



YOUTH CULTURES AND STYLE. ANALYTICAL APPROACHES AND A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

Kulture mladih i stil. Analitički pristupi i jedan metodološki predlog

ABSTRACT: Youth cultures are nowadays one of the main social forms among young people, and at the core of youth cultures is style. Variouslly defined, style is made up of all those elements through which each youth culture, and every individual involved in it, expresses itself and positions itself with regard to other cultural models, by processes of identification, distinction and recognition. Over time, different approaches to the analysis of youth cultures have been developed – on the basis partly of the different empirical phenomena which have been taken into consideration, and partly of the different sensitivities of the scholars – and thus different interpretive perspectives of style have also emerged. The article aims at reconstructing the core elements of the main approaches to style in the study of youth cultures – considering definitions, constitutive elements, and interpretive models – and then, on these bases, at reflecting about a possible methodological path in the concrete study of today's youth cultures' styles.

KEY WORDS: Youth cultures, style, deviance, resistance, distinction

APSTRAKT: Kulture mladih su jedan od glavnih društvenih oblika ispoljavanja mladosti, a u njihovom jezgru je stil. Određivan na različite načine, stil se sastoji od elemenata preko kojih svaka kultura mladih i svaki pojedinac u njih uključen sebe izražava i pozicionira u odnosu na druge kulturne modele, kroz procese identifikacije, razlikovanja i prepoznavanja. Različiti pristupi proučavanju kultura mladih razvili su se tokom vremena, zavisno delimično od različitih empirijskih pojava koje su uzimane u obzir, a delimično zavisno od različitih senzibiliteta istraživača, a sledstveno i različite perspektive tumačenja stila. Cilj članka je da rekonstruiše glavne pristupe stilu u studijama kultura mladih, u odnosu na određenja, konstitutivne elemente i iterpretativne modela, da bi potom na tim

osnovama promišljao mogući metodološki put u konkretnom istraživanju stila kultura mladih danas.

KLJUČNE REČI: kulture mladih, stil, devijacija, otpor, distinkcija

1. Youth cultures and style

The weakening of collective identities based on the sharing of social position or of ideologies and great narratives is one of the main traits described by scholars, at least in the last four decades, as distinctive of contemporary society in the Western world. From the postmodern turn in the late 1970s (Inglehart, Lyotard) to the most recent interpretations of “runaway”, “risky”, “uncertain”, “liquid” modernity (Bauman, Giddens, Beck), this society is largely described as characterised by the irrepressible weakening of the main benchmarks through which individuals oriented themselves in the past. And research clearly shows that youth in particular, due to the intersection of generation and cohort effects, have been and still are the sector of the population most involved in these changes (Furlong, 2012; Côté, 2014; Kelly, Kamp, 2014).²

In tandem a growing amount of research reflects about which new and different elements are possibly emerging among youth as potential benchmarks of socio-cultural positioning as well as bases for collective identities. From this point of view the results and the interpretative proposals are less clear, more fragmented, as well as less transversally accepted. Nevertheless it seems that two main points of reference are progressively coming into light: more and more often collectively-shared behaviour, and more specifically social practices, prove to be fundamental references; more and more often youth cultures based on the sharing of these practices, as well as of their meanings, are fundamental social forms (Muggleton, Weinzierl 2003; Bennett, Kahn Harris, 2004; Hodgkinson, Deicke, 2007; Subcultures Network, 2014; Blackman, Kempson, 2016; Gildart et al., 2017; Genova, 2018a).

The study of youth cultures has a long tradition: the term “youth culture” was introduced in the early 1940s (Parsons, 1942), and since then its diffusion has gathered speed, with a significant acceleration since the late 1990s. Nonetheless, the diffusion of the label in literature is not accompanied by theoretical reflection and systematisation either about the definition of this concept or in particular about potential analytical approaches in the study of the empirical phenomena to which it refers. Concerning the first aspect, in this article that of “youth cultures” is thus intended as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) referring to sets of cultural practices through which young people express shared

2 On the whole the point is not, obviously, to assert that social position, as well as ideologies, no longer influence the building of collective identities among youth; but rather that the processes of this influence, as well as more in general of this building, are more complex than in the past. People seem to have more freedom of choice – or even seem to be forced into choosing – in the elaboration of collective identities and personal positioning, albeit always within the sets of opportunities defined by their social position.

sensibilities, identities, identifications and social positioning (Buchmann, 2001). Concerning the second aspect, the article takes inspiration from subcultural studies: research in this tradition, on the one hand, has often been dedicated to empirical phenomena which correspond to the definition of youth cultures just proposed, and, on the other hand, even if only partially focussed on youth, has developed structured and punctual analytical perspectives effectively useful in the study of youth cultures.

