Still "Winning Space?: Updating Subcultural Theory

Geoff Stahl

Published on: Jan 01, 1999

URL: https://www.invisibleculturejournal.com/pub/updating-subcultural-theory

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
Subcultures represent noise (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation.¹

Subcultures as noise: a metaphor that possesses a deep, romantic and poetic resonance for many scholars. The heroic rhetoric of resistance, the valorization of the underdog and outsider, and the reemergence of a potentially political working-class consciousness are all embedded in discourses that have shaped the theorization of subcultures in the past twenty years. The work of Dick Hebdige, Stuart Hall and others connected with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, through which these conceits evolved, remain a backdrop for many contemporary theories of subcultures. Studies such as *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* and *Resistance Through Rituals* drew their theory from such diverse sources as Gramsci's theories of hegemony, Levi-Strauss's notion of bricolage and homology, Eco's semiotics and Marx's theories of class, ideology and commodity fetishism.² The sartorial splendor of Teds, Mods, Rockers and Punks became emblematic of a "semiotic guerrilla warfare" that took objects from the dominant culture and transformed their everyday naturalized meaning into something spectacular and alien. Style became a form of resistance.

This discourse of style has outlasted many other aspects of their work, recuperated through recent attempts to situate subcultural practices within a postmodern milieu. In this context Baudrillard's implosion of meaning, the blurring of fantasy and reality through the aestheticization of everyday life and the supremacy of the image in an ocularcentric culture become tropes that consign subcultural practices to a narrow notion of spectacle. Social and cultural practices, condensed to mere processes of signification, are consequently viewed through theories inadequately predisposed to consider the complex intersection and layering of institutional, industrial, material, social, spatial and temporal dimensions and relations that facilitate and circumscribe a given social formation's operation.

The discussion that follows questions the efficacy of subcultural theory as it has been understood since the work of the CCCS rejuvenated an interest in the field. A reconsideration of the corpus will necessarily explore the gaps and limits that
undermine the relevance and theoretical potency of the work of Hebdige and others. To illuminate the blind spots of subcultural theory, the spaces, and specifically the global contexts and local circumstances in which certain cultural practices unfold, a thicker description of the multiple forces and vectors that shape them is required. The (retreat to the) spectacularization of subcultures offers ineffective descriptive tools and often obscures the complexity of current cultural practices that constitute, and are constituted by, the aleatory effects of a globalized cultural economy. As a corrective, the notion of “space,” an aspect of their work which has only recently been reclaimed, will be addressed in more detail.

The exploration of globalized cultural sensibilities and their coalescence into what will be loosely denoted here taste cultures, requires a conceptual framework that is also amenable to describing reconfigurations of spatiality and their effect on social relations. I will take tastes here to be defined, after David Chaney, as a "social vocabulary, a symbolic repertoire of membership and reference affiliations as a discourse that can be endlessly modified and renewed in the imagery and narratives of mass culture." Tastes, alongside dispositions, preferences and affinities, all systems of classification and organization, are terms used throughout to denote social activities and attitudes that influence as much as they are influenced by the spaces where they reside. They suggest a rhetorical move away from rigidly vertical models that rely upon universals such as class and enable a nuanced examination of individual identity and group dynamics and how they are articulated (often unevenly) to large scale cultural arenas.

An emphasis on the specificities of local and regional cultures understood in a global setting, where spaces become sites fraught with competition, negotiation and accommodation occurring on multiple and intersecting planes, undermines any notion of a single determinant, often cast in essentialist terms (class, ethnicity, age, gender), which might exist as the overarching structuring principle of contemporary cultural practices, preferences and formations. The contexts that are most affected by globalization are the products of the circulation of ideas, texts, styles, and people (as migrant labour, consumers, tourists, refugees) around the globe, a process that has been elided in subcultural theory. The institutional and infrastructural mechanisms that enable this mobility have led to networks, circuits and alliances, all modes of communicative and community action, which traverse the globe. An analysis of their role in the creation of geographically dispersed audiences will be a central component of the following discussion.
Subcultural Theory: An Overview

The subcultural theory put forward by John Clarke, Phil Cohen, Hebdige and Hall found its theoretical antecedents in a century of sociological work on deviancy and delinquency. A somewhat uneven trajectory can be traced from the work of Emile Durkheim to his influence on the Chicago School, a connection that shaped a tradition uniting urban studies and sociology, one with a profound and prolonged effect on the ensuing studies of marginal(ized) social groups. That history needs little documentation here as it has been thoroughly explicated in a number of texts devoted to a survey of the field. Briefly, the work of Hall, Clarke, Hebdige, Cohen et al., remains embedded in a tradition that includes functionalist anomie theory and the work of the Chicago School. Phil Cohen's work on neighborhoods, for instance, shares much with Robert Park's social ecology and Clarke and Hall's introductory essay in Resistance Through Rituals echoes Robert Merton's anomie theory. The new theory shares an intellectual affinity with the works its authors were initially trying to dispense with. Working class adolescent males remain the central focus in both cases and delinquency still remains the collective solution to a structural problem. The new theories, however, offer a much more intricate analysis, as Stanley Cohen has suggested, with the addition of a structural analysis. Class, race and gender, understood historically, economically and politically are the "problem" to which subcultures are the "solution."

