

Even Further: The Power of Subcultural Style in Techno Culture

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All power, whether it be from above or from below, whatever level one examines it on, is actually represented in a more-or-less uniform fashion throughout Western societies under a negative, that is to say a *juridical* form. It's the characteristic of our Western societies that the language of power is law, not magic, not religion, or anything else. (Foucault, 1980, p. 201)

In Western societies, it is a recurrent view that youth activities must be restrained and/or modified through rules and regulations like music censorship, curfews, and dress codes. One contention of the 'parent' culture,¹ or the culture at large, is that the young are biologically and emotionally immature and therefore incapable of making many of the decisions that affect their lives. Young people are seen as a disenfranchised group without political, economical, and social power (Côté & Allahar, 1996). Because some youth perceive these given roles as incomplete and void of any real meaning, subcultures emerge by developing their own culture in an attempt to find worthwhile identities (p. 20). Youth subcultures are generational groups that differentiate themselves from the culture at large through distinct activities, values, particular uses of material artifacts, and social spaces (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1997). Style is 'the active organization of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organized group-identity in the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of "being-in-the-world"' (p. 108). Subcultural style is manifested through look, sound, and performance, yet dress is a subculture's most powerful means of communication because of its high visibility. For youth subcultures, power is the negotiation of style within given cultural parameters. In this chapter, I explore the relationship of style and power in the rave subculture located in the Midwestern

region of the United States. My approach to this topic is interdisciplinary. I draw from diverse writings on youth and style in the fields of clothing and textiles, cultural studies, sociology, and youth studies in order to present a multi-faceted interpretation. The data collected from my fieldwork in the rave scene provides the primary basis for my discussion on one particular rave event, *Even Furthur*.²

Style as Power

During the life period of youth, style is a powerful means of giving a subculture an alternative approach to status attainment. Dick Hebdige (1997) maintains that while anonymity is a common characteristic of the powerful, subcultures respond to observation by posing and displaying themselves. He argues that this act feeds our voyeuristic tendencies by allowing us to gaze at strange appearances and activities from the safety of our own social locales. He concludes: 'Power is inscribed in the looks of things, in our looking at things' (p. 404). Youth subcultures define their spaces through styles of music, dance, dress, and rituals that are first unfamiliar and subsequently portrayed as threatening through media distortion. Moral panics may result because the meanings being communicated by the subculture through dress and appearance programs do not coincide with the meanings assigned by the viewer in their review of the programs (Stone, 1962). It is through deliberate aesthetic reconstruction of mainstream cultural practices that it is possible for subcultural groups to achieve a sense of empowerment. The symbolic power of style is a subculture's ability to symbolize otherness.

For example, bell hooks (1990) believes in willfully choosing the margin as a site of resistance rather than accepting it as a place of imposed oppression. By making this distinction, it is then possible for marginalized groups to live in spaces of creativity and power. Through her lived experiences as a Black woman, hooks describes how a powerless position can be transformed to one of strength through aesthetic evolution. hooks writes:

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space, which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (p. 153)

The power of cultural expression distinguishes subcultures from the mainstream, the un-hip, and the inauthentic. Metaphorically, it releases them from the authoritative grips of commerce and media. Most youth with subcultural membership will emphatically deny any connection with the conventional,

and will often discard a style if they feel it has been commodified. Hebdige (1989) contends that commodification is an attempt to control and tame the subculture; that the diffusion of style leads to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power. It is at this point that subcultures negotiate their styles so they can re-authenticate their appearances (Thornton, 1996). Authentication can be viewed as a means to protect the original ideologies associated with a subcultural style. Although fluid relationships in reality, subcultures prefer to view themselves as separate, elitist entities in order to authenticate what they view as unique existences. The radically baggy and long look of skateboarding style has now been commodified by the Levi-Strauss clothing brand in their *Wide* label jeans. One skateboarder in Minneapolis, MN confided to me that he is now choosing to wear a less baggy pant since skatestyle has been diffused into mainstream culture. When his style was incorporated by the mainstream, he experienced a loss of power. As this skater's style evolved to maintain the authenticity of his subculture, there was another shift in power. Power, then, is a process of negotiation for a subculture.

