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Street Lit and Subversion

ABSTRACT: The aims of this article are twofold. First, it explores some key elements and themes of “street lit”—a movement in contemporary, predominantly African-American fiction that takes place within the urban underworld, describing gang and ghetto life. The commercial success of street lit leads me to reconsider some common approaches to the study of subcultures, underclass, and “alternative communities” within cultural studies. Specifically, I wish to address two major claims which often tend to go together in cultural studies. One of them, which I ascribe to Marcuse, Hebdige, Hall, and others, is the glorification of gangs, subcultures or the underclass as possessing a revolutionary political potential that can challenge the capitalist economical system and lead to social change. The other tendency is what I see as excessive textualisation of the phenomena studied within cultural studies, which results in understanding them either as reinforcing or subverting established cultural codes. I argue that to understand the aforementioned groups as either reinforcing or subverting the dominant economical system is to make a fallacy of excessive textualisation, and that their activities can never fall easily into either category. In the end, the combination of both approaches makes the study of alternative communities and their potential severely flawed.

KEYWORDS: cultural studies, textualism, alternative communities, subcultures

The aim of this paper is to investigate some tendencies within contemporary cultural studies by focusing on an exemplary analysis of a phenomenon called “street lit,” or urban fiction. In particular, I attempt to point out some shortcomings of a strongly textualist approach within cultural studies: analysing a particular product of culture purely in terms

of a set of codes that are reproduced and challenged, marginalising the actual socio-economic contexts of their production.

First, I wish to explore some key elements and themes of “street lit.” It is a contemporary genre of American popular fiction, written predominantly by African-American and Latino authors and targeted at young adult readers from urban ethnic communities.¹ Although it is difficult to generalise, as the genre is vast and mass-produced, some of its key features include: urban underworld setting, underclass characters, depictions of various aspects of surviving in the “urban ghetto.” The tone is usually dark, reflecting the socio-economic realities of the urban life. The style is realist and incorporates heavy use of African-American Vernacular English. There is no uniformity regarding the story level: the narratives encompass individual struggle (e.g. women’s), coming-of-age stories, crime, gang life, prison life, hip-hop culture.

The genre developed outside of mainstream literary circles and is emblematic of grassroots movements. Many authors associated with it are convicts or ex-convicts. The genre is quite successful commercially, but its circulation is almost exclusively arranged by numerous, small publishing houses, often sold in the streets by authors themselves, without the attention of mainstream publishers or critics. In addition, its mode of existence seems to form a self-contained circle: both the authors and readers are typically part of these lower/underclass ethnic communities.²

When it comes to cultural studies research on the phenomena, both the grassroots nature of the movement and its embeddedness in the realities of the economically marginalised minorities makes it rather tempting to understand it, in a quite predictable fashion, as a voice of resistance of the oppressed which subverts the mainstream discourse concerning urban life. I suppose that conceiving of the phenomenon in such a way is problematic and, at the same time, it is symptomatic of a broader tendency within cultural and literary studies, which are sometimes prone to carry out research in terms of what I consider to be excessive textualisa-

1 Carlene Thomas-Bailey, “Is ‘urban fiction’ defined by its subject—or the skin colour of its author?” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2011, accessed February 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/03/black-urban-fiction-american>.

2 Ibid.

tion. What I mean is a tendency to read certain cultural phenomena as political texts, purely in terms of codes which are reproduced or challenged, at the same time marginalising the actual socio-economic actions in which these codes are always already embedded.

Analyses of street lit-related phenomena often tend to go precisely in this direction. To illustrate this, Frederick Aldama³ pointed out the case of Monica Brown, who claimed in her book on Latino gang fiction that gang narratives are the voice of resistance of those marginalised by the overall cultural hegemony of contemporary capitalism.⁴ Thus, gangster textualities shake up those power structures “that have been held in place by the mechanisms of a monolithic ‘national culture’ invested in maintaining the status quo.”⁵ The title of the work already suggests Brown’s perspective. Gang narratives are voices of “gang nations,” alternative communities formed by the underclass against the master narratives of nationalism and racism which exclude and criminalise Latino urban subjects. As Aldama noticed, Brown suggests that gang narratives demonstrate that “codes of loyalty and honor and territorial pride are similar [...] to the way nationalist rhetoric informs the American nation-state.”⁶ Not only are gangs claimed to be communities parallel to that of a nation-state, but their narratives also demonstrate the “violent effects of a dominating nationalist identity that criminalizes and makes Other the urban brown subject,”⁷ and that they further “complicate instead of solidify the notion of criminality.”⁸ Finally, they show how “organized resistance, through the recognition of a shared social, historical, and geographic reality”⁹ can become, as Aldama says, “sites of ‘counter-nation’ resistance and political intervention.”¹⁰