Phil Cohen's landmark project, "Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community," exemplifies the approach taken by many of the CCCS theorists. It foreshadows their focus on post-World War II social transformations as wrought by a reinvigorated industrialism, renewed urbanization (as well as the "explosion" of suburban development) and the accelerated consuming habits of the young. Taking the members of the working-class of East End London as his object of study, Cohen proposes that their position in newly urbanized spaces had become one of exclusion. In these renovated spaces the working-class was subjected to middle-class ideology with its valorization of property and individual ownership, a stark contrast to the working-class ideal of communal ownership. The fractures that ran through the East End section under scrutiny were economic, ideological and political, all of which combined to a greater degree among the working class youth. The generational conflict that resulted gave rise to new subcultures that operated in opposition to the parent culture. Consequently, Cohen notes, "one effect of this was to weaken the links of historical and cultural continuity, mediated through the family." Face-to-face contact with family members becomes abstracted to symbolic relations that are mediated through the
activities of other members of a subculture. The subculture, a symbolic structure, then
tries to "magically" resolve the contradictions that exist (latent or manifest) in the
parent culture. (The subculture, although a symbolic structure, depends upon
territoriality to anchor individual members to a collective reality.) The contradictions of
the parent culture remain irresolvable because "it merely transcribes its terms at a
micro social level and inscribes them in an imaginary set of relations." This is not
meant to suggest the futility of subcultural activity, however. Even as it expresses its
autonomy from the parent culture, it simultaneously maintains parental identification,
which often manifests itself through a ritualized defense against the transition into
adulthood.

John Clarke, Stuart Hall et al, also view youth subcultures through the prism of class
and suggest they are doubly articulated to a parent culture (the working-class) and the
dominant culture. Subcultures are defined here as "smaller, more localized and
differentiated structures, within one or more of the larger cultural networks." There
is a distinction to be drawn, however, between subcultures and other resistant or
alternative cultures: Working class cultures are the home of subcultures, while middle-
class cultures create counter-cultures. This class-based correlation can be made
because subcultures must be understood, foremost, in relation to the hegemonic forces
of the dominant culture. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony illuminates how a fraction of
working-class culture, youth, comes to have its expressive elements curtailed and its
lived reality circumscribed by the operation of hegemony. Society can never be one-
dimensional and as such the working class is never completely absorbed by the
dominant class. The occupation of these lacunae is understood as "winning space," a
negotiated version of the dominant culture’s values that the working-class has
appropriated as an alternate moral system permitting legitimization of their means of
expression. This space was won by being made, a creative response to their alienation
and disenfranchisement.

As Cohen's work illustrated and as these authors reiterate, subcultures must be
understood in relation to their parent class. In the case of working-class youth they are
seen as a generational fraction of the parent working-class culture. The generational
specificity that marks youth is seen through the prism of education, work and leisure.
Youths experience class conflict differently than their parent culture due to the gaps
between generations, a process that results in the creation of a generational
consciousness.
The authors extend Cohen's work on symbolic structures, particularly modes such as dress, music, ritual and argot. The resulting discourses of style are an attempt to examine the relations struck between the subculture, the parent culture and mass culture. Through the semiotic reconfiguration of objects, specifically the commodities of the dominant class, the members of a given subculture invest them with particular meanings, further strengthening its inner relations through symbolic gestures. The unity of the modes binds the expressive elements of the subculture together, crystallizing into a set of cultural practices that develop their own history and structure, ones which are detached from the symbolic and social firmament of the dominant culture.

Class, at least for Dick Hebdige in his study of British punks in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, is only one dimension of subcultural formation. Hebdige's work occupies a central place in the subcultural oeuvre, offering a persuasive integration of modernist literature, semiotics, anthropology and structuralism in what has become a canonical study of the emergence of punk style. Hebdige's examination of punk music and culture historicizes its antecedents (reggae, the Teds, Mods, rockers) in a highly charged class-stratified milieu (where the even the working class is fraught with racially motivated anxiety and blame-casting). Hebdige offers an examination of the process of cross-pollination, hybridization, contamination and appropriation that occurred among subcultures in post-war Britain:

> Patterns of rejection and assimilation between host and immigrant communities can be mapped along spectacular lines laid down by white working-class youth culture. The succession of white subcultural forms can be read as a series of deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community. It is on the plane of aesthetics: in dress, dance, music; in the whole rhetoric of style, that we find the dialogue between black and white most subtly and comprehensively recorded, albeit in code. By describing, interpreting and deciphering these forms, we can construct an oblique account of the exchanges which have taken place between these two communities. We can watch, played out on the loaded surfaces of British working-class youth cultures, a phantom history of race relations since the War.11

Subcultural style, a deliberately arranged sartorial semiotic guerrilla warfare, is crucial to making the "noise" essential to the success of a given subculture. Style for the dominant culture becomes both a celebration and subject of derision in the media; for subcultures it becomes a form of lived contestation and innovation. Hebdige recalls
Stanley Cohen's "folk devil" and "moral panic" to suggest how the subordinate group is constituted in the social imaginary of the dominant group. The process of recuperation (of neutralizing the threat posed by "folk devils") used by the dominant culture takes two forms: conversion of subcultural signs into commodities and the relabeling of deviant behavior by various social agencies (police, judiciary), providing the means through which the dominant ideology is articulated and maintained (through surveillance, discipline and punishment). The supposed Otherness of punks, as Hebdige notes, is continually redefined in the media, recuperated most often through the discourse of the family.

How they come to resist this process is understood by Hebdige as taking shape through a variety of practices, most of which recall the earlier formulation of ritual, argot, music, and dress. The subculture defines itself through a number of stylistic forms: intentional communication, bricolage, homology and signifying practice. Intentional communication is an ironic gesture, where visual ensembles are understood, at least by members of the subculture, as fabricated and function as forms of display. Bricolage, a term borrowed from Levi-Strauss to describe a science of the concrete (of the everyday, of the banal) is a descriptive tool employed to account for the reconfiguration the naturalized meaning of an object. Elevated through the rhetoric of style, the détournement of objects takes on another layer of cultural value, acquiring a new symbolic resonance and meaning subject to the discourses and visual idioms specific to the subculture.

