

5.5. Conflicts, integration, hybridization of subcultures: An ecological approach to the case of queercore

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Abstract

This paper investigates the case study of queercore, providing a socio-historical analysis of its subcultural production, in the terms of what Michel Foucault has called archaeology of knowledge (1969). In particular, we will focus on: the self-definition of the movement; the conflicts between the two merged worlds of punk and queer culture; the “internal-subcultural” conflicts between both queercore and punk, and between queercore and gay/lesbian music culture; the political aspects of differentiation. In the conclusion, we will offer an innovative theoretical proposal about the interpretation of subcultures in ecological and semiotic terms, combining the contribution of the American sociologist Andrew Abbot and of the Russian semiologist Jurij Michajlovič Lotman.

Keywords: queercore, theory, subcultural conflicts.

1. Introduction

Since the foundational works of Hall and Jefferson (1975), Irwin (1977) and Hebdige (1979) the theorization about spectacular youth cultures has undergone a deep theoretical revision, regarding their relationship with locality, virtuality and translocality (Bennet and Petterson, 2004); the definition of actors involved in the art worlds (Becker, 1982); the production and reproduction of idiocultures (Fine, 1979; Kotarba, Fackler and Nowotny, 2009). Scarce attention has been paid to the conflicts, negotiations, hybridisations between subcultures.

The very large sociological literature about these topics, despite its variety, has some common features. Firstly, it is partially or totally self-referential. While subcultural studies use macro-sociological concept to interpret subcultural phenomena and conceptual problems, very seldom this kind of literature tries to give life to a more general approach to culture, social stratification, and identity theory.

Secondly, it tends to be frequently case-oriented, focussing on the simple description of single phenomena (subcultures, scene, begs), and, in some cases, in the development of an inductive theoretical approach, more than on the explanation of plural subcultural phenomena and on the development of comprehensive and deductive models that could be applied to minorities and subcultures of different ambits.

Thirdly, they tend to provide an internal look, describing a posteriori how a given subculture has born or developed through some given hybridization, while not theorizing how subcultures tend to interact between themselves, even in other senses: through differentiation, opposition, fragmentation and composition and so on.

Finally, in our opinion, it tends to over-evaluate the problem of the relationship between subculture and social structures: social class, ethnicity, differences and inequalities associated to gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

This paper investigates the case study of a different kind of subcultural phenomenon, which can be classified as an *interstitial subculture*. We will focus on *queercore*, providing a socio-historical

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analysis of its subcultural production, in the terms of what Michel Foucault has called archaeology of knowledge (1969). In particular, we will investigate the self-definition of the movement; the conflicts between the two merged worlds of punk and queer culture; the “internal-subcultural” conflicts between both queercore and punkcore, and queercore and gay/lesbian music. Our empirical material will consist of lyrics, interviews, manifestos and a variety of visual material used by the global actors of queercore, through fanzines, lyrics and other supports.

In the conclusion, we will offer an innovative theoretical proposal about the interpretation of subcultures in ecological and semiotic terms, combining the contribution of the American sociologist Andrew Abbot and the Russian semiologist Jurij Michajlovič Lotman.

2. A short introduction to queer history

The origins of *Queercore* movement can be traced to the publication, on 1986, of the “*J.D.’s*” fanzine, by G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce. At first, the fanzine named the musical scene as “homocore”, but soon “queer-” replaced the “homo-” prefix. This turn was justified by the will to represent the different subjectivities involved in the scene, and to clarify its political stance. Furthermore, *queer* is a scientific world that had a deep influence both on music and on GLBTQ self-definition.

At the subcultural level, queercore emerged out from the Toronto’s anarchist scene as a response to the anti-queer bigotry of the local punk scene. This territorial-bound phenomenon of differentiation became rapidly recognized all over the world, labelling a variety of different musical phenomena, joined by a common emphasis on DIY culture, rude musical gestures and irony (DeChaine, 1997; see further). As Amy Spencer suggested: “those punks that were gay felt dissatisfied with the options of either participating in the hardcore punk scene or the mainstream gay scene. Neither scene was willing to accept them fully: they could either be queer in the punk scene or punk in the queer scene” (2005, p. 22).



Figure 1: The logo of the queercore band No Brain Cells.

In brief, queercore emerged as an interstitial space created by two concurrent forms of stigmatization (Muñoz, 2006) and turned this stigmatization in a marker of self-identification.

Queercore arose not simply as a criticism per se to the Punk and the GLBTQ movement themselves, but rather as a rant against the different directions the two movements were approaching in the late 1980s. While at first they used to be considered as experimental arenas

and refuges to all sorts of people who were engaged in nonconformist behavior, more and more the main core of them became reciprocally conflicting (DeChaine, 1997). As stated by GB. Jones and Bruce LaBruce (1989), *punk* represented a slang word which in the Seventies stood also for *passive homosexual*, or *catamite*.

