Re-imagining subcultures: networks of art and authenticity.

by

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Abstract

In recent times subcultures have received quite a bashing, to the extent that they no longer attract the attention they deserve. Based on six months field work in Perth, Western Australia, this paper re-examines the area of study, opening up to less exact, or bracketed, perspectives and to show how subculture has shifted to become a far more amorphous and individuated practise than previously documented. In this case, subculture is put forward as a macro perspective of collective ‘alternativeness’ across a wide number of previously separate urban communities, where the unifying features are individualism and creativity; regardless of the official title of the subculture. And it is also this individualism, creativity and alternativeness that unites, or connects, the diverse urban communities, resulting in a cultural network of ‘cool’ across the cityscape. By utilising this method of viewing subcultures I hope to show how subculture can be re-imagined and subsequently remain a valid field of social enquiry.

Biography

Steve is in the final year of his PhD at Murdoch University, where he has been examining the superficial nature of contemporary urban sociality and the way in which it produces new forms of community. Tied up in all this has been a research, and personal, interest in youth and subcultures, from where this paper comes. He has recently returned from Oxford, UK, where he presented a paper of the necessarily superficial nature of contemporary sociality in the face of overt individualism.

Re-imagining subcultures: miasmic urbanity and networks of authenticity.

This essay explores the cityscape of Perth, Western Australia, and how it is made up of numerous overlapping subcultures, all vying for a bit of space and culture to call their own. It will show that membership in these subcultures is not mutually exclusive and that most members of one group will be actively involved with other groups. In fact the most important aspect of contemporary subcultures is that they are outwardly more about the individual than the group, but this individuality, and in particular the emphasis upon individual creativity, seems to be the unifying factor in this urban milieux. In this case, subcultures, though initially referring to static and iconic cultural categories of say hip hop or punk, are actually amorphous collections of individuals, all engaged in an urban scene and in which they may move between multiple genres, or attempt to define themselves as outside of all genres completely. But these individuals are not simply passive consumers of urban culture, they are essentially
self-validating machines, all choosing which parts of culture they want to be a part of. Furthermore, this high level of personal choice, or individual autonomy, is heavily based on their understanding of authenticity, leading to groups developing where individuals seem to congregate around varied cultural understandings, producing short lived moments of conflagration. So for the sake of this paper, rather than subcultures being iconic or ‘locked in’ social groupings, they will be examined as networked collections of individuals, based loosely around personal creatively and collective understanding of authenticity, and while seemingly transient and superficial, are actually the social units that start to make up a cultural geography of the city.

**Method**

The data for this piece was gathered over six months fieldwork in central Perth and the suburb of Mount Lawley, which is an urban village one kilometre away. Information was assembled primarily through recorded interviews, but also through attending a number of exhibitions, live music performances, cafes, pubs and nightclubs. There was little in the way of an initial study group, as I was particularly keen to examine how people get to know each other but to simultaneously not to bracket out real subcultural activity (through focusing on what I assumed to exist). Participants were found through polling a number of subcultural and arty (bohemian) shops in both areas and through approaching, or being introduced to, people at venues. As a result of this methodology, I got to see how individuals negotiated their way through both urban culture and the city itself, and experienced firsthand how they developed meaningful networks of friends and subcultural style.

**A bit of subculture history**

Subcultural analysis has had some interesting turns. Starting as the term for a culturally and geographically excluded group, the early Chicago school examined the outwardly chaotic migrant culture in Chicago, where migrant slums were seen as being below, or beneath that of mainstream American culture. In this regard, subculture came to mean those not engaging in the wider society; they were kept at bay by specific zones within the city, and then kept culturally distant by being refused social membership in the parent culture (Whyte 1943). This placement of subculture shifted in the fifties to the more cultural groupings. Jazz musicians and marijuana smokers were labelled as deviant (Becker 1963) and then this deviance was associated with anomic (ref Merton), to produce a view of the subculture as being both a personally elected collection of outsiders and as a grouping of those who are not fully integrated in the society. The importance of this shift is that it changes the boundary between the subculture and the parent culture from that of geography and resentment, to that of culture and sociality, where instead of the two cultures being separated by quite obvious walls, the subculture began to be something that was actually part of society, though in a different state to it. The next large body of work to take up the subcultural baton turned to the counter-culture and, utilising a predominantly Marxist framework, showed how subculture was part of the generational answer to alienation and other glaringly large contradictions in the oppressive parent culture. The body of work from the Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies dealt with aspects such as what subcultures were trying to represent and what they were trying to resist (Willis 1977; Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979; Cohen 1980; Cohen 1987). This, is in my mind, probably the most broad work in the history of the field, but has come under heavy criticism for basing the majority of their perspectives on masculine portrayals of the subculture (REF McRobbie), for being too synchronic (Thornton 1995) and for being locked into a static, romantic and overtly rigid view of what subculturalism
entailed (Redhead 1990) PAGE. These issues start to be addressed in both Muggleton’s (2000) and Malbon’s (1999) work, where they both attempt to apply post-structural methodologies to the field. And, particularly in the case of Malbon, utilising Maffisoli’s (1996) work on the “tribus”, or short lived cultural groups, to move towards defining subculture as a much more fluid and transient form of sociality; as opposed to a static and canonical structure that dictates cultural norms to its members. This move towards a more post-structural perspective had a number of effects. The first, that instead of subcultures being seen from a narrow and locked in perspective, they are now viewed as reasonably dynamic and fluid social organisations. But the second effect is to blur the edges and make subcultures so temporary and transient as to render them unusable as a methodological or analytical device. So in the quest for correct or valid representation, the subculture has moved from its static and overarching form to a vague and ethereal social device; something that is unusable in sociological terms.

