

# Aesthetics of Youth Scenes: From Arts of Resistance to Arts of Existence

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## Abstract

The aesthetic expressions produced and reproduced within post-war spectacular youth (sub)cultures used to be seen as a display of resistance to and subversion of 'social order', perceived as oppressive of youth life experiences and chances. Under the traditional subculturalist paradigm, both artefacts or performances were subsumed to the class status of their young practitioners and seen as ideological expression of their dominated and disadvantaged social position. Nowadays, however, the stylistic resources used in youth scenes has taken on new meanings for which the concept of resistance is not enough and/or adequate to explain. Therefore, departing from a post-subcultural approach, this essay intends to highlight the social changes recently occurred in the political culture of spectacular youth scenes and, consequently, to contribute to overcome *resistance* as nuclear concept on the debate, relocating it towards the concept of *existence*. Following this idea, and to close this essay, I suggest the concept of *arts of existence* as analytical point of view on the new expressiveness of the aesthetics of contemporary youth scenes. Inspired in Foucault, that concept allows to go further in the understanding of youth scenes aesthetics as *arts of a good living* (in the consumption sphere), and *arts of making a living* (in the production sphere).

## Keywords

Subcultures, youth scenes, aesthetics, arts of resistance, arts of existence

## Introduction

The relation between aesthetics and politics within youth cultures has been for a long time a central question for cultural studies and sociology of popular culture. At the heart of this articulation has been the concept of *resistance*, launch by sub-cultural theory during the 1970s. Here the concept of *resistance* was analytically used to describe a form of political culture characterized by collective attitudes of

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opposition, dissent and transformative practices in response to the subordinated structural position of working class youth, expressed through the use of spectacular objects and performances connoted with anti-aesthetic canons towards bourgeois dominant taste. Under the influence of subculturalist paradigm, and even after the 'post-subcultural turn' (Bennett, 2011), the production and use of this kind of stylistic resources within youth studies have been analysed as *arts of resistance*, a concept labelled by the historian James C. Scott to describe the expressive practices and objects used by subordinate groups and to understand their 'infrapolitics' (Scott, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

The stylistic resources associated with the more recent youth cultures, however, have recently begun to expand beyond their traditional anti-aesthetic legitimacy. Street aesthetic productions as diverse as images, sounds, texts or bodily performances are being under an intense process of *artification*, 'a term generally used to describe the transformation of non-art into art' (Kosut, 2014: 144; see also Heinich and Shapiro, 2012). For example, graffiti has gradually earned the symbolic status of street art (Bou, 2005; Campos, 2010); tattoos have been claimed as body art (Ferreira, 2014a; Kosut, 2014); clothes and other *do-it-yourself* street accessories are being scouted by fashion and design industries (Amores, 2008; Bovone, 2006); dance and music expressions that usually go unnoticed on street corners or in suburban garages are finding a place on prime-time media, reputed stages and dance schools (Simões, 2010; Valderramas and Hunger, 2009). Indeed, art worlds begin to recognize some aesthetical expressions of common culture as border arts, accentuating their logic of authorial creativity (Willis, 1990). And both, art worlds and street cultures, co-evolve amidst intense porosity and hybridism, have had their aesthetics commodified under the sign of creativity, innovation and authenticity (Kosut, 2006; Sassatelli and Santoro, 2009).

Artified and commodified, those stylistic resources keep function as cultural forms that contribute actively to the production and expression of youth sociabilities and identities. Often identified by spectacular and distinctive aesthetics, their impact derives from the fact of being aesthetics that defy the canonical and mainstream social tastes, opening up a path to still being frequently (mis)understood as symbolic expressions of *resistance* to normative and hegemonic models of social order. But is still worthwhile, adequate and enough to use this concept to interpret the youth production and consumption of spectacular aesthetic expressions? As Sharpe et al. (2000) already pointed out, the fact is that the concept has become so widely applied that is in risk of becoming almost meaningless.