3 Frederick L. Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter: A Commonsensical Approach* (Austin: UTP, 2008).

4 Monica Brown, *Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Chicana Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

5 *Ibid.*, xxvii.

6 Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter*, 172.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Brown, *Gang Nation*, 159.

9 *Ibid.*, xxvii.

10 Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter*, 172.

The type of textualist research cited above rests on a fundamental underlying assumption that all sorts of cultural texts can be decoded as either challenging or engaging uncritically in hegemonic discourses of capitalism, nationalism, neo-colonialism, etc. In the case of “street lit,” gang fiction, and related texts, one fashionable way to read them is to acknowledge them as the voice of the “counternations,” “gang nations,” alternative communities that enable the members of the oppressed underclass to resist and lead to actual social change. I believe that it is possible to further specify two aspects, or two claims that immediately follow the first assumption. First, if fiction and producing narratives are part of the mechanism that leads to social change by disrupting the mainstream master narratives (owing to the fact that writing and reading contributes to identity construction within the alternative community), it implies both that political action can take place on a symbolic or textual level, and that the power which the subversive narratives wish to challenge is not located in any specific institution or group, but is discursively constructed. In Negri’s famous words, “there is no place of power—it is both everywhere and nowhere.”¹¹ The second claim is that social change for the lower classes and for the underprivileged can only be brought about “from the outside,” by entirely rejecting social order and the existing social institutions, and establishing alternative forms of organization, such as gangs, subcultures, counter-culture, etc.

Accordingly, two intellectual traditions appear to contribute to and intertwine in this strain of cultural studies. The latter claim that I mentioned seems to be associated with a particular Marxist tradition, which insists that in contemporary capitalist society, the dominant ideology is being reproduced in all the existing cultural artifacts, forming an all-encompassing and all-controlling, omnipresent structure. Thus, the only possibility of a successful political action is the wholehearted rejection of society and mainstream culture and forming alternative communities which become sites of resistance. This tradition can be perhaps traced back to Gramsci, and his notion of “cultural hegemony,” and related ideas can be found in Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, as well as in the works of

11 Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: HUP, 2000), 190.

Herbert Marcuse¹² and Frantz Fanon,¹³ both of whom saw the groups effectively excluded from society, the lumpenproletariat, or in Marcuse's words, "the substratum of outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable"¹⁴ as possessing the truly revolutionary potential that can lead to social change. In other words, only those who are unspoiled by the cultural hegemony of capitalist society can lead to political change.

The other intellectual tradition that I believe contributed to the development of a strong textualist stance in cultural and literary studies is associated with the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, famous especially for its early, 1970s enthusiastic analyses of the styles of subcultures (by Richard Hebdige¹⁵) and of the eruption of public panic in response to the increase in crime rate, particularly regarding mugging and juvenile delinquency (by Stuart Hall¹⁶). Hebdige analysed the style of punk subculture in terms of a set of conventions, or codes and their relations to the established codes of dress and behaviour. His focus was to decode punk subculture in terms of placing them against the background of recognisable codes: how punks borrow and mix some codes from other social and ethnic groups, or earlier subcultures when it comes to clothing, music, how they reject British national symbolism, or how they make use of some established codes within accepted mainstream culture to subvert them, break them, and form symbolic resistance.

Hebdige's analysis was heavily influenced by Stuart Hall's famous model of communication outlined in "Encoding/Decoding in TV Discourse."¹⁷ Hall opposed the standard linear model of communication with a passive recipient of a message. Rather than that, Hall draws on semiotic theories, claiming that the object of communication is a set of signs "organized, like any other form of communication or language, through the operation of codes, within the syntagmatic chains

12 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

13 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

14 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 86.