But at the core of the study of subcultures is style. Various defined, style is made up of all those material and immaterial elements through which each subculture, and every individual involved in it, expresses itself and marks out its positioning as socially perceivable. Over time, however, since different approaches to the study of subcultures have been developed, different interpretive perspectives on style have also emerged (Berzano, Genova 2015: Part 2; see also Williams, 2011; Haenfler, 2014). The article aims then at reconstructing the main approaches to the analysis of style in order to find useful elements for the study of contemporary youth cultures, and subsequently at introducing some coordinates for a possible “methodological translation” of these elements into an analytical model of style. Sections 2, 3 and 4 of the article are respectively dedicated to the three main approaches which have emerged: the Chicago School’s interpretation of subcultures as forms of deviance, the Birmingham School’s interpretation as forms of resistance, and the most recent interpretation as forms of distinction. Section 5 reflects – on the basis of these different approaches – about a possible method for the study of today’s youth cultures’ styles.

2. Deviant style

Reflection about style in youth cultures began in the Chicago School of sociology, and was subsequently developed by the American School of criminology, between the 1920s and the 1960s.³ The bases of this reflection are embedded in the search for an explanation of socio-cultural differentiation, in particular the emergence of deviant and delinquent behaviour, rooted in two main processes.

The first process can be described through the “strain theory” introduced by Merton (1938): society proposes to all its members the same goals and the same means to obtain these goals; however, society doesn’t provide all its citizens with the same resources, with the same possibilities of access to these means; the consequence, as highlighted by Cohen (1955: see also Cloward, Ohlin, 1960; Sutherland, Cressey, 1960; Spergel, 1964; Matza, 1964, 1969) is that some sections of the population adopt deviant means to gain dominant goals, or define alternative – more or less deviant – goals, or live without goals in a condition of marginality and retreat. Youth cultures can be then expressions either of

3 Many works of the scholars involved in these two schools use neither the “youth cultures” nor the “subcultures” label, and nor do they focus explicitly on youth; nevertheless their analytical perspectives represent chronologically the first instruments available for the study of youth cultures and their styles.

rejection of dominant cultural models, or of strategic reinterpretation of these models: these are not two mutually exclusive perspectives but two extreme ideal poles within which multiple intermediate modalities appear.

The second process can be traced to the “social disorganisation theory” introduced by Park and Burgess (1925; see also Thrasher, 1927; Wirth, 1928; Shaw, McKay, 1929, 1942; Shaw, 1930; Cressey, 1932). Every society acts to transmit and diffuse those cultural models which are coherent with and useful for its goals; in some sections of society, however, for several possible reasons, this transmission fails or is not efficient; the consequence is not a lack of cultural models in these contexts but the development of variant, and in particular deviant, ones.

In the case of youth in particular, the incompleteness of basic socialisation processes, together with the quest for entertainment and risk, make this sector of the population particularly exposed to these two processes. Youth cultures thus often emerge when a certain number of actors with similar experiences and means-ends adaptation problems begin to interact, working out common solution strategies and at the same time developing a new definition of reality, a new perspective from which to interpret it.

In the Chicago School’s approach, both processes must be considered also from an ecological perspective (Anderson, 1923; Park, Burgess, 1925; Wirth, 1928; Zorbaugh, 1929; Shaw, McKay, 1929, 1942; Shaw, 1930; Cressey, 1932; Park, 1952). Push-and-pull dynamics tend in fact to create, in the urban territory, areas characterised by social and cultural homogeneity of the individuals who live and dwell inside them: every area attracts some types of individuals and at the same time discourages some others. As a consequence, individuals in each area tend to interact mainly with people socially and culturally similar to them, and this fact further reinforces their distinctive traits, in a sort of reciprocal contamination.

The most relevant point here is that these deviant emergent cultures are made up of several different components – values, rules, attitudes, and also habits and practices – which in reality constitute a shared style. Hardly any of the Chicago School’s or the New York School’s scholars develop a systematic reflection about this issue, and only Cohen (1965) talks explicitly in this sense about a “style of life”, as composed of: image, namely clothes, hairdo and accessories; demeanour, that is facial expression, gait and posture; argot, made of vocabulary and forms of linguistic expression. Nevertheless, in most of their works further considerations about style can be found, albeit without making any systematic proposal. Style thus emerges first of all as defined by a territory of everyday life, with its places and paths. This life is made up of distinctive practices, such as types of clothing, food, drink, objects, and also jobs, leisure activities, illegal or deviant practices, social, sentimental and sexual relationships, collective rituals, a specific language, vocabulary and nicknames, as well as a particular organisation of time. The individual bodies are themselves part of this life, with postures, facial expressions, personal aesthetics. But this style exists also in less ‘material’ elements, such as representations, evaluations and prescriptions, as well as rules and sanctions, roles, moral codes, yardsticks, forms of social control

and organisation. More generally, mentalities and mindstyles, feelings, attitudes and beliefs, interests, tastes and values are all often presented as further relevant components of style, as well as bases of collective identities.