Style is a subculture's most immediate form of communication, yet the meanings are complex constructions because how youth experience style is subject to various interpretations across time and space. One example of hip-hop dress of the 1980s, which consists of knock-off designer emblems³ such as Gucci and Chanel, is stylistically different than the current fashion trend of wearing Tommy Hilfiger clothing or other phat gear.⁴ Likewise, the politics of gangster rap are understood differently by a Black, urban youth as opposed to a White, suburban youth. The meanings forged from such sights and sounds are understood clearly when attention is given to gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.

In *Black Noise*, Trisha Rose (1994) explores rap music and Black culture in American society, and is particularly interested in the power struggles that exist between male youth and female youth within the rap community. She contends that the hip-hop appearance of Black women rappers is reflective of a working class, Black youth aesthetic. Their distinctive dress is an attempt to resist images of sexual objectification seen in music videos, and to claim cultural visibility within the dominant popular culture (p. 170). In this instance, the visual presence produces a subcultural space that is empowered by female youth in relation to both members and non-members.

The particular subcultural moment I explore is rooted in the contemporary spaces of techno culture. A culture characterized by technological and conceptual advances, the current techno culture experience is described as being fractal; a nonlinear means of constructing one's reality through computers, appearance, electronic music, psychedelic drugs, and pagan-like rituals (Rushkoff, 1994). While the culture at large is suspect of such postmodernist

thought, this culture is embracing alternative ways of seeing their world. The subcultural group that practices these tenets is most popularly referred to as the rave community.

Interpretive Inquiry

In 1995 and 1996, I acted as a participant and as an observer at several raves in the Midwest region of the United States. Entering a person's lifeworld by participating and gathering anecdotes is referred to as close observation (van Manen, 1990). I also regularly explored Internet web sites, discussion lists, and chat lines devoted to rave culture to deepen my understanding of how this subculture reflects a techno culture. Because understanding the ways people subjectively experience style is the basis for my inquiry, I choose to use an interpretive science perspective as my mode of inquiry. When I attempt to understand how style is integrated in the experiences of youth, the descriptions I receive are an interpretation of the lived experience of the event of understanding through discourse. As a participant, my own lived experiences become a valid component in the interpretation. During a rave, it is not possible to conduct formal interviews because documentation would not be possible in the existing conditions of dim light and loud music. In addition, the weather conditions at *Even Furthur* were not conducive to taking photographs or recording conversations. My interpretation of this particular event uses close observation as the method, and the technique of field notes to record information.

Raving in the United States

During the two years of my fieldwork, I observed various subcultural configurations, which made each rave I attended unique. Although what is produced and consumed at each rave is similar, the fusion of elements varied. The Internet web site, Hyperreal.com, is a techno culture resource created and maintained by its members. They describe the rave concept as:

a party, usually all night long, open to the general public where loud 'techno' music is mostly played and many people partake in a number of different chemicals, though the latter is far from necessary. The number of people at the event is unimportant; it can range from 50 people to 25,000 people. The cost of attendance is also unimportant – there have been good raves and bad raves at both end of the cost spectrum (though in practice, the higher the price, the more commercial the event, and the lower the quality). At a rave, the DJ is a shaman, a priest, a channeller

of energy – they control the psychic voyages of the dancers through his or her choice in hard-to-fit music and their skill in manipulating that music, sometimes working with just a set of beats and samples, into a tapestry of mindbending music. A large part of the concept of raves is built upon sensory overload – a barrage of audio and very often visual stimuli are brought together to elevate people into an altered state of physical or psychological existence. (Behlendorf, 1994)

