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Intro

“Fuckoff mainstream!, mainstream fuckoff!/ Fuckoff mainstream!, mainstream fuckoff!” (Warcry)

The lines quoted above are the chorus of one of my favourite punk songs; its message being kept short and simple. The last time I saw this band play the singer introduced the song by shouting “mainstream *punks* fuckoff!”, thus further closing the ranks by extending the condemnation to include punks, or at least people who claimed to be punks, a statement that was met with an enthusiastic cheer by the crowd, including myself. Whenever I have interviewed punks over the years, they have all stated that punk is against the mainstream, however what constitutes this mainstream has differed significantly: Some have said MTV, others have said commercial media *safe for* MTV, some have stated that it meant barcodes on records, while others claimed it included singing in harmonies. It has been used to make distinctions outside of the scene, and as implied above, as within the same. It is all intriguing to me, how the mainstream is agreed upon as being what punk is against, yet its significance is arbitrary. This paper is meant to outline a further investigation of what consequences this have for subcultural mobilization; the drawing of boundaries, how identities are claimed and maintained, negotiated and refuted in relation to a cultural Other. I will argue that in order to understand how meaning is constructed and how actions are made sense of we must approach the mainstream as existing within, what Goffman (1986a) calls a groups’ belief system, the framework of frameworks. Further I will claim that this set of beliefs governs actions and makes them meaningful, consequently we should take our point of departure how the participants (re)produce and negotiate meaning from those structures that validates this action. The mainstream only exists in the actors’ articulations of it. Instead of investigating this from the observing point of view we should start with the performers and how they seek recognition and make distinctions, otherwise we risk excluding those participants that do not meet with our expectations of authenticity. Something that, I will intend to show below, has every so often biased previous attempts to investigate subcultural meaning.

Situating the mainstream

In her, at times, brilliant study on English club cultures Sarah Thornton makes an interesting remark: The clubbers she investigated saw themselves as opposed to a mainstream instead of the other

available scenes (1996:99). They did not situate themselves against punks and rastas for example but positioned themselves as outside of this mainstream. Similarly Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) found that authenticity was not limited to the own group but included other groups as long as they met with expectations of what was deemed authentic. Thus instead of championing the own group against other existing alternative ways for subcultural affiliation, the positioning of the inauthentic regarded the mass, the mainstream. Authentic commitment was compared with the superficial, the shallow and temporary fashion-centred. These traits of the unauthentic are often mentioned as traits of the mainstream and of sign of the uncommitted regarding punk (c f Andes 1998, Fox 1987, Gosling 2004, Lull 1987, Muggleton 2000, Pickles 2001). Nonetheless this positioning of the mainstream in celebrating a punk identity is seldom investigated.

Dick Hebdige (1988), one of the first scholars to theorize punk, argues that subcultures reflect tensions between dominant and subordinate groups which are reflected in a stylistic resistance against the normal. Building on the Birmingham School's subcultural theory (c f Hall et al, 1993) and thus following Gramsci's claim that hegemony has to be won as it cannot be fixed, Hebdige sees subcultures as resisting the attempts to hide the unnaturalness of the hegemonic order. Subcultural style goes against nature, against the normalization of the mainstream culture: *"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"* (1988:90). The mainstream for Hebdige, as well as for John Clarke (1993) whose work regarding the incorporation of style overlaps Hebdige's, encompass both a contrastive as well as a threatening aspect: The mainstream is positioned as the Other in an attempt to transform the meaning of an object and relocating it into a new context – as in resisting the dominant culture – but mainstream media also threatens to turn this object into a commodity – to defuse its potential for resistance and subversive connotations and turn symbols into mass produced public goods. This 'freezing' of subcultural symbols (1988:96) further marks a distinction regarding authenticity, between the innovators and the hangers-on: The former, the working-class youth as the artistic vanguard, the creator of style; the latter, the mainstream middle-class attracted by media exposure. Thus authenticity becomes a factor of class, as well as of temporality, concerning an innovative original meaning and an incorporated fake. 'True' membership becomes the moment of stylistic innovation that reflects a resistance to mainstream culture.