Hebdige also borrows from Levi-Strauss the notion of homology to explain the connection between seemingly disparate cultural practices. Homology is understood as the "symbolic fit" between a subculture and the lifestyles and attitudes it acts out. There was an order to the chaos in punk subculture that, to the initiated, made it appear as a coherent and meaningful whole. There was an internal structure and an organic fit between various parts, which to the uniniated appeared as disparate and non-sensical. The objects that circulate through that culture acquire a resonance that has deep affective value, suitably arrayed in the subcultural imaginary as a reflection and expression of explicit and implicit values. An extension of bricolage, homology is a term deployed to explain the consistency of a subculture and its attachment to various material practices (record buying, clothes wearing, scooter buying).

Bricolage and homology are both terms that describe a set of signifying practices. However, subcultures embody a number of contradictions which most semiotic theory is inadequately predisposed to accommodate. Hebdige stresses instead the polysemy
of signifying practices, in which structure and system are discarded for the more febrile idea of subject position and the process of meaning making (which is ultimately bound up in the dominance of the signifier over the signified). He borrows from Julie Kristeva the notion of radical signifying practices: those which disturb rationality and order and semantic coherence. Punk for instance "cohered elliptically through a chain of conspicuous absences. It was characterized by its unlocatedness—its blankness." Members of a subculture are not always fully aware of the significance (in semiotic terms at least) of their own practices. The level of commitment to a subculture differs for many individuals. It can be escape or distraction but there must be a common language, or "it must say the right things in the right way at the right time." Using Kristeva's concept of poetic language to describe a form of disturbed syntax, Hebdige proposes that punk expresses itself through semantic rupture. Punk's refashioning of language is positioned in contrast to other subcultures that might be seen as simply and 'magically' resolving the contradictions of living under the regimes of industrialized capitalism. From swastikas as accessories, to safety pins puncturing cheeks and to wearing bin liners as clothes, punks were construed as literally inscribing and embodying those contradictions.

Subcultural Theory Rethought

The work of the CCCS opened up a theoretical space that enabled a richer study of marginalized social formations and their cultural practices. Individually, their examinations of the uneven power differentials organize contemporary culture and society relied upon analytical tools that have become essential to [...] responses of subordinate(d) groups to structures of domination. However, there remain a number of areas that are overtheorized, and others undertheorized, which question the continued relevance of their work. First, the discourse of style overemphasizes symbolic response to exclusion (Phil Cohen's "magical resolutions"), situating semiotic play with appropriated texts above that of the imaginative and concrete contexts in which cultural activities and practices are enacted. Also, the discourse of style adopted by a number of CCCS theorists remains fettered to its overly reductive optimism. In their estimation, style is either a symbolic form of resistance or a "magical solution" and therefore not a "real" solution. The discourses attached to "winning space" and the symbolic nature of that process in the CCCS's analyses are configured as rhetorical ploys meant to explain away the opacity of subcultural activity itself. Style should be understood neither as a decoding tool that is solely oppositional, nor as something
internal to the group itself. The convergence and mingling of mass culture and subculture through the détournement of appropriated objects are much more nuanced: they are trickle-up as much as trickle-down. The second criticism, and related to the first, is that the creation of a subcultural Other such as the media, the mainstream, or the popular, elides the role each plays in the subculture's own internal construction and its imaginary. Third, the emphasis on a linear model such as class, acting as the primary determinant in the origins of subcultural practices, marginalizes and often excludes other factors such as age, gender and ethnicity. Considerations of these factors as outside the purview of a model bound to a geographically specific idea of territory and "winning space" neglect the complexities of identity formation, failing to assess the multiple determinations and motivations drawing individuals toward a certain range of subcultural practices.

The first criticism has been (somewhat awkwardly) rethought in the context of postmodernism; the latter criticisms have been highlighted by the visible and invisible effects a globalized cultural economy, combined with the related interest in rethinking notions of space and spatial relations. These criticisms emerge primarily as a result of the shifting parameters circumscribing the spaces in which cultural practices unfold. First, there is the tension between local circumstances and global contexts, or more specifically, between dispersed and geographically disconnected sites of production and consumption. Second, the movement of ideas, objects, people and texts through that globalized cultural economy and its febrile apparatuses (including computer-mediated communication technologies) undermines the notion of a single trajectory or determination shaping individual identity and group affiliation. These latter criticisms will be covered in greater detail in the last portion of this discussion, however their bearing on analyses of subcultural practices requires an examination of the dominant role the "discourse of style" has played in limiting past and some present, accounts of subcultures.

The belief that subcultures are a common stylized solution for disenfranchised youth remains vague on the connection between structure and the problem-solving option as well as undertheorizing notions such as choice and belonging. Gary Clarke asks "how do we analytically leap from the desire for a solution to the adoption of a particular style?" Group organization and individual desires are subtler and much more ineffable than Hebdige allows. Hebdige fails to describe where and when style is intentional and when it is unconscious, also ignoring the question of how, when, where and why individual identity begins and ends or when group affiliation starts. What are
the internal and external factors, or the individual dispositions and group dynamics, that shape a subculture?:

It is hard to say which is more sociologically incredible: a theory which postulates cultural dummies who give homologous meanings to all artefacts surrounding them or a theory which suggests that individual meanings do not matter at all.\textsuperscript{17}