Raving is also regarded as a spiritual revolution and many participants continuously pursue the activity as a hopeful vision of what might ultimately be possible for the future of humankind. While this really represents a synergy between the abstract and the physical, four ideals make up an acronym that is followed by some ravers: P.L.U.R., Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (Fogel, 1993). One of the guidelines of *Even Furthur* illustrates the concept of P.L.U.R.: 'Through kindness and positive attitudes we can help in the process of change that makes everyone open minded' (Promotional Flyer, *Even Furthur*, 1996). A rave then, cannot be easily defined, but rather described by the elements of music, dance, dress, drugs, and the ideology that comprise the ritual experience of rave.

The rave is a ritual of style and philosophy that has been growing for over ten years throughout the world since its birth in Europe and the United States in the late 1980s. Like the origins of techno music, ravers debate whether the first rave was held in Spain, the U.K., or various cities throughout America. The largest rave I attended during my fieldwork is what I regard as the quintessential example of this creative evolution – *Even Furthur*. Next, I describe the Midwest raver's most prized techno culture gathering, and explore how this style experience empowered 4,000 youth.

Like lovers we close our eyes not to be disturbed, anxious for a most exquisite avalanche of sweet consciousness. We have again set the stage for creativity, serenity, and irony – to poetically frolic in the passionate bloom of youth . . . it's time to hurry up and start living, people; hurry up and start staring at flowers until butterflies appear; and hurry up, with gushing detail, and start preparing to assemble. (Promotional Flyer,⁵ *Even Furthur*, 1996)

A celebration of the Midwest's rave scene, *Even Furthur* is a four-day electronic festival promoted by Milwaukee, Wisconsin's techno level, Drop Bass Network (Figure 7.1). A Memorial weekend tradition since 1994, I attended the third *Furthur* that was held in a camp ground in Gorham, Wisconsin from May 24th to May 27th in 1996. I can best describe *Furthur* as a place where technology and nature converge. Thousands of youth were immersed in rain and mudslides as they danced and listened to various genres of electronica⁶ music (techno, house, acid, gabber, jungle, trance, hardcore,



Figure 7.1. Flyer of the *Even Furthur* rave event promoted by Drop Bass Network.

ambient). Throughout the camp, cars, trucks, and vans outlined the tents and campfires. Some people set up trampolines for playtime as they watched intelbeams, or laser lights beamed from projectors, lighting up the sky in sheets of green rain. Also visible was cigarette smoking, the drugs Ecstasy, Acid, and nitrous-filled balloons. There were constant hugs and kisses between new friends and old friends, and dress ranging from hip-hop to hippy.

Furthur reflected the indefinable nature of the rave as well as the dogma of the culture, as it was an intersection of many types of youth and styles. The *New York Times* (Strauss, 1996) reported that *Even Furthur* was a mixture of people ranging from age twelve to thirty who displayed both rave gear and dress of the Grateful Dead fans. However, dress was not limited to the standard phat pant and tie-dyed shirts commonly associated with ravers and hippies. Fashion at raves consists of unique ensembles that are highly volatile. On display at this particular event were body-conscious clubwear paired with platform shoes and elaborately applied make-up for both male and female youth. Extremely baggy pants and jeans; many of them homemade or re-inventions of store-bought apparel, were worn in wide and long lengths to effectively drag on the ground, while simultaneously covering expensive

athletic shoes. Hooded sweatshirts, skate shirts adorned in graffiti-style illustrations, Hilfiger and Polo shirts, tiny-tees, and athletic logos such as Nike and Adidas were also visible in cotton, metallic, and knit fabrics. Ravers had various parts of their bodies pierced, tattooed, and painted. Hair was worn short or long, styled in Afros, and was dyed a variety of colors including blues, pinks, and oranges. Others wore wigs, baseball caps, or hoods to cover their head. A variety of backpack styles were used to carry supplies such as food and drink, candy, cigarettes, illegal drugs, toilet paper, glo sticks for viewing and dancing, and many toys. Many *old skoolers*,⁷ or those who have been in the rave scene for a number of years, wore dress that was appropriate to the natural environment: layers of clothing, rain gear, hiking boots, and rolled-up jeans.