Style emerges therefore as a set of socio-cultural elements adopted by individuals as a consequence of personal choices and contextual constraints (Anderson, 1923: Chapter 2). Processes of failed transmission of dominant cultural models, of consequent anomy or of socialization to deviant models (Thrasher, 1927: Chapter 7; Shaw, McKay, 1929: Chapters 1, 16; Zorbaugh, 1929: Chapter 4; Shaw, 1930: Chapters 1, 12; Cressey, 1932: Chapters 1, 4; Shaw, McKay, 1942: Chapters 6, 7) promote, as has been illustrated, the development of specific styles. But at the same time the adoption of these styles is connected with the individual search for new experiences, and generally of social recognition and status, through non-conventional means or through the assumption of deviant judgement parameters (Thrasher, 1927: Chapter 5; Foote Whyte, 1943: Conclusion; Cloward, Ohlin, 1960: Chapters 2, 5; Becker, 1963: Chapter 6). And the effects of both the processes are finally accentuated by the dynamics of spatial segregation and self-segregation, through which the individual retention of these distinctive traits is reinforced by the predominant interaction with other individuals sharing the same traits (Park, Burgess, 1925: Chapters 1, 3, 5; Wirth, 1928; Zorbaugh, 1929: Chapter 1; Park, 1952: Chapters 4, 14). The resultant style permits development of collective identities – and consequent forms of identification and recognition – which are alternative to those defined by the dominant culture.

3. Resistant style

The analytical model presented in the previous section has been dominant for several decades in the study of youth cultures' styles, but has gradually also attracted various criticism. Two elements in particular are highlighted: the model fits efficiently for the analysis of deviant – and more specifically illegal and delinquent – styles, but not every youth culture has these traits; the model is strongly rooted in an ecological perspective, but the spatial dimension doesn't represent a necessary constitutive element of youth cultures. Also on the basis of this criticism, and in the face of the emergence of new phenomena which can no longer be successfully interpreted by using such tools, a new perspective on youth cultures' styles was developed in the 1970s by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham.⁴

In this approach youth cultures are interpreted as the result of the intersection of a dialectic between social classes (in particular the working class and the middle class) and a dialectic between generations (with a conflict between youth and adults). Youth cultures, or more precisely youth subcultures,

4 The 'dialectic' connection of the Birmingham School with the Chicago School and the New York School in the study of youth cultures is explicitly underlined by Hall and Jefferson (1976: p. 5) in the Introduction to the volume *Resistance through Rituals*, the manifesto of CCCS, referring in particular to the work of Becker, but explicit references to Thrasher, Foote Whyte, Albert Cohen, Cloward, Ohlin, Matza and Downes are also present in the book.

emerge thus from the interaction of two different processes (Cohen, 1972; Hall, Jefferson, 1976: Introduction; Murdock, McCron, 1976). On the one hand, some young people from the working class aim to express their distance from, and rejection of, their class culture, their “parent culture”; on the other hand they conjointly refuse the dominant culture, the middle-class culture, as well as their own culture, and middle-class youth do not grant them recognition. In tandem, they aim at building and expressing new, different, selected and non-ascribed collective identities. In this sense they “resist” the dominant cultural models, but this resistance is not “real”, concretely oriented to a transformation of the social structure, but only “symbolic”, “imaginary”. And the fundamental instrument of this symbolic resistance is style.

According to Clarke and Jefferson (1973), style is the result of a process of “appropriation of disparate objects and symbols from their normal social context and their reworking by members of the group into a new and coherent whole with its own special significance”. Style is thus essentially “the product of a cumulative process of *selection* and *transformation* through which available objects, symbols and activities are removed from their normal social context, stripped of some or all of their conventional connotations and reworked ‘by members of the group into a new and coherent whole with its own special significance’” (Murdock, McCron, 1976: 203).⁵ More specifically, the creation of a style implies the selection of certain objects relevant to the group’s sensibilities, the assignation of meaning to those objects, and their general use to express symbolically the basic interests and self-conception on the part of the group itself.