Following upon Hebdige work, punk's allegedly opposition against the mainstream society has been frequently addressed (c f, Frith 1981, Laing 1985, Lull 1987), Katherine Fox (1987) for example uses the mainstream to account for 'real' commitment; the more committed to punk the further away from the mainstream. Whereas the core-members – the hardcore and softcore punks – provided ideology, leadership and acted as role models for the periphery – the preppie punks and spectators -

the latter insulated the core from the mainstream society which they opposed. Andes (1998) too connects commitment to an opposition to the mainstream. Punks, she argues, may have different sets of meanings for what constitutes punk, following their reference group and through time. When these vary so will this definition. The more committed you are to a standard the harder the individual will work to behave consistently. According to Andes there is a developmental aspect to punk identity involving a change in reference groups. Following a state of mind of being different from the mainstream, punk becomes the channelling of this difference; a rebellion against parents and friends aimed to shock and offend. As a second stage members learn the standards of how to behave and dress; they become part of a subculture, this includes being conscious of how to separate between punks and posers and learning why this is important. While the second stage refers to affiliation the final stage indicate transcendence: the moving away from the subculture as affiliation becomes subordinated punk as an anti-authoritarian and highly individualistic ideological commitment with a stress on DIY; the production and distribution of the own culture.

Consequently, although similar to Hebdige as the mainstream is used to assess resistance to a dominant culture, Andes hints that the mainstream has nuances, as subcultural commitment develops so does the positioning of the mainstream: From parents and teachers to posers and then finally to society as a whole. Nevertheless these nuances are explained by reference to commitment, thus signalling an authentic punk-core and cultural homogeneity as potential differences regarding the mainstream can either be cast off as those of the not fully developed same goes for the hangers-on (Hebdige), or those in the periphery (Fox). Mainstream then is more of a means to secure the assumptions of these authors, rather than being questioned and investigated. Fox, for example, clearly champions the hardcore punks' descriptions of the "preppie punks". She describes these punks as approaching the scene as a costume party "*concerned with the novelty and the fashion*" and "*drawn to the excitement*" (1987:361). Muggleton (2000) criticizes Fox for focusing too much on the hardcore punks and their views of what constitute authenticity; "*what Fox is actually describing here is the way in which members authenticate their own commitment as 'hardcore' by invoking a subcultural 'other'*" (2000:101). Mohawks and tattoos might be signs for authentic membership for some punks, but might be the opposite for others, as such it is useless to differentiate between real punks or pretenders; the members' strength of affiliation is a bad way of stratification as no one will present themselves as less committed (ibid). Thornton (1996) also draws attention to that we risk universalizing the views of a particular group over others if we do not problematize the mainstream. Rather more and more we are facing a society in which everyone claims to be different and the problem of investigating deviance lies not in identifying it, but instead of explaining how it differs from a mainstream (Moore 2005:250). Depending on whom we are investigating we will find

different views on what constitutes the core. The mainstream is then plural, or rather a construct in constant dispute, as such it is used for ideological distinctions regarding authenticity, both for the researcher as well as for the cultural group we investigate.