The response throughout \textit{Resistance Through Rituals} and \textit{Subcultures: The Meaning of Style} (although less so) was to essentialize working-class youth cultures. As a consequence, both studies theorized "the popular" (subculture's Other) as little more than purely ideological, with mainstream culture presented as producing banalized and passive individuals. Subcultural practices could then be construed as active, innately (and authentically) oppositional and resistant. This model of cultural activity often ascribes too much power to the audience. It does this, in Lawrence Grossberg's estimation, in two ways:

[by]reducing the context which it claims is determinate to little more than a sociological position and a cultural identity. And in the name of political optimism, it too easily ignores the macropolitical success of hegemonic struggles in favour of abstract micropolitical struggles.\textsuperscript{18}

By bracketing out macropolitical forces, the authenticity of the subculture is valorized by theorists such as Hebdige and Hall, often at the expense of considerations of the paradigm shifts impinging on the contexts in which cultural practices, including style, are realized. What portions of their work can be applied today, given that Hebdige and Hall were working within post-war capitalism and a still overwhelming modernist conception of culture? How do we begin to account for the shape and scope of subcultural groups and practices under the current capitalist regime? How, for instance, do we begin to discuss style as the preeminent signifier of subcultural allegiance in contexts that are continually subject to the changing shape of relations of production? In a world moving away from post-industrial modes to post-Fordist and finally to disorganized modes of production, signaling a marked transformation of social and geopolitical relations, how do we begin to even map out the context for a singular analysis?\textsuperscript{19} There are a number of changes that must be taken into account, not the least of which is a much more modest appraisal of what might be occurring in this new global economy. It is often taken as given that the vertical disintegration of transnational corporations, through outsourcing and flexible specialization, has resulted in highly reflexive productive capabilities. Their success is contingent upon the willingness or resistance of the places in which they might be operating. In other
words, there is contextual variability that determines how effective their operation might be. This could possibly create a scenario in which the articulation of individual to larger reference groups participating in a global arena becomes a highly charged site of negotiation, compromise and opposition.\textsuperscript{20} What this model of vertical disintegration does not differentiate between is the different types of cultural industries and their specific logics of practice.\textsuperscript{21} In many respects, this same criticism can be directed at the CCCS. For both the flexible specialization and subcultural theorists, cultural industries are conflated into functional arms of the dominant hegemony, part of the apparatus of the controlling culture. The divergent interests, motives and organizational capacities of cultural industries such as radio, television and other media (often at odds with one another) are neglected and remain a significant gloss in both areas of research. By highlighting the spectacular consumption of subcultures, Hebdige, Hall and others overemphasize the significance of reception among subcultural formations, bracketing out larger, multifarious institutional and industrial forces, such as new modes of production, that operate on a scale that often obscure their subtle yet unavoidable influence.

Some of those theorists repositioning cultural production along the lines of flexible specialization are grappling with larger social and cultural issues as well (it has proven difficult to discuss post-Fordism without raising the spectre of postmodernism). The most recent attempts to realign subcultural studies alongside the vector of postmodernism appear premature. David Muggleton (1997) has extended many of the premises of those earlier, and decidedly modernist, studies of subcultural practice, recalibrating them to suit a postmodern milieu.\textsuperscript{22} Writing on the post-subculturalist, he places particular emphasis on style and the encroachment of the visual into the everyday. In the aestheticized hyperreal setting of everyday life there are no commodities left for subcultures to appropriate, just signs, the logical conclusion of a move away from use-value (authentic-modern) to exchange-value (manufactured-modern) and finally to the apotheosis of sign value (postmodern). Subcultural styles become simulacra, copies with no originals.\textsuperscript{23} Accordingly, there is no longer space for originality, as referents have been displaced or disappeared and the "real" has been reduced to the play of surfaces, an infinite series of signifiers signifying more signifiers. Creative practices such as fashion, art and music become depthless manifestations of postmodern pastiche, where any potentially radical politics (identity, resistance or otherwise) is eviscerated.\textsuperscript{24} If there is no originality there is no authenticity:
Post-subculturalists no longer have any sense of subcultural authenticity where inception is rooted in particular sociotemporal contexts and tied to underlying structural relations. Indeed post-subculturalists will experience all the signs of the subculture of their choosing time and time again. Choosing is the operative word here, for post-subculturalists revel in the availability of subcultural choice...This is something that all post-subculturalists are aware of, that there are no rules, that there is no authenticity, no reason for ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played.  

Muggleton's account of current cultural practices focuses on rootlessness and play, where any hope for the ruptures that characterized the CCCS model of subcultural practice is seen as impossible and void of political potency. Cut adrift in a free-floating, inauthentic and valueless ether, post-subculturalists are interpreted as mindlessly genuflecting in awe at the postmodern, millennial sublime:

The trappings of spectacular style are their right of admission to a costume party, a masquerade, a hedonistic escape into a Blitz Culture fantasy characterized by political indifference.

This formulation of postmodernism, framed by a cultural pessimism suggesting quietism, apathy, moral relativism (which includes the ability to occupy a multiplicity of subjectivities) obscures the effect that difference (structural and otherwise) and differential access to power have on producing meaningful contexts (and contexts of meaning) for cultural activity. In Muggleton's estimation, the gravitation of individuals and groups to sites of emotional investment, whether they be imaginary or real, is evacuated of all meaning and affective value.