As it has been discussed over the recent debates on the subculture perspective (Bennett, 2011; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Blackman, 2005; Muggleton, 2002; Muggleton and Weinzier, 2003), within a context of an intense proliferation and commodification of artefacts and practices as possible choices of youth identification, the social borders of youth cultures have weakened significantly, together with the creative explosion of their stylistic and identification resources. Where belonging was understood as permanent, based on long-term commitments and in a strong group identity, membership is now assumed to be temporary and commitment as susceptible of being renegotiated or cancelled. Young people promiscuously scroll between several youth scenes, in parallel or successively, structuring more fragmented, provisional and fluid identities.

In their scrolling, young people appropriate spectacular youth cultures such as social stages, in the Goffmanian sense of the concept (Ferreira, 2009; Goffman,

1959). It is in this sense that the word *scene* is often used by Ibero–American young people to classify their own peer cultures, an alive and lived native category<sup>2</sup> that have conceptual echoes within post-subcultural theory (Bennett, 2004; Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Ferreira, 2009; Grossegger et al., 2001; Hesmondhalgh, 2005). By using this dramaturgical metaphor, young people are making reference to micro-spaces of their social existence where they can experiment new identities, perform specific social roles and act for daily audiences, captivating their attention: ‘looking and being looked at becomes the most effective way of being present in the public sphere’ (Diógenes, 1998: 181) turning each individual into a real actor, protagonist of one’s own life. There, performances, styles, choreographies and other aesthetic resources are used as ways of *being in scene*, namely by those individuals who are objectively placed in the backstage of the macro-social scene, who frequent the most marginal, subterranean and interstitial areas of the social space. In their scenes, young people dramatically and creatively use and produce accessories, props, scenarios, soundtracks, performances and plots in order to signal their existence in the world.

In this new scenario, much has been discussed about the theoretical value of the concept of *subculture* to describe, interpret and explain contemporary youth cultures,<sup>3</sup> but less was argued on the concept of *resistance*. Despite the analytical specificity of each of the concepts presented as alternative to the concept of youth subculture, transversal to all is the emphasis on aesthetics consumption as a creative process of identity construction and lifestyle distinction, more and more fragmented, fluid and individualized. This does not mean that the new forms of youth cultures are depoliticized, in the sense that they do not share any kind of political culture. But it gives theoretical space to advance with the hypothesis that the concept of resistance is not hermeneutical enough to understand the political culture of new youth forms and its aesthetics.

Emphasizing contrasts between subculturalists and post-subculturalist approaches to youth production and consumption of common culture, the aim of this essay is to highlight the main social changes recently occurred within youth cultures, in articulation with the recent and underdeveloped debate on the analytic value of the concept of *resistance* and its politics to better understand the meanings behind the aesthetics used and produced in youth scenes. In my point of view, it is hard to find traces of a *politics of resistance* in contemporary youth scenes aesthetics as it was described by subcultural tradition of research, and even as it is being endless reconceptualized under some post-subcultural explorations. As it was very cleverly put by Johansson and Lalander, ‘what happens with resistance when it is no longer so easy to identify “the enemy”?’ (2012: 1081). In the absence of a clear ‘enemy’ or ‘target’ (Raby, 2005: 158–59) to fight against, but with causes to fight for, I argue that the aesthetic purposes and claims made in the context of contemporary youth scenes are much more engaged towards the expression of a *politics of existence*, that is, the social recognition of a personal identity self-fulfilled and self-defined as singular, authentic, creative and free.<sup>4</sup>

To define the scope of my proposal, I shall say that I am not referring to youth cultures configured as ‘new social movements’—as environmentalism, feminism or gay rights—nor as ‘new new social movements’—as alter or anti-corporate globalization movements, for instance (Feixa et al., 2009; Pleyers, 2010). My analysis regards spectacular youth scenes as seapunk, hipster, emo, straight edge, psychobilly, cosplay, kei, otaku, harajuku, lolita, among many others which public expressions

often result from hybrid fusions and re-cycled revivalisms of traditional youth scenes aesthetics—turning into ‘endless cultures’, ‘without limits’, as referred by Cavenacci (2005: 9). Although it is a phenomena that tend to arise and have a greater incidence and visibility in metropolitan landscapes of Europe, USA or Japan, these kind of youth trends quickly expand its extension through new media and the Internet (Bennett and Robards, 2014; Feixa, 2014). That is why the scope of this phenomena is very difficult to delimit geographically in countries or regions across the globe, even where totalitarian states control the media channels, having though their local expressions and meanings.<sup>5</sup>