As Clarke (1976a) maintains, style is not then a simple amalgam of different elements, but their composition in an organic whole expressing the group’s self-awareness; what creates the style is “activity of stylization” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 1976: 54), through which objects and activities are selected and re-interpreted with a transformation of their specific meanings and with the construction of a unitary sense which connects them reciprocally.

This process of style-building is possible because every object, as well as every action, contains multiple potential meanings, and no meaning is innate or ‘natural’. In any socio-historical context, every relevant form has already been invested with a specific meaning by the dominant culture. And this culture tends to repress other potential meanings, so that dominant meanings seem fixed and ‘natural’, and seem by now to be the only meaning that they can express. Nevertheless every sensorially perceivable form is always open to redefinition and interpretation. More specifically, although mass cultural products – the fundamental material components of style – are conceived in the capitalistic context as goods, a “‘profane’ power” remains for individuals to select, transform and creatively develop these artefacts to express new meanings through them, “to make their own distinctive culture” (Willis, 1978: 166, 170).⁶

5 Language itself, Hebdige (1976) stresses, is truly in that sense part of the style.

6 Thus most youth cultures principally build their style not through the material creation – *ex novo* – of new objects but rather through alternative uses and significations of already-available objects.

Youth cultures, in building their style, interrupt the normal sequence leading from signifier to signified, thereby creating a crisis for the conventional meaning attributed to an object, a practice or a sign, and by these transformations contrast shared cultural codes (Hebdige 1979: 52 ff.). Thus they challenge social and cultural hegemony, but indirectly, through style, within which contradictions and criticisms are symbolized, and also processes of assigning meaning developed by the dominant culture are highlighted, in this way relativizing and denaturalizing them.

The concept of reference here, explicitly recalled by Clarke (1976a: 177), is that of “bricolage” introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1962: 21–47): the re-ordering and re-contextualizing of objects with the aim of transforming their meaning within an overall cultural system, which defines a structure of systematic connections between objects and meanings. And this transformation may take place according to different strategies: placing the single elements within a different interpretative code; placing elements from different semantic contexts side by side; intensifying the meaning of a single element.

It is however still necessary to clarify the criteria upon which the selection of the components of style is based according to this analytical perspective. The main bases of the selection are the so-called “constitutive relationships” (Willis, 1978: 190–203) between youth cultures and the objects, the institutions and the practices of the ‘others’ who surround them, and the core concept is that of “homology”. The idea is that individuals involved in a youth culture need to express their sensitivities and reciprocally recognise themselves through the objects and the activities which make up their style. Between these two levels a homological connection is thus established: more or less wittingly, youth cultures adopt those material elements that, on the basis of the semiotic connections widespread in society, allow recalling, evoking, the immaterial components (such as values, tastes, interests, representations) of their culture of reference.

In this perspective a style is then a text to be interpreted: the characteristics by means of which youth cultures distinguish themselves supply signals, they communicate; but interpreting their messages depends upon those who receive the signals (Clarke, 1976b). It is a matter of “reading’ the style, in the sense of uncovering the meanings attached to its constituent elements” (Murdock and McCron, 1976: 203). In order to understand youth cultures it is thus necessary to proceed to a “dechiphering” operation which will allow us to identify “hidden messages inscribed in code” within the style, starting from the “action and reaction” dialectic, which will render meaningful the constituent objects (Hebdige, 1979: 3, 18). But in this procedure it must always be borne in mind that neither are all of the youth cultures’ adherents equally aware of these meanings contained in the adopted style, nor do they choose a specific style for these reasons.

4. Distinctive style

The approach to the analysis of style developed by the Birmingham School was the dominant paradigm in the 1970s and remained substantially accepted also in the 1980s. During the last years of the decade, however, and since the early-1990s in particular, several criticisms of this perspective have made their

appearance, mainly on the basis of the difficulties in applying it to the analysis of new emergent phenomena.

The main point is that this model tends to connect the emergence of youth cultures too closely with socio-economic factors, particularly class collocation, and with a perspective of resistance and conflict, although only symbolic. Youth cultures are thus often described as internally homogeneous and characterised by the adoption of distinctive traits, opposite to and inverting those of an equally homogeneous mainstream dominant culture, largely ignoring both the overlapping space between the two domains and the undeniable internal heterogeneity present in both. In addition, more specifically in relation to the issue of style, this approach, mainly focussing on spectacular youth cultures, leads to excessive attention towards the visual elements of style, in particular to the most shocking ones, while ignoring others, and to consequently neglecting the problem of the identification of a youth culture and its borders, which are considered as obvious because easily and intuitively perceivable.