Nevertheless the mainstream is frequently used unproblematized in cultural studies. Futrell, Simi & Gottschalk (2006) for example claim the White Power music scene to be against mainstream culture, Schilt states that “*independent music scenes tightly police their boundaries, expelling those who are seen as going too mainstream or “selling out”*” (2004:123) and Gosling claims that the disappointment with mainstream punk fueled an underground punk scene that viewed safety-pins and mohawks as an “*ineffectual fashion posturing*” (2004:169) drawn from mainstream media. In a similar vein Lull (1987) further notes punk is a way of defining “*cultural space as being outside of mainstream society*” as do Holt (2007). In none of these cases the meaning of this mainstream, how it is created and whether this differs among participants, is investigated. Even though it is becoming more and more common among cultural theorists to question the rigid character of subcultures, and claim boundaries between the mainstream and subculture being hard to draw (c f Bennet & Peterson (eds) 2004,, Muggleton & Weinzierl (eds) 2003, Epstein (ed) 1998), the mainstream is still largely left untheorized. It is the mass mediated and passive, the commodified and corrupted, the shallow and fashion-centred, against the alternative and subversive, the creative and active. Research investigating youth culture is too often caught up in binary categories that are drawn from the participants’ accounts to illustrate the own culture ideologies (Thornton 1996:94ff). Instead of being problematized the mainstream is dismissed as negative and uniform, posing the subculture and the mainstream are defined against each other, the latter being the normal, the majority. Further there is a risk of homogenizing youth cultures as differences within the mainstream are neglected and subcultural meaning is all too often attributed from the outside, hence the implications and social consequences of the mainstream is left untouched.

Thornton as well as Muggleton (2000) and Moore(2005) are the few exceptions to the negligence of the mainstream. In her study regarding club cultures Thornton connects mainstream to the issue of the authentic and legitimate. To possess knowledge of what is deemed as authentic is to be ‘hip’, it is a means to imagine the own world and the own group’s distinct character from a perceived mainstream. Mass media constitutes a potential threat to this hipness due to their general distribution that thus can disseminate this knowledge to other social groups, in short to the mainstream. Consequently the mainstream becomes what the hip world constantly attempts to escape; the image of the undifferentiated mass. The mainstream is this hip world’s “*perpetually absent, denigrated other*” (1996:5), that both functions as to affirm the own distinctive character as it is assessed in relation to this mainstream, and as a threat to this status if becoming aware of the

knowledge being used to assert this character. We become who we are by stating who we are not (Thornton 1996:3). While Hebdige and Clarke argue that the mass media constitute a threat to the subculture Thornton turns this around as she argues that the media creates meaning in combination with the subculture, this way meaning is perceived as objective by the participants as it is seen to exist outside of the subculture. For style to be perceived as authentic it has to appear to have been accumulated outside of the mainstream yet mass media includes a validating feature as it confirms the originality and distinctiveness of the subculture (Moore 2005:232, Thornton 1996:128). Interestingly enough media then gets a double role, first and foremost as participating in naming and establishing the subculture, and second both to provide the means for distinguishing between the own identity and the mainstream as well as the boundary for such distinction; what is cherished within subcultures is perceived as being legitimated by media only to become dismissed once recognized as trendy. Muggleton (2000) too touches upon this double role of the media. Subcultural identity is constructed through a distancing from a stereotypical image of the subculture (wearing the right clothes, listening to the right music) that is diffused through mainstream media. Members of subcultures are thus resisting this stereotypical image; the own heterogeneous identity is contrasted to a mainstream deprived of heterogeneity and originality. The definition and positioning of media is dependent on this contrast, their *“relative ‘massness’ is therefore derived from the homogenization of the ‘Other’, not in terms of any pre-defined formal qualities”* (Muggleton 2000:140). Not only is the mainstream a construction meant to validate the own position but so are notions regarding what constitutes this mass media, as it is created in the process of defining the Other. This is definitely an interesting thought as it suggests the need for further investigating and contextualising statements regarding mass media’s threatening role, something which Thornton and Moore does not take into consideration.