As a corrective to this, Grossberg has more convincingly characterized the postmodern as a disarticulation of affect and ideology, where maps of meaning and mattering maps become disengaged and reengaged in new places. By affect is meant a structured plane of effects (investment) which offers the possibility of agency (of acting willfully), a term describing "observable differences in how practices matter to, or are taken up by, different configurations of popular discourses and practices -- different alliances (which are not simply audiences)." And although affect waxes and wanes within everyday contexts, authenticity has not disappeared; as a discursive form it remains crucial to processes of differentiation, but has been modified in ironic fashion:

Confronting the postmodern vector of everyday life produces an increasing tendency to stop in places (e.g. taking on particular cultural identities or taking up
forms of agency), while self-consciously questioning, limiting or perhaps even challenging the investment in them: authentic inauthenticity (indifference) is a popular logic which refuses to distinguish between the authentic and inauthentic, between boredom and terror - and a set of practices which celebrates the affectivity of investment while refusing to discriminate between different forms and sites of investment - as the only viable response to contemporary conditions.29

Contrary to Muggleton's assertion, "rules" still exist within the spaces of everyday life, albeit in very provisional and ad hoc forms. The unequal exercise of power (and its uneven distribution) in any given context negates claims many postmodern theories make about a cultural leveling and the disappearance of boundaries. Boundaries are continually shifting and being redrawn, the contexts of cultural activity habitually reconstituted by new and longstanding power relations and lines of continuity or cultural logics (as manifest in traditions, mythologies, various forms of media and the circulation of commodities) which course through them.

The means by which these boundaries are reasserted and maintained through processes of social differentiation and distinction have been taken up by Grossberg and Sarah Thornton. They have each challenged the CCCS's unspoken assumption that cultural practices unfold in discrete, self-contained spaces. Grossberg does this by problematizing the notion of the mainstream (in relation to the postmodern); Thornton, by inserting the media into the very origins of subcultures.30 For Grossberg the mainstream, or more correctly the popular, exists as a social pastiche where fragments from the margins are incorporated and fragments of itself are excorporated back into the margins: "a structured distribution of practices, codes and effects."31 The intersection of margin and mainstream produces a space where practices of social and cultural differentiation also unfold and overlap, whereby the mainstream can no longer be seen as unified or monolithically Other.

The researchers at the CCCS construed the media as an after-the-fact response to subcultures, allowing them to see more "uncontaminated homologies" and make claims on their uncorrupted unauthenticity. They saw the media as instrumental to the success of the dominant hegemony, an integral part of the apparatus (the control culture) which constructed "folk devils" ( punks as Other) and "moral panics." Subcultures were consequently theorized as "transparent niches in an opaque world as if subcultural life spoke an unmediated truth."32 Thornton suggests, in a contrast to the CCCS formulation of media as a subculture's demonized Other, that the media (television, radio, magazines, zines, pamphlets, virtual media such as the Internet) are
integral to the formation of subcultures, playing a significant role in both their origin as well as prolonging their lifecycle.

Broadly speaking, the media exist as systems of communication critical to the circulation of ideas, images, sounds and ideologies that bind culture(s) together. Rather than dismissing the media out of hand, Thornton reminds us that some media legitimate while others popularize, some preserve the esoteric while others are seen to sell out: "As subjects of discussion and sources of information, media are deliberate and accidental determinants of cultural hierarchy."33 The media function in this last instance as a central network for the movement and distribution through cultural and social hierarchies of what Thornton, borrowing and reworking from Bourdieu, has called "subcultural capital."34 Various types of capital (cultural, economic, social, symbolic) are acquired and distributed according to a logic specific to the field in which they are active components. Economic capital is distributed through the field of economics, educational capital through an educational field, and so on. Fields (of cultural production, of economics, of education) are hierarchies structuring the social spaces where struggles over capital and various resources are played out. The overarching field, of which these narrower fields are subsets, is the field of power.35 Cultural capital, a form of knowledge acquired through education and upbringing, is dispersed throughout the field of cultural production, where individuals and groups struggle to acquire and reinvest it to maintain social status.

Bourdieu's taxonomy of capital effectively describes the hierarchies of value and social status that underlie the (conscious and unconscious, subjective and objective) construction of individual preferences, tastes, and how they might then be articulated to, and by, social formations:

```
Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis.36
```

As Bourdieu states, the field of production, for example, could not exist if it were not for always already preexisting tastes. It offers a universe of cultural goods, a range of stylistic possibilities from which individuals select the system of stylistic features constituting a lifestyle.37 By contrast, in not considering the origins of style as a preference, predisposition or motivation, the CCCS never fully explained how style might become a "uniform," a lifestyle replete with attitude. For Bourdieu and Thornton
cultural capital can be embodied/objectified (i.e., style), the result being the naturalization of preferences into what might be called second nature, the ability to make the right choices, or what Bourdieu calls the habitus:

> Habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification of these practices. It is the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted.\(^{38}\)

Subcultural capital denotes a form of "being in the know," a type of knowledge not acquired through formal education and as such it remains classless: "Subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay."\(^{39}\) Subcultural capital, then, is a subspecies form of cultural capital dependent upon notions of "hipness": cultivated and naturalized forms of knowledge which can disguise the origins of their becoming. It can manifest itself through embodied practices, such as mannerisms, gestures, speech and behaviour, as well as appear in objectified form, most visible in the care, selection and arrangement of objects which surround one's self (a record collection, or furniture). Performing according to a logic specific to its field, subcultural capital functions to (ironically) distance itself, at least in the imaginations of its participants, from mainstream culture.