In order to apprehend the changes within political culture of youth scenes, the article is developed on the basis of relevant conceptual issues regarding youth scenes politics’ and the meanings of its aesthetics expressions in their cultural production centres: its purposes and social scale (from collective expressions to personal constructions), perspectives on the future (from shared utopias and dystopias to singular heterotopias), political values (from universalisms to particularisms) and life ethics (from contestation to celebration). Following this outline, I will claim that, more than collective and militant expressions of an intention to change the world, the actual expressive goals for the use of stylistic resources within youth scenes are smaller in ambition and scale, at the tangible level of the social existence of the individual. If any activism remains, it mainly seeks to enlarge the field of possibilities for self-expression and creativity in the life-world and lifestyle of the aesthetics consumers, producers and *prosumers* (Cole, 2011), thereby emphasizing their social presence in the world as singular and authentic persons. This happens in micro-cultural contexts that are no longer driven by an ethic of contestation, but are mainly oriented towards an ethic of celebration of everyday life, cultivating particularist, hedonist, experimentalist and presentist values.

Having said this, aesthetics and politics continue to be interlaced in the newest visible and audible youth scenes, linked to new musical trends, namely electronic dance music, new kinds of extreme sports or new forms of visual arts, for instance; or associated with old sounds, facades and body performances and modifications that are mimicked and reworked, often using prefixes like ‘neo’ or ‘post’ to distinguish themselves from scenes where they were originally inspired. Nevertheless, as I will defend in my final point, instead of trying to interpret these expressions under the conceptual umbrella of *arts of resistance* (Scott, 1990) and going towards another endless reconceptualization of the concept (as made by Haenfler, 2004; Johansson and Lalander, 2012; Raby, 2005; Seymour, 2006), nowadays it might be analytically more productive and inovative to change the focus towards a perspective closer to the lived experience and subjectivity of young people within youth scenes and to approach such aesthetic resources as expressions of a *arts of existence* (Foucault, 1984).

Broadening this foucaultian concept and relocating it within youth scenes practices, the concept of arts of existence has a double hermeneutical value: it can be used to refer to the *consumption* of aesthetics as ‘arts of good living’, that is, as styling accessories of a lifestyle for the expression and recognition of a personalistic and celebrative existence at the stage of youth scenes; the concept might also be used to refer to the *production* of aesthetics within youth scenes, seen as ‘arts of making a living’, that is, practices that extent the lifestyle of their practitioners from the existential sphere of consumption to the productive existence. In this case, by looking at youth scenes as contexts of *production* and of *transition* to work, this analytical

perspective extend their theoretical scope, intertwining two established paradigmatic traditions with only occasional dialogue in youth studies: the one on transitions to adulthood, and the one on youth cultures. To capture youth cultures from the perspective of their production and transitional potentials definitely contributes to bridge an important gap in the theoretical and empirical heritage of youth sociology.

## From Collective Expressions to Personal Constructions

In the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham body of literature, the concept of *resistance* implied a latent or manifest collective intention, with major or minor social impacts, of opposition to an oppressive, mainstream or hegemonic social order (Cohen and Taylor, 1978; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1986). Even if 'not all are potentially counter-hegemonic' (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 45), the objective of traditional youth 'sub' or 'counter' cultures would be to undermine an order of predefined dominant values and/or social positions, understood as conforming youth experiences and as subordinating young people to their structural positions. Under this light, the stylistic resources created and used by young people in those social contexts were seen as 'material and cultural "raw materials" to construct a whole range of responses' (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 45), both to their subordinated positions as young people (against parents culture) and as members of a working (subcultures) or middle (countercultures) class (against bourgeoisie dominant culture).