The mainstream Other

So far the previous remarks regarding the mainstream we have touched upon all refer to authenticity, although in different ways. For while Hebdige, Fox, Lull and Andes suggest an authentic punk-core, Thornton, Moore and Muggleton suggest that commitment is not something real but rather a perceived reality and thus in dispute. Either way the positioning of the mainstream regards the drawing of boundaries, and as such attempts to define the subculture: *“The relevant social network for fans is determined, not merely by shared tastes in music, but more important, by shared ways of drawing the line between what is and what is not rock”* (Grossberg 1987a:184). Now, Grossberg states that these taste groups are nominal in the sense that they do not imply any sociological reality or stylistic feature, I would beg the difference, as is implied above regarding the work of Thornton. If being meaningful to the actors the mainstream has consequences for how

action are recognized and positions claimed; it exists in the actors' articulations and as such it carries importance (Moore 2005:234). Further, attempting to pass as committed calls for an affirmation of this commitment as being valid. It is only through the recognition of the collective that meaning can be attributed to action and legitimized. Following this line of argument I want to draw attention to an understanding of meaning as an issue involving validating action in relation to a specific cultural context. In line with this Arjun Appadurai (1998) argues that 'culture' should not be used as a noun but as the adjective cultural:

The most valuable feature of the concept of culture is the concept of difference, a contrastive rather than a substantive property of certain things [...] I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group (1998:12)

Seen this way, *culture* signals a distinction, a mobilized framework, which, when adhered to, provides our actions and our distinction from others with meaning. The creation of meaning becomes the act of validating action in relation to a cultural framework but also as distinct from a cultural Other. Culture not only proclaims our way of doing things and what we are but also indicates what we are not doing and who we are not. However, this is not to say that culture becomes a power in itself, rather as a context within which behaviours can be described and understood (Geertz 2000). The cultural context is neither real nor objective rather it has a structuring aspect as it validates certain actions and values over others. It thus involves and incorporates a dominating aspect as is argued by Edward Said (2004) concerning the West's dominance over the Orient. Thornton for example writes that "*Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others*" (1997:201). This involves seeing these oppositions as interrelated; in excluding the Other, potential interpretations are reduced as the ranks of the group are closing. Excluding the Other thus means narrowing down alternative interpretations (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000:51f). Hence we cannot speak of one uniform existing mainstream, rather it is made up from various accounts, including the mass media (c f Thornton 1996, Moore 2005) and meant to distinguish the own identity as authentic in attempting to exclude other interpretations. The use of the mainstream is a form of categorizing our world, a positioning through "*the burlesque exaggerations of an imagined other*" (Thornton 1996:101) that creates a communal feeling. Consequently the mainstream is a construction, a means to imagine the own world and claim a social position. As such cultural groups should never be reduced to homogeneous groups; rather it calls for an investigation of their heterogeneous character and how alternative interpretations are excluded in the performances of culture.

The performance of the Other

Cultural action involves performance, I will argue, as it attempts to hide other potential interpretations in legitimizing action through the connection to a cultural framework that provides it with a past and present, what Appadurai above referred to as a mobilization of group identities. Erving Goffman defines performance as *“all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”* (1990:26). Goffman’s point is that individuals perform within a social context to control impressions of themselves that they know are being watched, as such, it is in the individual’s interest to control how he or she is perceived by the others. This, in turn, is done through attempting to define the situation for them and if this works “effectively” the others answer in such a way that they reaffirm the individual’s performance. But this action is not carried out in a social void, instead Goffman argues that society provides both the means to categorize people and then attributes action to these categories. The possible categories, as well as what kind of persons who are likely to be encountered are limited by the social setting (Goffman 1986b:2). Subjectivity is realised in an interaction governed by frames:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which governs events [...] and our subjective involvement in them: frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify (Goffman1986a:10f).

Frames then, are used to make sense of the world; it renders the otherwise meaningless meaningful. Chris Brickell (2005) argues that Goffman’s definition of performance and frames account for a self-conscious actor who presents him or herself to other actors within certain frameworks which validates these presentations. To Brickell our daily interactions involves validating, refuting and cooperating with other actors and in doing so we participate in legitimating, resisting, and bolstering existing social structures; frames. We are conditioned by these frames, however not determined, there is still room for an acting subject who then act on socially available meanings and frames as resources. It is in this dynamic process that our selves are constructed through performances and definitions of the situation carried out within a framework which organizes and thus constrains that action. We do not act out of motivational schemas but rather into the own situation; following opportunities and constraints available (Shotter 1993:69). Consequently the possible alternatives that are available to us are limited by frames, but on the other hand, without these frames action would not be meaningful at all. They situate action within something beyond that particular action. Frame analysis thus strives to identify but also to describe how meaning is created socially, how action is organized through taken for granted socio-cultural elements such as premises and presuppositions (Alasuutari 1995). This in turn decides how the situation is defined and as such it