Based on these critics, youth cultures begin subsequently to be rather understood as sets of individuals sharing some cultural traits which distinguish them in a significant way from other individuals (Gelder, Thornton, 1997: Introduction), or more precisely (Buchmann, 2001) as sets of cultural practices through which young people express shared sensibilities, identities, identifications and social positioning. Moving from Hodgkinson's proposal (2002: 28–33), youth cultures should then be defined as collections of young individuals sharing four elements: consistent distinctiveness (while accepting an inevitable degree of internal differentiation and change in time, a group of shared cultural elements distinguishing the "we" from others is indispensable); identity (participants must have the perception of being involved in this collectivity and of sharing a feeling of collective identity and distinction from those who are considered outsiders); commitment (involvement in a youth culture must significantly influence the daily lives of its participants, who are generally in a reciprocal relationship for long periods); and autonomy (although a situation of dropout or subversion with regard to the mainstream culture of their social context is not essential, some distinctiveness from this culture must exist).

In this perspective it is evident that the processes of building, perception and communication of collective identities – with the consequent processes of individual identification, distinction and recognition – are fundamental elements for youth cultures, and at the core of all these processes is style. As in the previous approach, and even more explicitly, style emerges as constituted by very heterogeneous elements, both concrete and abstract: image, objects, language and behaviour, as well as tastes, opinions and interests, are only some of these. And especially with regard to material elements, which are somehow more relevant, the idea still remains that of appropriation – mainly from mass culture – and of re-signification, re-ordering and placing them in new contexts. The emergent style thus expresses group identity and promotes mutual recognition for members (Brake, 1980: 15). But relevant differences with the CCCS approach also exist. First, increasing difficulty in finding a unitary image of the mainstream

culture is highlighted, and similarly also youth cultures' styles are recognised as internally more fragmented and changing over time (Muggleton, 1997: 174–80). As a consequence, the meaning assigned to the elements constituting the style is less and less definable as symmetrically inverting the mainstream one, and more in general youth cultures do not necessarily express themselves by means of unitary, homogeneous and stable styles. Second, within youth cultures there may develop goods-production circuits allowing avoidance of having recourse to goods deriving from the mass-culture industry; and since youth cultures' members may create meaningful objects on their own, since they may themselves become downright professional producers and suppliers of goods, they can also signify these elements for the first time (Hodkinson, 2002: Chapters 6, 7).

On the whole then, even if youth cultures are still often described as trying to make themselves significantly autonomous from the mainstream, or at least from what they perceive as “the mainstream”, their strategies of action are recognised as more complex than in the past, and their style and the meaning of this style are explicitly described as never independent of the surrounding cultural context and not necessarily counterposed to a well-defined mainstream cultural model.

At the same time, it is underlined that individuals involved in youth cultures develop increasingly superficial and transitory relationships with any style, rather tending to cross the borders separating their youth culture of reference from the mainstream culture as well as from other youth cultures (Muggleton, 2000: 81–87); and that since also the growing complexity and diversification of the cultural industry's supply discourages individuals from becoming involved in youth cultures with over-rigid confines, they tend rather to develop transversal personal cultural profiles. Fragmented, heterogeneous and individualistic stylistic identifications are thus described as predominant, and style reveals itself to be a continuously evolving element in youth cultures, strongly connected with individual changes in sensibilities. In tandem, distinctions between styles emerge as less important than in the past, precisely as a result of individuals' tendency to cross over serially from one style to another. What can be observed is thus not only or mainly a succession of specific styles, but a reciprocal simultaneous presence and hybridization in individual paths. It is the “supermarket of style”, at the heart of which stylistic promiscuity resides and where synchronicity, re-interpretation and the negation of authenticity prevail, despite awareness that every element is situated within a vaster previous semiotic complex (Polhemus, 1994: 132–4). In parallel, (Böse 2003: 169–74) not only do individuals move often, quickly and freely, from one style to another, adopting the practice known as “style surfing”, but the symbols of youth cultures themselves end up being perceived and used according to different modalities, and with different meanings, by different people.

○ what is the possible overall sense to be attributed to style in this new landscape? How is it to be interpreted? Muggleton (1997: 173) writes that “the decoding of modernist style was facilitated by its univocality – a limited availability of signifiers and a stable anchorage in a particular time-space context – and it

was also assisted by the firm demarcation of specific social groups, each with its own style boundaries” because it was developed on “clearly differentiated, yet internally homogeneous, collectivities”. On the contrary, postmodernity seems to create problems for the stability of this framework in that internal fragmentation has reached such proportions that the borders between established cultural collectivities appear to have vanished.