Subcultural capital is an important part of the field of subcultural production, a subfield within the larger field of cultural production. According to Bourdieu, the field of production is composed of two differing fields: the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production.\(^{40}\) The former is germane to this discussion as it describes the "negative existence" of this field in relation to the latter. Externally, the sub-field of restricted production is opposed to the bourgeois or dominant economic order ("the mainstream"). Internally, the sub-field of restricted production is structured by the opposition between what Bourdieu calls the consecrated avant-garde and the avant-garde: an opposition between those who have the power to consecrate and those who are trying to acquire that power (i.e., newcomers). The activity within the field of restricted cultural production is more characteristically defined as production for producers. In this context, where market forces are integral to the formation of the field, notions of autonomy become paramount. Authenticity, usually expressed in the vernacular as "selling out," is a term that becomes part of those rhetorical strategies...
that are used frequently to define and justify who or what might be in or out in an economy of cool.

Bourdieu’s notion of fields as "spaces of possibles" emphasizes the contested and conflicted activities of individuals vying for positions and resources in several fields and given sites. In these differing contexts, his notion of accruing and investing various types of capital (social, cultural, intellectual, etc., but not discounting the economic) is a valuable way to describe systems of exchange and distribution that are not reducible to a simple monetary economism. The field of cultural production exists as a field of "possible forces" which organizes and is organized by the agents operating within it:

(\textit{and is}) defined in the relationship between the structure of average chances of access to different positions (measured by the difficulty of attaining them and, more precisely, by the relationship between the number of positions and the number of competitors) and the dispositions of each agent, the subjective basis of the perception and appreciation of the objective chances.\(^{41}\)

Dispositions and positions combine to form a sense of social direction that orient individuals in a given field. This direction cannot be understood as entirely linear. The work of the CCCS, which has characteristically correlated a vertical model of class rather mechanically to culture to explain the cultural forms they produce, does not include considerations of the effects of power differentials functioning to quantitatively and qualitatively determine access to a given field.\(^{42}\) Bourdieu's model of fields, taste and habitus replaces a rigidly vertical description of social and cultural mobility by accounting for the activities occurring within and between fields, emphasizing that they are related in more complex, mobile, non-linear and multi-dimensional ways.

To maintain its multivalent potency and currency (or cultural worth) subcultural capital must flow through channels of communication, which themselves operate with, and are subject to, varying degrees of restriction.\(^{43}\) In globalized fields of cultural production and consumption these channels form part of a global infrastructure composed of networks of exclusion and inclusion. Within these channels state and institutional power is exerted (through cultural policy, protectionism, etc.) and individuals that have strategically reinvested their capital, subcultural or otherwise, consolidate positions of power. These agents, or agencies, act as gatekeepers, cultural custodians and intermediaries who can oversee, evaluate, sanction, or consecrate, and thereby legitimize, certain cultural forms and practices.\(^{44}\) In this capacity, they actualize discourses, such as those attached to notions of authenticity, constructing an (ideological) opposition between mainstream and margin that remains integral to the
distinctions that differentiate individuals and their social groups from others (which can often be in the same field).

Grossberg employs Bourdieu's notion of sensibility to describe the intersection of these discursive practices and human actors. Sensibilities "empower cultural practices to work in certain ways, and they empower individuals to enact them in certain places. Sensibilities define the dialectical production of active audiences, everyday practices and productive contexts." As Appadurai states, these productive contexts are interrelated to other contexts, not only by discursive practices:

---

Contexts are produced in the complex imbrication of discursive and nondiscursive practices...in which contexts imply other contexts, so that each context implies a global network of contexts.

---

While Grossberg may overemphasize the localized context, Appadurai links interrelated and interdependent contexts to global processes. Appadurai speaks of mobility and mediation of both objects and ideas as having profound effects on the shape of contexts of production and consumption. New modes of communication and new means for distributing information assist the circulation of the various forms of capital, while simultaneously reconfiguring the contexts in which cultural production and consumption take place. Forms of knowledge such as cultural capital can also be subject to global forces, distributed according to the organizing principles of a given spatial configuration. Because the political, social, economic and cultural transformations occurring on a global scale are necessarily fluid, chaotic, arbitrary and uneven, resulting from the influence of mobile and mobilizing forces, Appadurai and Grossberg offer another contrary to the CCCS's paradigm where social movement is restricted to vertical ascent or descent. The movement and distribution of people, ideas, money and technologies through this global cultural economy takes hold of the imaginations of individuals as well in concrete contexts. The very novelty and synergistic charge of this phenomena can produce opportunities for subjective reinvention and cultural innovation. In other words rapid change. At the same time, the flow of commodities through these networks is subject, much like capital, to local restrictions that limit access. This suggests that there are lines and forms of continuity that are more likely to slow, resist or halt that rapid change. Combine the resulting tensions with the differential access to commodified objects, information and cultural capital and it becomes apparent how much work is needed to determine and examine the form and spectrum of experiences that are possible in a given space.
We are left then with a caveat: "Spatial patterns cannot be said to interact, only the social objects present within one or more such spaces interact." To avoid fetishizing the spatial, it remains critical to distinguish a given space from the flow of goods and objects through that space. The initial entropy and subsequent organization that characterizes the distribution of goods, services, ideas, capital and people are contingent upon the structure of the spaces through which they flow. The spaces where they come to rest and develop can be sites in which different and competing value systems (and systems of evaluation) produce conflict over access and distribution of these resources, a struggle structured by an already existing arrangement of indigenous social hierarchies. The intersection of social spaces and social relations shifts emphasis to the greater global contexts and the smaller local circumstances in which social and cultural activities unfold. To this end, John Urry suggests that "there is no simple space, only different kinds of spaces, spatial relations or spatialisations," where space is not neutral. Urry recalls Lefebvre's theoretical structure for the analysis of the production of space that is composed of three elements: spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation. Spatial practices include individual daily routine as well as the concretization of zones and regions, through urban planning, etc. Phil Cohen's work on East End London neighborhoods touches on those elements of spatial practice, such as property and (economic) capital, that serve to demarcate difference in physical locales. Representations of space include the forms of knowledge and practices that organize and represent space in particular forms. Spaces of representation include the imaginative construction of collectively experienced sites: "These include symbolic differentiations and collective fantasies around space, the resistances to the dominant practices and resulting forms of individual and collective transgression." It is this third element that has the most rhetorical force. As Appadurai has suggested with regard to the processes of globalization, there has been a notable return to the imagination persisting as a repository of nostalgia, engendering and preserving collective experiences constituted through mythology, and guaranteeing the promise of individual agency. The imagination "has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility."