limits alternatives as it means focusing on certain possibilities over others. Accordingly it has consequences for how the mainstream is approached. Put together frames form a code, or belief systems, what Goffman defines as “*framework of frameworks*” (1986a:27) that serve to give action distinctive meaning and as basis for validation and affirmation. As Goffman puts it: “*To fail to adhere to the code is to be a self-deluded, misguided person; to succeed is to be both real and worthy, two spiritual qualities that combine to produce what is called ‘authenticity’*” (1986b:111). Authenticity then, is connected to conformity to group norms, and indeed for Goffman an individual’s nature is dependent on his or her perceived group affiliation (1986b:112). It thus constitutes the performance of affiliation and commitment as opposed to Hebdige, Fox and Andes. Mainstream is given meaning within the belief system, More so, this also highlights heterogeneity as this belief system is made up of different frameworks that work together in validating action, thus opening up for negotiation and alternative readings.

When investigating subcultural style we then have to consider that objects are articulated and thus placed within a context which connects it to different practices and meanings, what is punk to a punk does not have to be the same as for a non-punk, as Holly Kruse states : “*a particular practice is articulated within a specific discursive terrain, and helps to construct a different sort of oppositional identity*” (1993:34). What is important here is identity as a process in which an oppositional stance is constructed and not taken for granted; this articulation is not uniform but rather in dispute, the important part is the consequences it brings. What is missing in Moore’s (2005) and Thornton’s (1996) analysis of the media’s role as a threat to the subcultural capital of insiders by introducing their style and music to the rest of society, is, I would argue, that as this articulation is framed within a belief system, but not determined, what constitutes mainstream for one participant may very well not be the same for another, and that the attempt to present the own interpretation as valid hides more than it shows. We need to take into consideration different views on media, instead of homogenizing culture insofar as to portray members of having a shared view on media, selling-out and the cultural Other. It is not enough, I would argue, to state that actors reject something because it is considered mainstream or that something constitutes a cultural Other, we have to investigate their cultural value for the actor as well as its mythological value within the scene; what is expected of whom by who? Thus when Schilt states that “*the indie scene tends to see popular press attention as equivalent to “selling-out”*” and that the “*boundaries between independent music and pop music began to blur*” (2004:124) we should rightly ask “to whom?” and “with what consequences?”. If mainstreams are plural and in dispute what becomes interesting is how the positioning of the mainstream constitutes the basis for action as well as social positioning? Thornton does not further take this into consideration; that different views on what is deemed sell-out results in different

claims for positions, something which, at least to some extent, is implied by Andes' (1998) stress on different reference groups.