Especially in the Birmingham interpretative model, where youth cultures represented symbolic forms of resistance to social contradictions, a style permitted expression of a new collective identity independent of one’s social origins and therefore symbolized that resistance. Nowadays, as has already been pointed out, styles are losing their resistance potential; as stylistic heterogeneity continues to increase, the external appearance of rebellion becomes only the latest fashion. At the same time scholars are more aware that an operation seeking hidden meanings within a youth culture risks exposure to overdetermining the researcher’s interpretation compared with meanings attributed by the youth culture’s members themselves. Therefore it is not a question of decoding or deciphering youth culture’s objects in order to find presumed hidden meanings within them, but rather of considering the modalities with which these cultural objects are used by real people in real situations (Hodkinson, 2002: 132–146).

Recalling Simmel (1957), style could then be better interpreted, for the individual, not only as an instrument of identification with one’s own youth culture and, at the same time, of distinction from one’s surrounding cultural context and other youth cultures, but also as a means of individualisation; and, in parallel, for the youth culture itself, as a tool for expressing its affinity with cultures perceived to be similar and its differentiation from cultures seen to be distant, as well as, eventually, from a ‘perceived’ mainstream culture. But a style also allows individuals and collectivities to express, to make socially perceivable, their own sensitivities, made up of representations and values as well as tastes and preferences. As Gelder (Gelder, Thornton, 1997: Introduction to part seven) writes, a style conjointly provides a youth culture with validation and consistency, gives visible expression to a sense of belonging and allows a group to recognize itself and to be recognized (even if not necessarily understood) by others. In this sense a style is always relational.

This explains why, in the view of several recent scholars, style is often considered as meaningful in itself and of itself, as a set of preferences sited within – and not beyond – the expressive sphere, and as a fundamental element of belonging, and therefore of identification and distinction. Practices, objects and meanings unite to form an overall style which becomes a fundamental element of distinction, which is not only informative but also performative, in this way remaining in any case open to the actor’s interpretation, that of the youth culture and of the surrounding social context. There is in this sense a kind of ‘affinity’ among the various elements which go to make up the style, in some way rendering unitary the heterogeneity of its objects, languages, places and practices. Style signals a youth culture, marking its boundaries and so in some manner defining and describing its identity; but style also indicates individual belonging

to this youth culture and the degree of involvement with it; it is acquired from social interaction with the “significant others” involved in the youth culture, and it is constantly evaluated by these others in its individual declension, but it is also continuously reworked and modified by each individual.

5. Analysing style

As has emerged from the above sections, in the analysis of youth cultures’ styles, different definitions and different interpretative approaches have been adopted. Two main sets of factors are at the basis of these differences: each approach has been developed through the analysis of different empirical phenomena and by scholars with different sensitivities. In an explicit dialogue with these different perspectives, this last section is devoted to proposing a methodological strategy for the study of style with reference to today’s youth cultures, focussing on its composition and its interpretation.

First, composition. At the beginning of the article a youth was defined for our purposes as a set of cultural practices through which young people express shared sensibilities, identities, identifications and positioning. The “raw material” for the style of a youth culture is then made of practices. On the basis of the different models presented in the previous paragraphs, two clarifications must however be added: very often – in addition to practices – further concrete, sensorially-perceivable elements – such as objects and places – are at the core of style; at the same time also non-material elements – such as representations, attitudes, values, and tastes – can be components of style, even if in themselves they do not constitute the core of the “style”, which entails material components. In this sense five fundamental dimensions of observation can be involved in the analysis of a style shared by a collectivity: the stationary body of the individuals, considering the characteristics of all its parts, and also the clothes worn and accessories; their body in motion, considering movements and actions (in particular practices, regularly repeated actions); the language they use, in all its concrete written and oral forms; the objects; the places. Subsequently, the analysis of representations, attitudes, values, and tastes is also fundamental for the interpretation of these different components and of the style they define.

The main point is that not all the clothes, accessories, actions, words, objects and places in these individuals’ lives are relevant for the analysis of their style. Only some of these elements are used to build and express style, and only on part of them is the recognition of this style by external observers based. In past approaches, the deviant or spectacular aspect of style, and thus of its components, was the fundamental criterion to identify the relevant elements. But since the deviant and the spectacular dimensions, in the most recent perspectives, are no longer considered necessary traits of youth cultures’ style, the identification is more complex. Obviously the point is not to define, in a ‘absolute’ and ‘ontological’ perspective, what the components of a style are, but to operatively understand which components it is useful to consider in the analysis of this style. In this perspective the best strategy seems to be the adoption of a triangulation

approach among the stylistic profiles emergent from: the intersection of the single representations of style supplied by the single individuals involved in a youth culture; the representation of this style elaborated by the researcher, on the basis of (multi-sensorial) observation; and the representations supplied by privileged witnesses to this style.