However, by observing any mall or high street, it is quite evident that people, especially youth, are still wearing clothing that signifies belonging to a cultural genre. It is also quite evident that people are also attracted to sites of very specific cultural consumption, where one form of cultural product is valued over another. So, in other words, despite the demise of subculture as an analytical tool, people are still marking out cultural space, and, as per any community, creating their identities through belonging to, and separating themselves from, specific communities and cultures. In this regard then, subcultures are still around, but not in the same way as they have, to this point, been described. Currently, they seem to be more of a cultural norm of differentiation as opposed to being separate from society, and are something that is inherently part of the system of cultural consumption and which simultaneously enables individuals within the system to demarcate some personal cultural territory. They are also far less rigid and far more open to individual modification, but perhaps the largest difference seems to be not in the subculture itself, but in the ways that the innumerate urban cultures seem to be tied together in a system of cultural capital, loosely centred on authenticity and creativity. The following attempts to show, through a number of examples around Perth, how this system of urban subculturalism supports itself.

**Exploring Perth**

My initial points of contact were a number of little boutiques on the outskirts of Northbridge, Perth’s entertainment district. Each one sold small collections of exclusive clothing, ornamentation and accessories. But this was not the sort of ‘exclusive’ one would find in the more upmarket shopping districts, this was an alternative type of apparel, comprising of low print runs on tee shirts, locally knitted dolls, painted sneakers and skateboards, antique hairpins and dicky bows as well as an assortment of dresses and trousers, all either made locally (at the art college around the corner), or in Melbourne and Sydney. The décor in these shops was also not like the interiors of the boutiques in the city centre, these shops had little in the way of mirrors or large signs, and there was a complete lack of banging techno. These were scruffy looking places, or decorated more like lounge rooms, and the music was a mixture of anything ranging from hip-hop to country music, but all a little strange and, for want of a better term, exotic. Many shopkeepers said that they regularly ran small exhibitions for local artists and one even had a graffiti paint shop out the back. This connection to art was how I had stumbled across the shops, having found an article advertising a multisided exhibition across eleven local boutiques. When I
started speaking to the people who ran the shops about their clientele they generally gave me a wide range of types of people, including punks, artists, techno heads (or new ravers), rich, poor, alternative and mainstream, but the key thing was that they were people who wanted something different and individual.

It was evident, even from this early point, that there was something going on between multiple groups of city dwellers. This was not the same as punk, or other earlier subcultures, where the image was predefined. This was more like a macro theme of individualisation, or possibly trying to achieve difference, which imbued the patrons of these establishments. Also there was the focus on art, and it was not just the link between exhibitions and the shops, but almost as if the people who where coming in were trying to construct themselves, the same way as one would create art. This was the first hint at the nature of these groups, the second came from an even that I went to shortly after.

