Stop Making Sense? The Problem of the Body in Youth/Sub/Counter-Culture

Paul Sweetman

People think it’s all about misery and desperation and death and all that shite. Which is not to be ignored. But what they forget is, is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn’t do it. After all, we’re not fucking stupid. Or at least we’re not that fucking stupid. Take the best orgasm you ever had, multiply it by a thousand and you’re still nowhere near it.

‘Renton’, in Trainspotting, Boyle 1996

Introduction

Much of the existing writing on youth, sub, or counter-culture has adopted a predominantly textual or semiotic approach, focusing on subcultural style, in particular, and the resistant or confrontational meanings that such styles are said to convey. In so doing, however, this literature has tended to neglect the lived experiences of those involved, or, as Ken Gelder puts it, ‘what they actually do’ (Gelder 1997b: 145). This point has been frequently noted elsewhere (see, for example: Cohen 1997 [1980]; Gelder 1997b; Muggleton 1997). What this chapter seeks to address is a more specific aspect of this overall neglect: the tendency to overlook, or accord insufficient attention to, the way in which subcultural practices are articulated through or on the bodies of the actors concerned.

This is arguably of particular concern given the centrality of the corporeal and/or affective dimension to the bulk of the activities in question. In other words, ‘what they actually do’, where subcultures are concerned, tends to centre on the body, and if we want to do more than simply interpret subcultures as signifying systems – if we want to understand what motivates subcultural involvement and what people
get out of it – then it is to the corporeal or affective dimension that we need to turn.

The following, then, looks first at the classic subcultural accounts associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in order to illustrate the problems with the textual or semiotic approach. The chapter then goes on to draw on my own research into contemporary body modification, illustrating the various ways in which the process of becoming tattooed or pierced is central, rather than peripheral, to the motivations and experiences of many of those concerned. In the third section I briefly address some of the more recent subcultural studies, noting the ways in which studies of club culture, in particular, have addressed certain of the issues in question, but not always in a sufficiently rigorous manner. The fourth and fifth sections deal with some of the wider theoretical and methodological issues raised in the foregoing discussion. In section five, for example, I consider some of the practical implications of my position, and some of the problems it might raise for the researcher in the field.

In part, then, the chapter seeks to address certain of the wider implications of an insistence on engaging with the felt dimensions of subcultural involvement. The chapter's primary purpose, however, is to emphasize the importance of focusing on this area if one wishes to fully understand the phenomenon in question. To paraphrase Jack Katz, it is suggested that ‘only through awareness and analysis of the phenomenological foreground of subcultural activity, ‘of the intricacies of its “lived sensuality”’ can we understand not only its ‘moral and sensual attractions’, but also its wider cultural significance (Katz, in Ferrell 1993: 167).

**Subculture as sign**

As was noted above, the classic work on British subcultures associated with the CCCS tended to adopt a textual or semiotic approach, for the most part treating subcultural formations as signifying systems, and neglecting the lived experience of subculturalists themselves. As Gelder points out, in these studies, ‘the focus on style comes at the expense of other subcultural features: modes of pleasure and fun, for example’ (Gelder 1997a: 88), and the ‘effects of a style’ are frequently ‘emphasized at the expense of the nature and behaviour of the participants who put it there’ (Gelder 1997c: 378). In spite of Phil Cohen’s insistence that there are three levels to sub-cultural analysis: historical, structural or semiotic, and ‘the phenomenological analysis of the way the