15 Hebdige, *Subculture*.

16 Hall, *Policing the Crisis*.

17 Hall, "Encoding/Decoding in TV Discourse," 128–38.

of a discourse.”¹⁸ Before having any practical effect, the message must be first recognised as a meaningful discourse. The point is, however, that there are several modes of decoding the original message, since the position of the recipient regarding the produced message/discourse might be quite different than just being a model/intended audience. In fact, Hall recognizes four coding/decoding positions of TV audience. For our purposes, only three are relevant. The first position is *the dominant-hegemonic* one, where the viewer is “operating inside the dominant code”¹⁹ and is able to decode the message exactly in the framework in which it has been coded. The second position, that of a *negotiated code*, presupposes some degree of active participation of the recipient, the hegemonic position of some codes is acknowledged, but at the same time, the codes are partly opposed. Finally, the third position is the *oppositional code*, where the viewer perfectly understands the original message but chooses to decode it “in a globally contrary way.”²⁰ Thus, Hall’s model questioned some traditional assumptions of media communications: the audience actively forms the meaning through decoding, rather than just passively receiving it and the meaning is not fixed and entirely determined by the sender. Finally, the message is not transparent.

I will not address Hall’s model of communication, or Hebdige’s analysis of dress code breaking, head-on. They clearly have some merit, and I do not feel to be in a position to give an overall assessment of models of communication or subverting dress codes. What I will address, however, is the dangerous potential to overemphasise the role of codes, of the cultural texts, in cultural studies, at the cost of thorough understanding of how these codes operate in actual, material conditions, marginalising the extratextual reality.

I suppose that marginalising the extratextual is present in the work of Hebdige, Brown (both of whom are indebted to Hall’s model), and Hall, and although this does not mean that either the communication model or their research in general is flawed, some of their claims clearly are. For instance, Hall produced a famous analysis of mugging phenom-

18 Hall, “Encoding/Decoding in TV Discourse,” 128.

19 *Ibid.*, 136.

20 *Ibid.*, 138.

enon in the 1970s Britain which fell victim to excessive textualisation. He claimed that mainstream media constantly elicited fear of muggers in the 1970s UK although there was no indication of an actual rise in crime rates. Though there was no substance behind it, the media's and the politicians' aim was to produce mass hysteria in the general population, targeted mostly at low-class black immigrants who were demonised in master narrative, largely due to the fact that their looks and lifestyle violated the traditional codes of conservative white British residents.²¹ On the other hand, however, some sociologists and media studies experts have criticised Hall's analysis. The former pointed out the fact that it appears that statistics from the time actually do indicate a significant increase in armed robberies and related crimes.²² The latter accuse Hall of using a hopelessly naive and outdated model of media where one dominant social group can successfully control the circulation of information in society.²³ Whether this is true or not, what remains indisputable is that it is one thing to say that particular interest groups can manipulate the circulation of information eliciting certain emotional response in the audience, but what the statistics show is an entirely different thing. The two phenomena are by no means correlated, and the role of statistics should not be disregarded: whether moral panic is induced with or without any factual backing regarding the actual source of social fear clearly changes how we come to understand and assess some facts about social life. In the mugging case Hall discussed, it is perhaps true that the media demonised the members of an ethnic lower class, but it is also true that real people were actually mugged, beaten up, or killed more often than before. Disregarding the latter fact, as it happens in Hall's case, leads to a claim that political action and political change can be brought about on the level of code. Challenging the hegemonic codes, for example showing the moral panic aspect or the demonisation of the immigrant, defuses the dominant message and itself becomes a liberating political act.

21 Hall, *Policing the Crisis*.

22 Peter A. J. Waddington, "Mugging as a Moral Panic: A Question of Proportion," *British Journal of Sociology* 37(2) (1986): 245–59.

23 Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 55–69.