The addressee and the Other

Waksler (2006) argues that while Goffman has contributed a great deal to the understanding of the face-to-face interaction, this is done "*from the perspective of an observing social member*" (2006:419) instead of exploring how the participants view this interaction. Consequently interaction is viewed from the outside, homogenizing both the interaction and the participants' views of it as well as how they assess the world. As Waksler notes this is a dangerous path to tread for a sociologist as it involves choosing sides in the definition of this interaction taking the observers' perspective, and thus imposing our interpretations on what this interaction and/or reality constitutes. As we have seen Muggleton criticizes Fox for not acknowledging that there is no core and periphery regarding membership. Bennett and Peterson (2004:12) makes a similar point in arguing that a that the boundaries of the scene are hard to draw and that therefore there is little use between separating between members and nonmembers and between what is a scene and what is not. Yet I would say that it certainly is, as this is a methodological question, as invoked by Waksler above. If we are not to separate between members and non-members then who do we include in our study? In investigating punk what are the criteria we use for whom to interview or what print media to look at? If we do not reflect on how this might affect our research, and more importantly how our own prejudices are left untouched we risk merely impinging our own views on those we are said to investigate. For Muggleton this is certainly problematic. Claiming to draw his conclusions from interviews with "*typical subculturalists*" (2000:15), he finds them unwilling to define themselves as belonging to a subculture; instead he states that they resist a stereotypical image. But this becomes rather complicated as these typical subculturalists are chosen on behalf of what Muggleton "*regarded as their unconventional appearance*" (2000:171)¹. Instead of focusing on how meaning is created dress and appearance becomes the focus. Similar to Kotarba's (1991) work on the rock scene it is the sociologist who describes what is normal and what is not regarding subcultures. Kotarba goes even further in his construction of stereotypes as he takes a Christian rocker dressed like "*an angry or anarchistic punk rocker*" (1991:46) as a sign for blurring the borders between subcultural identities.

¹ As do Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) however they state that their informants early in the interviews claimed to belong to the subculture, something that Muggleton had problems with. Nevertheless I would claim this to be problematic, as it situates membership as being identifiable from the outside and thus exclude those who might very well be punk but whose dress does not meet researchers' idea of punk dress. Further if we are, as is Widdicombe and Wooffitt, out to investigate how social comparisons are used to assess authenticity, dress is certainly not the right end to start in. This is the problem of having already defined what constitutes punk upon arriving to the scene.

As a researcher to identify someone as punk on the basis of dress and appearance, not only excludes a lot of actors as it is not affiliation that is investigated but a visual style identified from the outside, but it also questions the validity of the research: Are we studying members of subcultures or people who 'fit' the researcher's stereotypical images of subcultural style? In this case Kotarba and Muggleton are too busy focusing on the signs per se and not on what they signify to the members and to others from whom recognition are sought. If these people do not state to be members, the adherence to a style rather than to a wider community, how can we state them being members without finding ourselves trapped in issues regarding authenticity? Even though punk is rejected as a stereotypical subculture Muggleton argues his informants still are close enough for these stereotypical subcultures to be relevant; e.g. they dress in a manner that he conceives as punk. The mainstream for Muggleton becomes stereotypical images of subcultures which his informants are viewed as deviating from (as they claim not to be members) yet still are close to (regarding their style which already is defined as subcultural by Muggleton upon interviewing them). This is something which Bennett and Peterson, as well as Muggleton, leave untouched when referring to boundaries being hard to draw. But if these boundaries are of relevance for those who we investigate, as Muggleton implies in stating the mainstream and the core to be plural as well as in dispute, this separation has consequences for how meaning is maintained and negotiated. If it matters for them we investigate it matters for us. In the end this boils down to a question of definition, consequently I suggest that in order to escape authenticating and universalizing culture we should not define punk other than the articulation of an identity and or objects *as such* by performing actors. Same goes for the mainstream, we should investigate how it is articulated and with what consequences.

A problematization of the mainstream positions the mainstream as being part of the performances of the actors and the belief system that makes these meaningful. We should not attempt to find the mainstream outside of these performances. However I am not saying that, as do Grossberg (1987b:147f), that the subculture and the mainstream cannot be separated; again, if this separation is meaningful to the participants then it also has consequences (Thomas 1928), this is something Grossberg completely ignores (see Thornton 1996:97). Critically assessing the use of the mainstream means expanding on how meaning is created and where validations are directed and from what. As one of Lull's informants states regarding punk styles: "*We might look the same to outsiders, but there are big differences between us*" (1987:227). In taking an outsider view we risk becoming ignorant of these nuances, how they are (re)produced and what consequences they have as the meaning of these performances obviously is directed within the own group. Instead of investigating this from the observing point of view we should start with the performers and how they seek recognition and make distinctions, as such I find the need for separating between the addressee and