Although the campsite was filled with hills and paths of deep mud (everyone I spoke to told me it had been the same in previous years), most ravers opted to wear their personal uniforms, choosing fashion over physical comfort. Being a raver is a complete transformation of the everyday as temporalities and corporealities are challenged. When the music changed to softer ambient sounds in the late morning, the ravers went to sleep until late afternoon and arose again to scrape off the mud from the bottoms of their pants and shoes in preparation for another night of dance and music. Many ravers informed me that dancing and the use of drugs like Ecstasy also influenced their dress. They asserted that loose, cotton clothing is more comfortable to wear in intensive dance, and the euphoria caused by such a drug makes textured fabrics feel desirable on the body. On display was not a group style of dress, but a mixture of vernacular style unique to each individual. Dress style was influenced by other lifestyle choices outside weekend raving such as skateboarding, clubbing,⁸ and hip-hop culture.

In *streetstyle*, Polhemus (1994) describes this kind of hybrid of subcultures in the nineties as 'the gathering of the tribes' (p. 128-9). He argues that all subcultures have shared media intrusion, and have thus united together to fight the establishment in order to maintain the authenticity of their cultures. In doing so, he believes that styles and ideologies inevitably fused together to produce new subcultures like the rave scene. In *stylesurfing*, Polhemus (1996) further states that subcultural style has evolved to the deliberate presentation of confusing and complex appearances in order to avoid the categorization and labels that are characteristic of a modern ethos. This type of appearance management signifies a departure from homogeneity, and allows an individual to both conceal and reveal meanings that must be negotiated through visual and verbal discourse (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). Visually, *Even Furthur* reflects this ambivalence. Although each person appeared at the festival under the umbrella of raves and electronica music,

their experiences with style varied. From choice of dress to choice of music tents visited, each festival participant was able to construct his or her own realities in these four days, without regard to the rules and regulations enforced by the culture at large.

This massive display of style exhibited at *Furthur* took place in a more private than public arena, transforming it into a space of resistance and acting as a metaphor for social change. Hebdidge (1997) proposes that we are currently seeing an evolution in the activities of youth subcultures. He writes:

We are witnessing the formation of new collectivities, new forms of social and sexual being, new configurations of power and resistance. . . . All these shifts in power mean that older cultural traditions which provided the basis for collective forms of identity and action are being disrupted and eroded and that new ones are beginning to emerge. As power is deployed in new ways, so new forms of powerlessness are produced and new types of resistance become possible.

They can be seen as attempts to win some kind of breathing space outside the existing cultural parameters, outside the zone of the given. They can be seen as collective responses on the part of certain youth fractions and factions to dominate value systems, as forms through which certain sections of youth oppose or negotiate, play with and transform the dominant definitions of what it means to be powerless, on the receiving end. (p. 403)

It can be argued that subcultural empowerment emerges in new aesthetic expressions like those observed at *Even Furthur*. In her discussion of fashion and postmodernism, Morgado (1996) writes that youth subcultures 'might be explained as expressions of postmodern culture's rejection of authority and its embrace of the principle of pure difference.' She continues 'this condition could hold promise for inclusion and empowerment of excluded groups and oppositional movements, and for the revitalization of culture' (p. 49).

Taking control of social space through a rave style also indicates a shift from modernism to a postmodern interpretation of aesthetics, with dress being the most visible evidence. Morgado (1996) asserts that there are identifiable features of postmodern dress. First, the end of progress and original design is being suggested in contemporary appearances that seem to be recycled from the past and chronologically are confusing. Fashion change is interpreted as volatile, as compared with the rhythmic cycles of modernism. Aesthetic codes and traditions are challenged about how dress is worn and co-ordinated. There is disharmony in styles and fabrics and emphasis on ornamentation, as compared with simplicity and unity. Finally, the cultural categories of age, gender, race, and status are distorted, allowing a number of styles, including those previously marginalized, to coexist (p. 48).