From a methodological perspective, the first step of research into a style may then be the individuation of one element which the researcher, on the basis of an exploratory study, the findings of other research, or even just a simple intuition originating from other information (not necessarily scientific), hypothesizes as constituting a component of a broader style for a collectivity. Once this element has been identified, the second step is to reconstruct the network of further components co-present in the individuals which may be hypothesized as being involved in the style. This network may not be identical for all these individuals: in some cases it may be made up of a reduced central core of elements which are shared universally and a broader sector of elements only partly shared by each individual; in other cases it will be seen as only a partial superimposition of individual sets of elements with regard to which it will be impossible to identify even one universally-shared element. If in the former case the presence of at least one universally-shared element allows a smoother definition of the style's borders, in the latter the same identification of those borders will inevitably be a problem. The reconstruction of this network of elements may come about by means of differentiated research techniques, among which three seem to be fundamental: participant observation, natural document analysis, and qualitative interviews. But in using these tools one should be aware of some basic differences. The framework emerging from participant observation will be the result of an interpretative operation by the researcher on the basis of whatever s/he is able to observe of the individuals being considered. There is a risk of not being able to observe one or more elements which are really shared, but also of not evaluating correctly (i.e. over- or under-evaluating) the importance of one or more elements among those studied. The framework of elements from interviews will on the contrary be the result partly of an interpretative operation carried out by the interviewees, both 'natives' and privileged witnesses. And here too there is a double risk: that they deliberately hide some elements which are relevant, and that they are simply unaware of other elements or their importance to the research, and so neglect to talk about them. The case of natural document analysis seems to be intermediate, since there are risks connected with both 'external' observation and interpretation, and those of on an 'internal' filtering or censorship.

Second, interpretation. Once again different approaches emerged in past perspectives, in particular considering style first as the result of the intersection between social disorganisation and cultural adaptation processes, and then as a form of symbolic resistance rooted in social inequalities and class conflict; moreover, the meaning of a style was at the same time considered with reference to the cultural models both of the individuals adopting this style and those who adopted different but significant styles, mainly through processes of adaptive and dialectic deviance, or of homology and inversion. These approaches cannot

be adopted with reference to contemporary youth cultures – because these are no longer either deviant forms of cultural adaptation or refusal rooted in failed socialisation processes, or even forms of symbolic conflict rooted in social cleavages – but several elements can be usefully retained. Moving on from the most recent proposals, on the one hand it becomes necessary to consider how to analyse, how to reconstruct, the meanings of the style and its components, bearing in mind that it is by definition always shared by a collectivity; on the other hand it is necessary to remember that style is a relational object, so in its interpretation it is also necessary to consider the representations developed by youth adopting a style of different “relevant others” as well as their representations of how these different others perceive the style itself.

Concerning the former perspective, the interpretation of a style comes about with reference to the specific meanings – sensibilities, tastes, values, interests – adopted by the individuals involved. And this interpretation concerns both the single elements composing the style as well as the style in itself as a whole. The aim of this analysis is to reconstruct and intersect the different individual significations of the style and its components, again facing potential emergent problems of misalignment. Differently from what happens with the reconstruction of the constitutive components, however, in this case there is no possible direct external observation of meanings. As a consequence, the only option is to consider the solicited narrations about the meanings by single individuals (as in the interviews) and the unsolicited, and more or less explicit, traces of these meanings emerging from participant observation and natural documents, with all the consequent risks previously highlighted, in this case accentuated precisely by the fact that the interpretive intervention required from the researcher is much stronger.

Concerning the latter perspective – the relational dimension of style – the interpretation is produced with reference to the distinction, identification and individuation processes, and in this sense a relevant aspect of the analysis concerns how the individuals involved in a style perceive the existence – or lack thereof – of a specific pre-existing meaning, whether or not it is considered as dominant or mainstream, connected with the single elements of which the style is composed, as well as of other meanings connected with other relevant elements and styles. In the three processes of distinction, identification and individuation, actors may have as their referent the mainstream cultural model (if they identify its presence), their own style of reference, or other styles: the style and its components then acquire meanings when considered in their relations with both the surrounding context and the other relevant models of reference. Only by considering the interaction of the style with these different referents will it be possible to reconstruct a unitary interpretation. On the whole, in the interpretations of the style and its components, meanings have to be reconstructed bearing in mind the representations developed of a specific style by the individuals involved in the relative youth culture, other youth cultures or cultural forms, mainstream young people’s culture, mainstream culture in general (in particular as represented by mass media); as well as – and this is fundamental – the representations they perceive that all these different actors

have of their culture of reference. Only by this complex system of interaction among direct and perceived representations is it possible to develop an effective interpretation of a style.