the cultural Other. What I suggest is that we should question whether participants have a similar view on the situation and whether there are alternative readings present, but also whether face-to-face interaction must involve what is defined as a physical presence (Waksler 2006:420)? As West and Zimmerman (1991) have noted, we are kept in place by both ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ others, the creation of authenticity is not confined to what we most often refer to as present others. Similarly Irwin (1977:57) argues that the actor’s community can be either real or imagined. Redman (2001), in defining heterosexual masculinities, captures my point as he states that these “*can be viewed as deeply relational and struggled over, involving intricate assertions of likeness to and difference from key social others, assertions that are sometimes affirmed and sometimes contested*” (2001:189). There are several interesting points made here, first and foremost social identity as relational and something created and negotiated over in terms of likeness and difference. Second this necessitates a validation from other actors towards whom these performances of identity are addressed. Third this process also include the possible refutation and, or, punishment of others not adhering to the same interpretation of this validation, which, fourth, makes this identity contextual as different themes or repertoires are interpreted differently in different contexts. Consequently an investigation of how action is validated must include both the articulation of the cultural Other – from whom distinctions are made– and the addressee – towards whom these performances are directed in search for affirmation as well as the belief system within which these distinction appear as meaningful. This addressing also means excluding potential alternatives as it affords recognition to some and not from others. As we strive for recognition regarding our performed identity we thus make a statement, and indeed ask for recognition of that statement, of what is normal or authentic. The boys in Redman’s study for example used “the lad”; a sexist homophobic masculinity against which their own romantic masculinity was measured. The own identity is validated in the recognition of action by designated others as such and a simultaneous refutation of any alternatives as misplaced or wrong. This is what I have referred to as the mainstream.

Concluding remarks

Punk, I would say, is too often approached from an outsider perspective that attempts to explain action in relation to the observing public; either through a shocking appearance or by resisting a dominant bourgeoisie culture, as if the action were directed beyond the own group (Baulsch 2003, Moore 2004, Pickles 2001, O’Connor 2002, O’Hara 1999, Thompson 2004). Widdicombe & Woofitt (1995) makes an interesting point regarding this strong belief in resistance, in arguing that Hebdige’s and the Birmingham School’s admiration of the subculture and its resistance is coupled with contempt of the actual members who often are patronized and referred to as kids. The members of subcultures do not know what is best for them or what their action *should* implicate: “*members of*

subcultures are effectively silenced before they have even been allowed to speak about their lives: the knowledge about them is not written in their own terms "(1995:23). Similarly Fox's (1987) focus on hardcore punks as the true punks and Andes' (1998) referral to a typical punk style and punk values and ideals, excludes alternative interpretations of what constitute punk. Together they contribute to the construction of punk as a homogeneous culture. This way they define authentic punk and consequently leave those who do not fit this image as being outside of the subculture regardless of their definitions, deviations are quickly explained away by referring to the outside structures which punk is against – e.g. the incorporation into the mainstream – or as not being authentic enough. The mainstream is thus authenticated in the same process, it becomes a real entity, existing outside of the subculture and threatening to subsume it. The mainstream is homogenized and turned into a commodified other and is not further investigated, instead it is used to demarcate the authentic from the shallow, echoing the classic distinction between high and low culture. The cultural theorist becomes part of another consecrating institution in defining what authentic resistance is and what is not; drawing boundaries instead of investigating what these articulations signify. But the mainstream tells us more about the spectacular (Hebdige) or unconventional (Muggleton) than merely investigating these as different from an existing mainstream.

What I have argued is that the mainstream is and can never be anything else than a passive abstract as it is used to contrast the actions of the performers. Parents, teachers, politicians, media etc, that are cast off as mainstream are not active in the negotiation of their meaning within the subculture; their existence is only necessary for the performers to define the situation not the other way around. Irwin captures this regarding the deviating performances of the surfers he investigated;

"the surfing character [...] chose to make a spectacle of himself [...] He was not performing for the conventional society (it was not even necessary for outsiders to see the acts, though it was more convincing if they did), but for his own reference group" (1977:114).