At *Even Furthur*, elements of subcultural and historical fashion styles were worn such as the tie-dye shirts inspired by the Grateful Dead movement; phat gear that was first used by skateboarders and hip hop followers; and danceclub dress such as hip-huggers and platform shoes modified from the fashion of the 1960s. Many people wore pacifiers around the neck or in the mouth; some held stuffed animal toys and backpacks; others continuously consumed lollipops and other candy, borrowing from what is usually thought of as infant and toddler identities.

Fashion change at rave parties is accelerated, making a fashion cycle difficult to assess. Each person chooses an eclectic mix of dress that is purchased, reconstructed, or homemade, making the act of dressing similar to choosing a separate costume for each event. Traditional rules of fit are challenged in the wearing of shirts that are several sizes too small, and pants that are several sizes too large. Other Western aesthetic codes are challenged in adorning the body with multiple piercings and painting the face with lavish makeup and glitter. The dress I describe did not appear to be gender-specific or disclose a particular ethnicity.

Dress style is interwoven with the other elements of the rave. Like dress, electronic music is an arrangement of recycled music samples and original sounds that span a variety of rhythms and beats. The event is also perceived to have roots in ancient ceremonies as ravers participate in the ritual of individual dance and soul-searching to reach what they define as a collective pulse. The location of *Even Furthur* combined aspects of the physical and synthetic worlds in the interplay of technology and the natural environment. I posit that the experience of these combined conditions is empowering to a social group who is seeking transcendence.

Summary and Conclusions

Power is a function of all cultural production. Youth interpret their social positions as powerless, so their marginality becomes a place of creative development and fashion innovation. The postmodern perspective of aesthetic expression, as illustrated through the style of *Even Furthur*, is a time of subcultural empowerment as these ravers continue to break away from the tenets of modernism and seek new ways of constructing their realities. Nonlinear assemblages of dress and music, combined with the spiritual practices of dance, drugs, and ritual, represent elements of a techno culture.

Although rave philosophy proposes that members act as a collective whole, I would suggest further research that explores power relations, specifically those involving gender within the rave culture. Because raving is limited to

weekend commitments, tensions may also exist between rave space and the return to everyday life. Researching youth subcultures and their highly visible styles enables us to learn new cultural perspectives, and better prepares us for a future that seems to be mapped through a *bricolage* of elements. Power through youth style, then, can be viewed as one cultural indicator of social change as we look towards the new millennium.

Notes

1. The parent culture refers to the culture of which a smaller culture is a subset of so that these youth are seen in terms of their relation to the wider societal networks. See Hall & Jefferson, (1993 pp.13-17) for further explanation.
2. Furthur is intentionally misspelled. The name is inspired by the same word printed on the bus Ken Kessey and the Merry Pranksters drove around in during the 1960s (Strauss, 1996).
3. The subcultural identity of hip hop has generated a variety of styles in music, dance, and dress since the late 1970s. In 1987, rap artists Erik B. and Rakim could be seen wearing upscale brands of sportswear like Gucci and Louis Vuitton. This fashion was soon reflected in the street trend of wearing t-shirts printed with designer emblems.
4. The term phat is used to describe an extremely baggy style in pants in both rave and hip-hop speak.
5. Flyers are a popular means of promoting an upcoming rave event through innovative, graphic design.
6. Electronica is a music type that consists of many genres that are generally defined by their beats per minute.
7. The term, *old skoolers*, is a phonetic spelling of the word school. The term is used to distinguish between participants who have been raving for many years and those that have recently entered the scene.
8. Clubbing is an expression given to youth who frequent dance clubs. They also refer to themselves as 'club kids.'

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