Referring to both these levels of analysis, it is however necessary to bear in mind that style ought to be considered, once more, not only in its present configuration, but also in its diachronic development. In this sense the same elaboration of a style by the individuals involved appears on one hand to be founded on their personal sensibilities, on the assignation of a personal sense to a framework of spontaneously-selected practices and, on the other, to be also oriented towards cultural models which characterize the other referents indicated as relevant (through closeness or distance). But if this collective sharing of a framework of practices endowed with sense is behind the birth of a style, the approach with which we here interpret the development of this sharing is undoubtedly of an interactionist kind: we should not think that the adoption of single practices, and the assignation to them of meanings and unitary sense, happens autonomously for each individual; rather it springs from reciprocal exchange and reciprocal imitation. That is to say that each individual, making his/her sensorially perceivable components of style known to others, as well as his/her sensibilities and interests, and expressing in variegated ways the meaning which s/he assigns to them, will at the same time supply them with elements permitting enrichment of their personal, individual styles and will in tandem acquire elements from them enabling him/her to enrich his/her own. Thus we are not dealing with the unidirectional imitation of a pre-established model but rather with the progressive elaboration of personal styles on the basis of reciprocal contact. And whenever the process leads as a result of the appearance of a substantially shared model, albeit within the inevitable framework of individual variations, that is when we witness the emergence of a style. Consequently, even when this journey is somehow ended and it is therefore possible to identify a specific style, the same processes through which this latter will be propagated among individuals will assume an essentially horizontal form, according to social interaction modalities at the heart of which will be found mainly exchange and imitation. What will mostly be propagated through these interaction modalities are sensorially perceivable elements, and only or principally through them the unitary sense and single meanings assigned to them. And it will always be a transformative reproduction by means of which the style itself, insofar as it is a model, will be constantly re-elaborated.

From a methodological perspective, in the reconstruction of the style's generation, reproduction and diffusion processes, the basic question will be connected with the intersection between personal biographical paths and the historical evolution of the social form: by reconstructing the former it will be possible to identify the principal modalities by which the style is adopted, and therefore its reproduction processes; by reconstructing the latter it will be possible to follow the borders of the path along which a framework of individual practices is transformed into a true social form, and therefore its generation and diffusion processes. As to the biographical aspect, the biographical interview seems to be a particularly effective research technique, drawing special attention to the identification of the individuals, socialization agencies and events which

have influenced the interviewees to approach the elements which make up the style. With regard to its historical evolution, it will not always be possible to arrive at a true reconstruction of how the style developed. Yet on the whole, qualitative interviews with key witnesses, selected principally because of their greater and more long-term involvement in the style and, whenever possible, an analysis of the naturalistic data (the documents produced by the individuals involved) will be able to provide important elements. In some cases, also external key witnesses, not involved in the style, can be important sources of information and should therefore be interviewed.⁷

6. Updated hints for future perspectives

Nowadays youth cultures are one of the main social forms among the young sector of the population, and style is the core element in youth cultures. The article aimed then at reflecting about the different approaches through which style has been studied and interpreted, looking for hints and starting points for the analysis of present phenomena. The main result has been the proposal of a methodological approach to the study of style – both in its components and in its sense, in a synchronic and in a diachronic perspective – rooted in a triangulation of the representation of this style by the individuals involved, relevant “others” and the researcher. At the core of this proposal is the awareness that several traditional categories through which style has been defined and interpreted (deviance and resistance; homology and inversion; ecological differentiation and spectacular alterity) no longer fit in with today’s youth cultures, and so must be reworked; and also that the most recent phenomena do not just allow the adoption of a different, equally structured and general interpretative key, but solicit more flexible and complex analytical perspectives.

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7 For a more comprehensive presentation of this methodological approach, in particular in its application to lifestyles, see Berzano, Genova (2015: part III). The most recent results of this approach in the analysis of youth cultures are presented in Genova (2018a, 2018b), Ferrero Camoletto, Genova (2019), and Genova (forthcoming).

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