As far as concerns the punk scene, queercore blamed its tendencies to be sexist and heteronormative (Spencer, 2005). On the other side, as concerns the GLBTQ movement, political activism established social spaces for non-straight people but these had quickly developed into a homogenous culture, which promoted the crystallization of queer in a series of strict rules of *homonormative* conduct (Du Plessis & Chapman, 1997; Duggan, 2003). Queer punks were ostracized by both those previously radical and accessible spaces.

During 1991, Bruce LaBruce and GB Jones articulated their views to the wider punk community in an article for the popular zine *Maximumrockroll*, titled "Don't be gay, or how I learned to stop worrying and fuck punk up the ass". After the publication of this manifesto, several people from different places began to develop new queercore zines and bands. At the beginning of the Nineties these actors would have become the center of queercore movement. They didn't share any particular geographical location. Mails and fanzines were the main means used in order to support each other and share their work (Halberstam, 2005).

This growing community had its first ritual gathering event in 1991, when Steve LaFreniere organized in Chicago the first national queercore gathering. It was named SPEW and it was intended to provide the movement an identity platform to strengthen social networks between artists and people who recognized themselves in the social, political and artistic ideals of queercore (Spencer, 2005). It starred some of the most famous queercore stars, like GB Jones Queercore band, The Fifth Column, and Vaginal Crème Davis, a black intersex, genderqueer performing artist, member of some of the most important queercore bands, like the Afro Sisters and Black Fag. This event also fostered the emergence of the US Queercore scene in 1992. It ratified the birth of the "Homocore Chicago" organization, which organized regularly queercore shows and held together diverse queer musicians by giving them a physical space in which to meet.

In comparison with Canada and America, queercore emerged several years later in Europe, and at first involved almost exclusively the British scene (Spencer, 2005). The center of the British spread of the movement was the Manchester GLBTQ scene. In particular, *Homocult* played a key role in spreading the queercore music all over UK. In fact, this movement shared with queercore a similar critique against the standardization of the gay experiences, and used similar political actions, like the creation and distribution of radical, satirical and rude posters against straight and mainstream gay culture (Maddison, 2000).

In the second half of the Nineties, many queercore bands emerged in other European countries, such as Poland, Germany, France and Spain. In Italy its spread was limited to few events of the BDSM scene, organized by the Atlantide squat in Bologna and to the musical performances of few famous Italian punks, like Helena Velena, a Transgender Activist and punk music producer.

The Queercore became part of the mainstream music during 1994, thanks to Pansy Division, a Californian band formed in 1992, which released several albums with the Alternative Tentacles label. As for Black Fag, the band's name is a parody of some iconic punk and post-punk bands (The Black Flag, and Joy Division). A similar irony in the self-definition is quite common to the queercore scene (see further).

In 1994, Pansy Division were asked to tour with Green Day on the band's tour. This event gave life to a strong debate within the queercore scene, opposing those who considered the queercore dead, as irreconcilable with the dynamics of commercialization and homogenization of mainstream music, and those who considered it a fundamental step in the legitimization and diffusion of this movement. In other terms, the process of commercial *integration* (Hebdige, 1979) of queercore gave life to a controversy around authenticity that is common to all postmodern subcultures.



Figure 2: The poster of a Pansy Division live during 1993.

3. An archaeology of queercore

In this paragraph, we will shortly provide an analysis of some elements of the cultural production of queercore, including fanzines, LP covers, lyrics, flyers and posters. Our target is to analyse how this musical scene created a space of self-definition and self-representation, positioning itself in an interstice between punk culture and LGBTQ community.

A first relevant element is the homocore fanzine's logo, dated 1986. The symbol represents a synthetic and explicit example of the hybridization of punk and LGBTQ subcultures: the "A" of anarchy and the infamous pink triangle are interweaved together (Jennings, 1988) in the logo.

The resulting symbol should not be interpreted as simply as the overlap between two different cultural identities. Rather, queercore expresses a crucial hybridization, a continuous dialectic of identification and distinction (Simmel, 1905) between the two cultural identities; finally, a postmodern form of irony towards subcultural authenticity (Grossberg, 1992).

As regards queercore lyrics structures, rhythms, styles, and performances on stage, they are largely imported and adapted from the late 70ies-80ies classic punk, as well as the DIY attitude. Analysing the fanzines, this latter aspect represents both a stylistic proclivity, and a themed issue.