As both Urry and Appadurai understand them, all three of Lefebvre's spatial ingredients highlight the multiple layers that compose social spaces. They are themselves shaped by multiple vectors (economic, political) providing contexts for
enactment and engagement at the micro-level of individual imaginings. These individual events and moments are also articulated within and to large scale global forces. Each vector simultaneously extends and limits the horizon of the imagination, the flow of ideas, capital and commodities. Even Cohen's neighborhoods need reconsideration in the context of global scale forces:

The capability of neighborhoods to produce contexts (within which their very localizing activities acquire meaning and historical potential) and to produce local subjects is profoundly affected by the locality-producing capabilities of larger-scale formations (nation-states, kingdoms, missionary empires, and trading cartels) to determine the general shape of all the neighborhoods within the reach of their powers.  

The neighborhood remains a powerful metaphor for the organization and variety of lived spaces in contemporary cultures, illustrating connections between geographical area, physical structures and social organization. Neighborhoods exist as productive contexts for subjectivities, where meaningful activity is initiated, enacted, performed and reproduced. This productive activity, however, often extends beyond the narrow confines of the neighborhood and its kinship systems, making connections and finding affinities with neighbouring as well as distant contexts. A notion of neighborhood that depends upon a territorial imaginary (such as Cohen's) needs to reconsider, for example, the emergence of virtual neighborhoods, electronically produced and connected spaces. New media, such as the Internet, build unique social links, creating conduits for the transmission of ideas, money and information, which in many ways also transform the lived spaces of neighborhoods in which the participants live.

The emergence of computer mediated communications (CMC) systems and their effect on the intersection of social and spatial relations and their bearing on notions of community is worthy of some consideration here. Every new development in technology has offered hope for the realization of new forms of community and connectivity, promising to form spaces that will allow the free flowering of proper democratic exchanges and pluralistic togetherness, recapturing some notion of gathering and interactivity that, for whatever reasons, have since been lost. Surrounded by the rhetoric of prophecy, "assumptions about technological change tell us what we believe the technology is supposed to do, which in turn reveals much about what we believe we are supposed to do."  

The ascent of CMCs has also emphasized the distinctions drawn between what James Carey has called the view of communication either as "transportation" or as
"ritual." A view of communication as transportation tends to be dedicated to explaining the domination of time and space through the transmission of signals (in the form of information, for instance). This type of communication is tied to notions of control and power, a mastery of time and space through new, efficient and accelerated forms of dissemination. On a broader scale, it is still framed by discourses of frontierism, colonialism, mercantilism, expansionism and the desire for leaving behind older communities and creating new ones.

The ritual view of communication, in contrast, is still very much an overlooked way of conceptualizing social interaction and movement. It is, as Carey states, "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs." Carey and Steve Jones, the latter employing these terms in discussing cyberspace and its relation to community, both advocate this view of communication. In its evocation of a prelapsarian cultural moment it retains a connection between community, commonness, and communion that positions it as the desirable and proper directive behind communicative action. That desired action itself assumes a dramaturgical function as information becomes part of a socially sanctioned staging, the portrayal of "an arena of dramatic forces and action" allowing for sites of physical and imaginative enactments and performances. In its ritual mode communication becomes a powerful tool that organizes individual desires and dreams of belonging by representing a certain range of experiences, thereby offering the possibility for deep, affective investment among a community of like-minded others.

The pursuit of this ritualistic notion of communication may appear as a much sought after ideal. It remains, however, a particularly problematic and highly contested one. As Jones suggests, most discussion surrounding the emergence of new communities founded through computer-mediated interactions fails to consider the "concomitant conceptualization of space and the social, the inquiry into connections between social relations, spatial practice, values, and beliefs." In this sense, and without a greater examination of issues surrounding access, motivations and levels of participation, the recent analyses of virtuality and digitally connected individuals and groups share common absences and elisions with certain aspects of subcultural analyses.

Both old and new communications technologies, which can be understood as types of networks, aid the movement and dispersal of individuals by connecting and organizing them in various contexts as audiences, markets and publics. Given both the ritualistic and transportation view of communications and their effect on the relations between
time and space, any attempt to supply a cartography of consumption requires a provisional model of taste cultures that cannot be understood as localized in any site-specific sense. Analyses of the flow of capital, information and people connected and mediated through communicative apparatuses that span the globe offer suggestive entry points into an account of the similarities that exist between dispersed consumers and their respective shared cultures. No longer hermetically sealed or self-contained, the spaces of culture should, instead, be understood as organized through a series of interconnections. Doreen Massey has suggested that cultures (and she speaks here of youth cultures specifically) could be understood as a "particular articulation of contacts and influences drawn from a variety of places scattered, according to power relations, fashion and habit, across many different parts of the globe." Social relations, in this capacity, are often constellations of temporary and ad hoc coherence embedded in a social space that is the product of relations and interconnections from the very local to the regional and transregional. The local structures (social and spatial) that determine the duration of these constellations as well those that inflect the reception and transmission of goods, images and people from distant contexts are interconnected through a series of networks. These networks function in the same capacity as networks of exclusion and inclusion, serving as channels for the transmission of people, ideas, objects and images that link one context and taste culture to another.