I heard about the ‘noise gig’ from one of the patrons at a boutique, they said it would be a good place to start, as ‘all-sorts’ of people would be there. It was at The Bakery; a government funded art and performance space, where the more avant-guard local and international bands tend to play. My first impression was the strangeness of the crowd. Not that they looked that odd, but that they were so eclectic. From my initial observations these people had very little in common. Some wore suits, some wore leather jackets, some were dressed in casual cloths and others looked like they were straight off the couch after a five-day marijuana binge, but the one thing that united them was that way that they wore something different, or something that separated them from what I would consider normal clothing. The second point of note was the music. This was, from what I could make out, noise. There was very little in the way of composition or rhythm, just the odd pattern that would loop for a while and then change as the guitarist selected a new feedback pattern or the keyboardist changed the settings on his machine. The crowd reaction to this was also interesting, this was not like the collective consciousness of a concert, where everyone attempts to experience the same thing, this was almost the opposite. While people were together in the venue, they were separate in terms of what they actually heard, a point supported by the vast amount of dry ice in the venue, which essentially separated all partons into their private aural environments, and subsequent interviews, which proved how different each individuals perspective was. Another point of interest was the way that roughly half of the patrons completely ignored the main act and sat out the back smoking and talking. It was almost as if the music was not that relevant. The important thing seemed to be the presentation of the self and the conversations that went with going out. Since then, I have spent many evenings at this venue, and though the theme or type of music being payed changes quite dramatically, it maintains a fantastic eclecticism, but simultaneously maintains a theme of experimentality, be it in the form of punk, hip-hop, drum and bass, or death metal. Similarly, though the crowd changes with the type of performance, it does not change that much; the dress of the crowd may generally reflect the type of music being played, but not to the exclusion of a large percentage people from the original ‘noise’ night. And regardless of type of music, all wear something that I can only describe as ‘different’.

Though the experimentality was not as immediately evident, The Flying Scotsman, in Mount Lawley maintained the same high level of eclecticism; on any given night hosting possibly a wide range of individuals in at least partly subcultural attire. This venue was not necessarily home to one form of subcultural style, but rather tried to
accommodate all of it. One night I went here and observed that in one corner of the large front barroom were a few gothic looking types, next to them were some people that looked like football supporters, next to them were some guys wearing flannel shirts, black jeans and long hair, and so on. The music being played a popular alternative ac, which though leaning towards electronic music, seemed to be accessible to all. In the small back bar there was a collection of drama and music students putting on small five-minute performances, and attracting a similarly diverse crowd.

In the three scenes above, I’ve tried how these areas have as their focus, not a singular style, but rather an association with subculture in general, or rather an association with slightly alternative urban culture. These places are not so much about one group, or one genre, as per more traditional readings of subculture, but about a meta-narrative of distinction. In other words these places seem to be primarily about subcultures in general, without worrying about the specifics of dress or musical style; this is left up to the individual.

**New forms of Subculture**

There are a number of points that I want like to make about the above examples, the first of which concerns the categorisation of groups. Though the above was at pains to point out the heterogeneity of subcultural affiliation, the truth of the matter is that the older forms of cultural stratification still, at least to a degree, exist. This is evident by the growing number of gothic, punk and hip-hop shops (to name but a few) as well as the emergence of some contemporary subcultural transformations, such as ‘emo’ or ‘new rave’. However the number of people actually immersed in these cultures, to the exclusion of others, is quite low. It seems to be mainly a particularly youthful demographic, roughly fourteen to sixteen, that takes on these categorisations, using them to firstly have a taste of personalised consumption outside of family purchasing habits and secondly as an aid to both identity construction and group belonging; facts supported by numerous comments from interviewees. But as these individuals move into social arenas that require a wider form of interaction, these categorisations are eased up, and while individuals may take some of their subcultural identifiers with them, such as a style of shoe, or a certain type pants, they generally move away from absolute identification with singular subcultural groupings. In this regard the categorised subcultures serve more as an ideal type as opposed to something that actually exists. They are seen as a style to borrow from, or something to provide the basis of ones cultural ensemble, not the entirety of ones social and cultural self. So while hardwired subcultural style still exists, and a number of individuals continue to take on these cultural ideals, it seems that most utilise small parts of these cultures to build their own. To a large extent, these individuals seem to be like the cultural omnivores of Carrabine and Longhurst (1999). However rather then the specific genre of music and culture having little affect they are heavily influenced by their interpretation of what is ‘alternative’ and ‘authentic’. So rather then individuals having no preference for particular genres and being open to anything, what seems to be the case is that they have quite a widespread knowledge culture. But this knowledge is based on hierarchies of cultural capital, which centres on how ‘un-commercial’ the cultural product is. This method of creating elitism though maintaining an economy of limited knowledge is nothing new (Bourdieu 1979; Elias 1994), but the interesting thing, especially for urban or youth studies, is that it is now outside of classic views of subculture and has become part of the cityscape, creating a subculture of cross-spectrum urban cool. This is the first point then, that rather then
subcultures being dead, what they have become is an amalgam of all cultures, based not on the specifics of the particular genre, but more on the maintenance of networks of alternativeness and authenticity.