Another likeness with punk is the centrality given to the fanzines as tools for the construction of a non-local scene. They allow sharing opinions on lifestyle, every-day episodes regarding homopunks, discussing political issues, reviewing music and cultural products.

Queercore shared also the political position of some subgenres of punk. In particular, they shared antimilitarism, anarchy and anti-capitalism with peace punk and anarchopunk. They promoted those values to a daily practice, through the boycott of multinational brands' campaigns or through more minute strategies, as the prohibition to pay *Homocore* zines with checks. Their slogan was "Really, Cash is preferred. Fuck Banks!" (Jennings, 1988, p. 1), witnessing their awareness of the interlocking of oppressions.

One of the most influential and foundational character of the scene, Bruce La Bruce suggested that the original spirit of punk is near to queercore. Actually, in the first-middle Seventies punk

rockers opposed hetero-normativity, and sexual delinquency was part of their performances: "playing out the role of punk in rejection of social norms. (...) This stance *obviously* included sexual delinquency, looking for bad trouble or wearing a t-shirt with two guys fucking on it as Sid and Johnny" (Jones & LaBruce, 1991, p. 28). Nevertheless, after La Bruce the development of punk scene homophobia, sexism and misogyny took roots within the movement, and punk scene became the reign of machism:

All you see is big macho 'dudes' in leather jackets and jeans parading around the dance floor/pit, manhandling each other's sweaty bodies in proud display. The only difference is that at the fag bar, females have been almost completely banished, while at the punk club, they've just been relegated to the periphery, but allowed a pretense of participation (Jones & LaBruce, 1991, p.27).

The whole punk scene was considered machist: those who expected to find in punk an alternative to a stagnant culture, were largely disappointed by this situation.

This antimachist critique made possible some cooperation between queercore and other anti-machist punk scenes, like the feminist punk of riot grrrrl. This collaboration gave life to compilations like: *There's a dick in the pi* and *New women music sampler*, with all-female groups, both *queercore*, *dykecore* and *feminist punk*.

For the same attitude, hardcore and rude boys or skinhead cultures were considered the perfect enemies, i.e. the best representatives of homophobia in the punk world. For that reason, it is particularly interesting to find queercore groups inspired to Oi! scene, as the Halfings. Their language, their logo (laurels and the pink triangle) and their semiotic references are typically *Oi!*, and they declare to be linked to the Rash organisation⁴.

As regards the relationship between queercore and GLBTQ, they share a common accent on sexual freedom, against bigotry and homophobia, regarding both everyday life and social and juridical oppressions. Queercore imported some slogan from the larger GLBTQ movement (i.e., "Be there and be queer" written on posters used during Fag Bash live concerts and on stickers on Ginoli's guitar) and the massive use of pink triangle. At the same time, queercore claimed a strong differentiation from GLBTQ movement in general, because of its commercialisation and co-optation with the social order. This radical position excluded part of GLBTQ activists from participating to queercore.

From a political point of view, queercore supported a more radical and hostile attitude, claiming Stonewall riots⁵ as a "founding myth" and fighting for a full emancipation of people:

One of the issue I constantly find myself arguing over with non-punk homos is 'unity'. A lot of people in the gay community are still espousing the idea of creating a movement solely based on sexuality. While I see the necessity in fighting common enemies like Larouche, Bush, Dannemyer, I have a hard time ignoring class, religious and goal-oriented differences for the sake of 'unity' (Jennings, 1988, p. 2).

This radical political position produced an allegation against the capitalist turn of GLBTQ movement. Queercore accused many GLBTQ people to have become part of the "American Dream" culture, and to be complicit with the status quo. In particular, queercore considered gay bars, discos and fashion, the loci of the commercialisation of sexual identity in the everyday life. As Fenster (1993, p. 73) suggested: "to be a queer punk means having taste and style that lies outside dominant notions of what music mainstream adult gays and lesbians perform, listen and dance to".

⁴ Similar "strange combinations" are The Staprest, that reuse a Mod imaginary in the construction of their punk identity and in particular, the Vespa byke.

⁵ Stonewall uprisings was a series of spontaneous and non-permitted demonstrations of New York's GLBT community, against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan. These facts, realized in June 28 of 1969, are recognized as "the first gay pride" and became the symbol of the GLBT movements, in particular for the more radical part of them.

This anticapitalistic stance connects queercore to the gay shame movement, which is highly critical against the commercial development of gay prides, and claims for a return to their original riot core.

Other minor actions of political positioning confirm the radicalisation of queercore ideology. For example, some queercore activists performed some vandalic spray-paintings against the Bay Area Reporter, a gay-community newspaper that has published the advertisement of a brand (Coors beer) engaged with Republican Party and conservative causes.

