage when the video relates to their character – especially of course, when their own character is shown on the video, but also, when their own character has a positive relationship with the character, the music or the dance moves on screen. So we have a double influence here. On the one hand Nico Nico Douga has changed cosplay. So it might make more sense to extract Nico Nico Douga out of cosplay: You would get cosplay as it was 2 years ago, but not as it is now.

Last but not least I need to mention the music. The beat was situated somewhere between Eurobeat and Eurotechno, combined with high girl voices, fast melodies, sometimes anime theme songs. However, in between there were other elements. One moment was especially memorable: A keyboard-crusher-themed-video collapsed into several minutes of pure noise. Another moment was a sentimental song, produced by an Otaku. Then there were 20 Minutes, when the music shifted once more: An amateur singer took the stage and sang in rock style, while the Nico Chuu surrounded him. He was obviously quite popular, a local Nico Nico Douga star. All in all, a highly eclectic mix. Could you imagine Eurobeat, noise and rock all in the same club night in the West?

So what can we learn from this? A.) If you extract the elements that are not unique to Nico Nico Douga, what is left is a new combination of formerly existing, but disparate fan culture elements. Each time the Nico Chuu meet, they will combine some new fan culture elements into it. B.) The offline ecstasy of the Nico Chuu is generated in the online world. I am not sure that I can think of some other ecstatic offline events that emerge in the online world. C.) Resulting out of that, a specific trait of these Nico Nico Douga offline events might be the way that Nico Chuu react collectively, but also immediately and physically, to the characters on the videos. D.) The videos are user-made, so this is still an almost fully decentralised form of fan culture – online as offline. There are not so much other examples that I can think of, which do the same.