In their levels of sociality, participation and symbolic interaction, these networks can be thought of in terms of ritual modes of communication, forging affective alliances or networks of empowerment, intercultural affinities, pathways, or scapes. Print media, broadcast media and the Internet serve as links that mediate between dispersed individuals and groups that are neither geographically specific nor dependent upon face-to-face contact, existing instead as loosely "imagined communities." Benedict Anderson in his discussion of the rise of print capitalism and its relation to nation building suggests three ways in which a community is imagined. First, though many of the members will never meet face-to-face with others, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Second, this community is limited, because it has "finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other (communities)." Finally, it is imagined because "regardless of the inequality...that may prevail in each, the (community) is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." Mass-mediation (and Anderson is writing specifically about print capitalism), particularly electronic media and CMCs, enable these imagined communities to transcend some of the limits of local, regional or national space, activating what Appadurai has called a "community of
sentiment," an articulation of individual sentiment onto a broader social plane of belonging:

[Sentiment's] greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into political state and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities. ⁶⁹

These mediated aspects of identity and community work most heavily on the level of the imagination. Local subjectivity exists, then, as a "palimpsest of highly local and highly translocal considerations," where the imagination of individual agents is articulated to a larger social imaginary. ⁷⁰

Whether it be in contexts, neighborhoods or communities (concrete, imagined, or virtual), increasingly the quotidian rhythms of life are refracted through the localized effects of these translocal forces. At the level of the everyday, greater consideration must be given to how individuals operate within demarcated spaces situated in a global cultural economy. Grossberg's own work is useful for mapping out the lines that distribute, place and connect cultural practice. The everyday here is meant to convey a sense of a "structured mobility", constructing a space that includes "specific forms and trajectories of movement (change) and stability (agency)." ⁷¹ Although the field and habitus (which share an affinity with "structured mobility") are spaces shaped by these trajectories, recast in a global framework, Bourdieu's terms cannot remain uncontaminated by the changing shape of social spaces in this context. As Appadurai suggests, the habitus, no longer simply a realm of reproducible practices and dispositions, has instead become "more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation." ⁷² As a schema for the appreciation and perception of cultural goods, even Bourdieu's habitus must be broad enough to incorporate the larger scale social universe in which tastes and fields are subject and object of the glacial drift of global forces.

**Conclusion**

I have outlined here a number of limitations of subcultural theory, particularly those of the long-standing British variant. I have also offered a number of terms that fall outside the rhetoric of rupture that otherwise highlight the tensions between the continuities and discontinuities, the formal and informal structures, that link spatialized cultural practices, production and consumption. I have also made reference to postmodern theories that focus solely on a flattened cultural terrain permeated by
undifferentiated signs, without consideration of either material practices or the concrete and imaginative organization of a given space. Both theoretical paradigms neglect the contextual variability that determines how, where and why social and spatial relations intersect in the places they do. Existing cultural and social formations exemplify the insinuation of cultural activity into global flows, and can no longer understood as being restricted to physically bounded sites. The dispersal of consumer products, ideas and cultural idioms has to be framed in terms that can convey the local specificities of a given site as well as the globally defined determinations that inflect their seemingly asymmetrical appropriation and incorporation at an individual and group/community level. This framework would allow consideration of the vicissitudes of a global cultural economy and how they impinge on imaginative activity and material practice, and what shape they give to structures of feeling that adhere in physical and imagined locales. It must move away from rigid, vertical and static models, like those offered by the CCCS. It should put forward a model which would get at, more effectively, the articulation of individual to proximal group, illustrate how that latter group is articulated to distant groups and finally how the social agglomerations of different shapes and sizes enter into dialogue with their globally disparate counterparts. In many ways it must move beyond a valorization of the local as site of authentic relations and heterogeneous cultural production and the demonization of the global as abstract homogenizing juggernaut. In accounting for the dispersed and diffuse nature of contexts of production and consumption, a new subcultural model would facilitate the examination of the distributive and connective functions of networks, alliances, circuits and conduits through which people, commodities, the myriad forms of capital, ideas and technology flow.

An examination of the mechanics of solidarity can highlight the diverse forces circumscribing each one of these links, illustrating how these processes of exclusion and inclusion function to arrange social and cultural practices in complex, interrelated, arbitrary and opaque configurations. Cultural practices, whether dominant or subordinate, rarely unfold in hermetically sealed or geographically discrete contexts. The parameters that define cultural practices, industries and institutions have been blurred, stretched, exploded, erased and redrawn through the complex and arbitrary effects wrought by the machinations of globalized cultural apparatuses. It is among the shifting origins and destinations of cultural production, distribution and consumption that an analytic model more flexible than that offered by subcultural theory must be found to describe the elasticity and fluidity that confounds any notion of self-contained cultural practices. The preceding discussion is one attempt at offering provisional
amendments to subcultural theory through the elaboration of a cartography of tastes and desires. In the end, it points towards instances of cultural practice which necessitate a remapped theory in order to, however provisionally, describe the various navigations through a terrain that is often simultaneously here, there, and everywhere.

Footnotes


24. See also Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146, 53-92.


InVisible Culture

Still "Winning Space?: Updating Subcultural Theory

34. Bourdieu, *Distinction*. ↩
41. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 64. ↩
42. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 65. ↩
44. Bourdieu, *Distinction.*
56. Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 16.
60. Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 21.