The second point is the high level of individuality inherent in this network. As per the reflexive-modernity theses of Giddens (1991) Beck (2002) and Bauman (2001) the majority of interviewees expressed opinions that were consistent with a view of contemporary sociality, where individuals have to find their own way in the world. This was not just taken as an obligation, but as something that almost defined the scene. Individuals repeatedly commented that they were not in a subculture and that they were their own person. So much so, that rather then adhere to the dictates of a predefined subculture, which was seen as naïve, they took it upon themselves to create their own image, though it was usually based on a pre-existing subculture. This type of self-reflexivity also occurred in terms of developing a repertoire of cultural artefacts, which became manifest in the way that, through both observed and recorded conversations, individuals took it upon themselves to report on and validate their preference for everything from shoes to movies. Similarly the inherent individuality also had a dramatic affect on the way that community ties were both created and maintained, as individuals moved through the urban environment, electing who they would relate to and how often. Another important factor relating to individuality and community is that all respondents said that communities existed throughout the city, but you had to find them; if you did not personally seek them out they would not come to you. In this we can see, once again, the importance of the individual quest, not only to define themselves and their cultural preferences, but also to find a community of similarly minded people. But for me the most important aspect of individualism and subculture, is the way that the close-knit groups reported in the sixties and seventies (Willis 1978) have given way to a far more fluid and superficial social environment, which simultaneously allows for group involvement, individual change and adaptation, distance from the group, and interaction with multiple groups, if so desired.

This individuality also worked its way into the creative aspects of these communities, where on one level they made their own events, and on another they almost had to be creative to be part of this scene. With regard to the first point, these people made a lot of their own entertainment; coming in the form of exhibition openings, live music events, drama shows and regular evenings at pubs, which were generally centred on a particular style of music or DJ, but always organised by a patron of an establishment, not an owner. As such they were actively involved in the creation and maintenance of their own social lives, something that no doubt added to the vibrancy of the area. At the same time, this level of creativity also goes some way to describing one of the central themes across the social urban networks.

It became evident very early on that cultural production played a huge part in this scene. So much so that the expression of subcultural style started to seem irrelevant. What seemed to be more important was what the individual made, or the fact that they made something outside of work commitments; a point supported by the fact that every interviewee said that they were involved in art, music, writing or some other form of creativity. This point is also supported by the emergence of art and culture magazines, such as Juxtapoz, which both aestheticise all aspects of subcultural style and simultaneously combine all genres into one cultural and creative milieu. It also became quite evident that this creativity not only took down barriers between
subcultures or previously distinct groups, but also went some way to creating a form of distinction between the subaltern and the mainstream. For these people art, or cultural production generally, seems to be the new marker of cultural difference. Where something that is created locally, or something that the individual has looked hard to find, is deemed authentic, and other cultural products, ones that have been mass marketed to the rest of society, are inferior. Making the consumers of those products also inferior.

To attempt to tie all this together, what I have seen is a shift in subcultural activity from the canonical structures of ‘locked in’ and mutually exclusive genres to a much more fluid and eclectic mix of styles. It is not centred not around a particular type of music, but on a philosophy of creativity and knowledge of the urban cultural environment. This seems to be based partly on the aesthetization of everyday life (Featherstone 1992; 1995), but also on the aesthetization of all aspects of subcultural style, which when mixed together has created a new cultural hierarchy of the subaltern and the different. Driven more by individuality than group belonging, this, almost random, network of groups and individuals functions on what is currently cool or hip, using this as both a form of congress, and as a form of distinction between themselves and the, largely imagined, passive consumers of suburbia. This last point reveals the way that this seemingly unordered mess of urban culture is performing the differentiation function of subculture, and as such shows the fields continued existence. However it is doing it, not as a resistant structure, but as part of the cultural system of the city.

**Conclusion.**

In the above I have tried to raise a number of points. Firstly, that subcultures still exist, just not in the form we are used to. Secondly, that this form is more heterogenous and fluid than has previously been reported. Individuals will move form scene to scene as they see fit, and internalise diverse parts of each cultural philosophy as they need to. Thirdly that the key features of contemporary subcultural activity are based on individuality and cultural production and that this creativity creates a bridge between all urban cultures. And finally, though it appears that this is an open and diverse group, the subcultural function of creating difference still exists, but rather then it being maintained through singular fashions, it is generated through knowledge of ‘authentic’ culture, individuality in dress, and creativity.
References