At a linguistic level, one of the main feature of queercore is the use of a highly ironic and sarcastic language as a way to create a complex dynamic of intersection and distinction with respect to queer and punk. Queering punk means destroying any punk sacrality and using a continuous irony about its icons, myths, purposes. Wordplays and punnings are used in lyrics and some band names are realized with the explicit intention of "queering punk".

The re-appropriation of some hostile words, as *fag*, *faggot*, *dyke* and, in general, entire lyrics, are a sarcastic way to show discrimination and to affirm the pride to be "mutant and out of normality", as we can see in the song *Homophobia* by Ugly Americans:

Let's beat up some faggots
cause they really make me sick
We all know it's a men's world
And real men don't eat dick
No way!
I know some funny AIDS Jokes
They make me laugh like hell'
And if you don't like niggers too
I'll tell you a few about Sickle Cell
Homophobia — homophobia
Up my ass
H-O-M-O-P-H-O-B-I-A
(Sinister, 1985).

The use of irony regarding their own sexual identities is not the only modality of semiotic subversion used by queercore activists. They also use, in a typical punk fashion, slogans of conservative politicians or conservative icons, in the visuals of fanzines, records and live performances. An example is the photo cover of one of the first numbers of *Homocore*, representing the picture of "an idiot Christian fascist haranguing the '86 San Francisco Gay Day Parade" (Jennings, 1988, p. 1).

4. Conclusions: For a theory of subcultures as jurisdictions

This paper focusses on a case study of interstitial subculture, i.e. that kind of subculture emerging through the interaction, the negotiation, the conflictual dynamics between other pre-existing subcultures, and proposing an original synthesis of the former divisions and oppositions. It is a typical example of a post-subculture, produced by an original ambivalence. Its main audience, topics, aesthetics emerge from a meta-discursive reflection about subcultures and their power of identification: queercore includes elements of punk and queer and proposes an ironic discourse of mixing, hybridization and combination of them. Starting from this background, queercore, produced a proper language, proper symbols, texts, codes and rules and through them the identification of a significant international audience. Its members have in common a self-collocation or recognition both in the punk and in queer subculture, or prevalently in one out of the two. In other terms, queercore is both a subculture representing a structural division, between a queer minority and the rest of the society, and a post-subculture born by the fusion, interaction, combination of different cultural texts and backgrounds. It reflects changes occurred both in punk and in queer movement. It gives life to a completely new cultural phenomenon with its own internal logic. Its possibilities of survival depend on the capacity to individuate and answer to the specific

subcultural needs of a significant audience, independently from its contents and its sociographic composition.

This allows us to affirm that more and more the question if subcultures are or are not the product of some structural division in society becomes somehow superfluous and unfitting with the great variety of subcultural expressions and the complexity of the relationship between cultural structures and historical phenomena.

Given this consideration, we propose to consider subcultures in an ecological sense combining the theories of Andrew Abbot on the systems of professions (1988) and the theory of the semiologist Jurij Michajlovič Lotman about semiosphere (Lotman *et al.*, 1975).

Consistent with Lotman's approach, subcultures can be defined as cellular semiotic spheres who frame the experience of members defining their own identity through lifestyle, representations, attitude, and values. This cellular sphere is in continuously moving, in a dynamic interaction with mainstream culture, other subcultures and a very vast and undefined quantity of textual, social and semiotic resources. Its borders are permeable but filtering: they select and transform external elements, admitting some expressions, appearances, behaviours, people, influencing and refusing others.

This latter aspect represents the normative side of subcultures. Once a given subculture is formed and supported by a significant number of people, it acts like a *jurisdiction*, a term introduced by Andrew Abbott in order to study how a profession born and becomes legitimated through a process of differentiation from other existing professions (1988). Like a profession, a subculture gives life to a normative system of style that defines the borders of the group, the internal hierarchies, the possible interactions with other cellular systems (cultures, and subcultures) and fields of power. Finally, the jurisdiction creates a kind of spontaneous institutionalisation. As in Abbott's model, the jurisdiction is mobile and dynamic: the process of internal and external differentiation of subcultures is relational and depending on historical, cultural, social contingencies.

Its life is vulnerable and depends on public recognition and on the same reason of its specificity: the possibility of being alternative, relevant, visible, and consistent.

In comparison with other existing theoretical approach, the advantage of our proposal is in considering the sociological and cultural field of subcultures dynamically. This dynamicity allows understanding the interaction between subcultures, the processes of internal and external differentiation, and various other processes of overlapping, hybridisation, conflicts. Finally, it permits us to overcome the traditional divide between structural and post-structural approaches to subcultures⁶.

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⁶ This contribution presents a first theoretical proposal to the study of subcultures. Further details and a larger discussion will be provided in the next future in other contributions.

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