Although I do not dispute the claim that challenging a master narrative or dominant ideology can, in the long run, lead to social change by helping a group of people to organise themselves and carry out actual political actions, this does not imply that the challenging itself is an effective political action. This can be illustrated with Hebdige's example. The idea that alternative communities that break down established codes and lead alternative lifestyles has been mercilessly exploited in mainstream capitalist popular culture. Whether it is *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, or *American Beauty*, the idea is the same: only by rejecting the socio-economic system in its entirety and building alternatives outside of it, can a political change be brought about. In fact, subverting the established codes of lifestyle and subscribing to subcultures or counter-cultures perfectly fits the classical Marxist notion of ideology: although one challenges the established dress-code, looks, consumer patterns, and general lifestyle, this is altogether imaginary, while the real, material conditions of existence and one's relation to the economic centres of power that shape these conditions remain intact. Becoming a member of subculture is explainable in terms of Bourdieu's *distinction*: being alternative sells, and subcultures always easily fit this pattern of identity construction in terms of more and more alternative consumer choices, often leading to the promotion of luxurious, expensive products and economically unsustainable modes of production.²⁴ The broader problem with textualising political struggle is that if one reads any acts (such as challenging a code) as mere value-free texts that are challenged or reiterated, without placing them in proper contexts of actual manifestation in social action, then there really is no difference between union activism, swearing or wearing alternative clothes. If "power is everywhere," then perhaps it makes little difference if civil rights are undermined or national budgets are cut.

The other thing that does not follow from the liberating potential of challenging hegemonic ideologies is that any groups that organise themselves to enforce their agenda have a potential of political and

24 I owe the argument in this paragraph to Joseph Heath, Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

economic empowerment of the underprivileged. As I mentioned, the myth that alternative communities are the only effective means leading to social change rests on a dubious assumption about the omnipresence of power and hegemonic ideology in society. If, as Brown claims, one can find a truly revolutionary political potential in underclass and in communities of gangs, by reading them as challenging the cultural hegemony of contemporary capitalism, then one falls prey to the same textualist stance that I pointed out earlier regarding Hebdige and Hall. The main problem with Brown's approach is that she ignores the real effects that these alternative communities have on lower-class masses. After all, apart from challenging some codes, the typical preoccupations of Brown's gangs include drug trade, smuggling, theft, human and arms trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, murder, etc. It is clear that the expansion and the empowerment of drug related gangs globally is strongly correlated with the suppression of working class movements. Killing trade unions' leaders/members, terrorising and recruiting their own members from the impoverished lower class is a serious mark of how these alternative "gang nations" add to the erosion of the working class. The point is that, historically, organising unions, strikes, demonstrations, political and social activism were the only politically effective means of improving the conditions of living of the masses (all of which constitute the type of activism that implies change from within mainstream culture, rather than entirely rejecting it), whereas alternative groups that function outside of the established social institutions seem to be going in the opposite direction, obviously rejecting any political and social activism. There is hardly any historical evidence where Marcuse's underclass, the lumpenproletariat, or Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, did actually lead to a socio-economic improvement of the conditions of life of the masses. It is true that the economic tensions in the lower strata of society can at times make the underclass burst shaking up the dominant power structure. 2011 London Riots showed precisely this. But more importantly, they showed how lumpenproletariat and disorganised and disoriented lower class can be pacified after looting and unlawfully acquiring substantial amounts of expensive electronic devices and fashionable clothes. This can surely lead to a temporary improvement in their conditions of living but, apart from that, nothing really progressive was achieved. On

a political scale, they do not easily fall in either subversion or reproduction of the dominant ideology. They are not progressive, but neither are they conservative in the sense of preserving the status quo. In fact, they are reactionary, as they lead to more uncivilised relations of brute and very clearly localised power. As Aldama writes,

For young men of color struggling to survive in urbanscapes that offer very few jobs and extremely low wages, severely underfunded school systems, substandard and scarce medical care facilities, overzealous and often racist crime fighters, and shattered family life, the appeal of joining gangs is obvious. They offer youngsters protection on the street (of course, from the gang itself as well as from neighboring rival gangs) and, as some argue, alternative forms of familial affiliation and belonging.²⁵

This appeal is, however, as Aldama suggests, largely due to a dysfunction of the social institutions and services provided by the state. The gangs do offer an alternative to some of them, but at an extremely high price for the entire society. To celebrate the gang narratives as challenging the master narratives is, thus, highly naive, as it marginalises the actual context of material practices in which these codes operate. Hence, if we were to say that the phenomenon of street lit is politically subversive, taking into consideration the material practices in which it is embedded and not the codes themselves, I can only think of a one subversive aspect of its existence, which Brown overlooked, but whose true potential is hard to account for at present: the increase in literacy among the young readers of street lit narratives in inner city communities.