Irwin focuses here on the amusement this gave the other actors rather than the distinction it actually constitutes and thus how meaning is derived from distinctive action. The conventional society, in this case, has no other function than as a background in front of which action is performed. Their watching only adds to make the action more convincing, not to make it meaningful. As Appaduari puts it referring to televised cricket games: *"the audience of live matches is itself a prop in a grander performance staged for the benefit of the television viewers. The crowd is there not to enjoy the liveness of the spectacle but to provide evidence of it for the television audience."* (1998:101). Hence those present who are not intended as validating action are degraded to part of the setting. Goffman (1986a) refer to this position in his discussion regarding participant status. As opposed to full

participant status where the capacities and privileges to talk and to listen in a given situation are on somewhat equal terms, toy status, Goffman writes, refer to; “*the existence of some object, human or not, that is treated as if in frame, an object to address acts to or remarks about, but out of frame (disattendable) in regard to its capacity to hear and talk*” (1986a: 224). Now Goffman does not expand on what consequences this might have for validating both action and others – including both a distinction from (the cultural Other) and that being guided towards other actors (the addressee). Nevertheless his definition above poses individuals present as being objectified into a cultural Other; their status not dependent on their spatial position, but rather on their level of ratification; as being validated as participants or not. Thus we may develop our view of interaction to include objects, both non-human and human, to be used by performing actors within frame-activity.

Thus there is a shift in focus from what is being done to how it is being done; how action, dress, lingo and appearance are made meaningful within a belief system and how the articulation of these as valid signals an adherence to the own group and a distinction from something else. This way the mainstream is nothing but stage props used to enhance the own performance as valid, it is the objectified abstract cultural Other, addressed to other participants. By claiming action to be valid some features are articulated over others, excluding, or at least attempting to exclude, other possible interpretations. The creation of meaning is validating action; associating it to something beyond the action itself, towards a belief system which provides action both with a past and a present as well as situating it in relation to other actions. The belief system is the mobilizing mechanism which limits and which is interpreted and used to validate action. Consequently the creation of meaning is performed as it involves *the presentation of action* in relation to this belief system and inevitably, as I pointed out above, to conceal any alternative readings. It is not something true or authentic rather it is constantly in dispute and being negotiated. Recognition becomes important as the only way to come off as authentic is to be recognized as such by other actors. For every punk there is a definition of what punk means, therefore a belief system constitutes the sharing of similar yet distinct beliefs and it is only, I dare to say, through the examination of how a mainstream, a cultural Other, is constructed through the actors’ articulations, as we can fully understand how meaning is attributed to actions.

Thornton concludes her investigation of the mainstream by stating that the mainstream is an inadequate concept for sociology as it redirects questions that instead refer to social definition and the representation of the own group. Judging from how it has been used in cultural studies, I am bound to agree. Still, as I have attempted to show, the mainstream is both a useful and relevant concept for cultural studies if applied as a theoretical concept and not as a catch phrase. Instead what I propose is that we simply accept the definition(s) given to us by those we investigate, as both

Moore and Thornton point to, this is how the own identity is made meaningful, and then investigate how this mainstream is being constructed, maintained or changed, how it differs between actors and what consequences this have for how the own identity is made valid and presented to others as to claim that validity and in turn how to validate others' performances. Taken this way mainstream becomes a crucial analytical tool for identifying the patterns of authenticity and the process of validation of style, speech and action. Again, while we should not search for authentic cultures we should expect to find authentic mainstreams but *merely interpretations of a collective belief, or rather, of a believed collective*. The mainstream is no more real than the own group, it is the bi-product of the own representation. This suggests a move beyond previous research on punk, as it leaves room for the participants' alternative, and sometimes conflicting interpretations, yet still acknowledging a shared cultural context. It also involves investigating the cultural Other from within the cultural context which both defines and creates it, instead of seeing it as external.

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