25 Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter*, 169–70.

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Bartosz Stoppel

Street Lit i subwersja

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie sposobów odczytywania kulturowej roli nurtu prozatorskiego zwanego „street lit” — ruchu we współczesnej, głównie afroamerykańskiej literaturze, który opisuje historie rozgrywające się na marginesie życia miejskiego, opisując gangi i realia życia w gettach. Sukces komercyjny „street lit” prowadzi mnie do przemyślenia pewnych popularnych metod badania subkultur, podklasy i „alternatywnych społeczności” w ramach studiów kulturowych. W szczególności pragnę zwrócić uwagę na dwa główne założenia, które często mają tendencję do łączenia się w badaniach kultury. Jedno z nich, które przypisuję autorom takim jak Marcuse, Hebdige czy Hall, to gloryfikacja gangów, subkultury lub podklasy, jako grup posiadających rewolucyjny potencjał polityczny, który

może zakwestionować kapitalistyczny system ekonomiczny i doprowadzić do realnych zmian społecznych. Druga tendencja to to, co nazywam nadmierną tekstualizacją zjawisk badanych w ramach studiów kulturowych, która objawia się w redukcjonistycznym ujmowaniu ich jako reprodukcje lub subwersje ustalonych kodów kulturowych. Obie tendencje często łączą się, prowadząc do uproszczonego opisanie zjawisk związanych z funkcjonowaniem podklasy. Takie odczytywanie zjawisk związanych z kontrkulturą, kontestacją i tworzeniem alternatywnych społeczności całkowicie pomija negatywne materialne i społeczne efekty ich funkcjonowania. Próby zrozumienia wyżej wymienionych zjawisk jako powtarzanie lub obalanie kodów hegemonicznego systemu polityczno-ekonomicznego unaoczniają istnienie niebezpiecznych redukcjonistycznych błędów w badaniach kultury.

Bartosz Stoppel

Street Lit und Subversion

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Artikel bezweckt, verschiedene Interpretationsmethoden von der kulturbildenden Rolle der „Street Lit“ — einer in gegenwärtiger besonders afroamerikanischer Prosa auftretenden Literaturströmung, die sich am Rande des städtischen Lebens abspielenden Geschichten, Gangs und das Leben in Ghetos schildert, zu erforschen. Kommerzieller Erfolg der „Street Lit“ bewegte den Verfasser dazu, einige populäre Methoden der Erforschung von Subkulturen, Unterklassen und „alternativen Gemeinschaften“ im Rahmen der Kulturstudien zu erwägen. Er möchte im Besonderen zwei Hauptthesen betonen, die in Kulturforschungen oft miteinander verbunden werden. Eine von ihnen, die der Verfasser solchen Autoren wie: Marcuse, Hebdige oder Hall zuschreibt, ist die Glorifizierung von Gangs, Subkultur oder Unterklasse als der Gruppen, die über ein solches revolutionäres Potential verfügen, das im Stande ist, das kapitalistische Wirtschaftssystem in Frage zu stellen und zum wirklichen gesellschaftlichen Wandel zu führen. Die andere These lautet: übermäßige Textualisierung der im Rahmen der Kulturstudien erforschten Erscheinungen, die in deren Betrachtung als Reproduktion oder Subversion der festgelegten Kulturcodes zum Ausdruck kommt. Die beiden Thesen werden häufig zusammen angewandt, was die Darstellung von den die Unterklasse betreffenden Erscheinungen vereinfacht. Solche Betrachtung der mit Gegenkultur, Kontestation und Bildung von alternativen Gemeinschaften verbundenen Phänomene übergeht ganz und gar negative materielle und soziale Folgen deren Existenz. Alle Versuche, oben genannte Phänomene als Wiederholung oder Widerlegung von Codes des hegemonialen wirtschaftspolitischen Systems zu verstehen, führen uns vor Augen die von Kulturforschern begangenen gefährlichen reduktionistischen Fehler.