While CCCS emphasized that subcultural style was a form of resistance to subordination, some later representatives of the subcultural theory pointed out how expressive materials subjectively used as resistance resources could objectively not subvert and change the social order and class relations but even reinforced it (Cohen, 1984; Willis, 1977). Pursuing this analysis further, Giroux (1992: 288–90) emphasized that the classist and ideological content of the *practices of resistance* distinguished them from simple *acts of rebellion*. The latter, located in a confined space and time, correspond to random and more or less spontaneous actions. In other words, rebellious conducts typical of the adolescent and youth period were often naturalized as being a part of the inherent process of growing up and gaining autonomy. In contrast, *practices of resistance* suppose an oppositional conscience that seeks to break with or win over a position with regard to the structure of power relations, the foundations of social control and/or figures of authority. This means that all action of resistance implies a transformative reflexivity, the kind of 'reflexivity which destabilizes consensuses through the simple fact of questioning them' (Pais, 2008: 246), inducing questions that intends to lead to the social circulation of new symbolic frameworks and practical options for further consideration.

Giroux also presumes that for an action to signify resistance, it needs to display an open ideological condemnation of repressive ideologies and the conscience of the social effect that may arise from them. It must contain a function of critical revelation of the situation of disadvantage or oppression, and provide the opportunity for reflection and struggle for social emancipation interests. Resistance is therefore frequently linked to a specific social programme, a political manifest or some collective organisation oriented towards the satisfaction of that collective's interests and the effective change of the system it denounces. In short, practices of resistance

would be closer to the utopian discourses and actions of middle-class youth counter-cultures that were considered in the early CCCS tradition, rather than the imaginary and often illusory stylistic solutions of working-class youth subculture, which is not as powerful and ideologically grounded.<sup>6</sup>

However, this conception of resistance becomes analytically ill-suited and heuristically limited when one tries to comprehend the cultural productions of some of today's youth scenes. On the one hand, youth movements—even the more combative among them—are no longer structured on the basis of social class (even if we take for granted that once, in the past, they actually were), but are rather the object of an intense, non-stop social diversification and reticular fragmentation (Gordon, 2010; Kennelly, 2011; Pleyers, 2010). Considering the already vast and solid social research on these realities, variables such as ethnicity (Ferreira and Pohl, 2012), gender (Heywood, 2008), sexual orientation (Peters, 2010) or lifestyles (Haenfler et al., 2012), among many others, come across as stronger poles for the demarcation of youth scenes.

On the other hand, the aesthetics grounded in current youth scenes are far from being any kind of voice for organized and ideologically uniform collectives. Without losing a dissident intention, their goals are no longer revolutionary, in the sense of trying to replace dominant symbolic models with their own models. The transformative reflexivity invested in certain expressive forms tends to display little ambition for social change. While some actors in youth scenes may use some stylistic resources in their confluence in certain major global movements and/or social collective events, like riots or demonstrations, their daily living experience within those youth scenes is nowadays less oriented towards the *collective expression* of a certain ideological system that seeks the 'common good', than towards the *personal construction* of an escape lifestyle. Which means that the aesthetic resources mobilized by young people in this settings intends primarily to express their avoidance towards more standardized and widespread tastes, more normative and routine social experiences, more linear and saturated life paths—hegemonic models seen by young people as prescriptive ways of living (Pais, 2001: 71).

Indeed, according with recent research, there is a reduction in the scale of social intentions underlying the aesthetics of youth scenes (Ferreira, 2007, 2009, 2014a; Haenfler et al., 2012; McDonald, 1999; Mendes de Almeida and Naves, 2007; Riley et al., 2010). These are much more pragmatic and microscopic, targeting the immediate and concrete living conditions in their participants' *life-world*, in the phenomenological sense: as the world of the effective reach of the individual, as his/her everyday zone of social operation (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973), organized around the 'here' of ego's body and the 'now' of ego's present (Luckmann and Berger, 1966). As Maffesoli argues, 'even if one feels alienated from the distant economic-political order, one can assert sovereignty over one's near existence' (1996: 44).

## **From Shared Utopias and Dystopias to Singular Heterotopias**

Far from the rationale traditionally attributed to the social action of earlier youth micro-cultures, today's youth scenes share a feeling of impotence and even of rejection towards the idea of *collectively* changing the world according to any predefined



social organizational model. Unlike the idealist and holistic devotion of some non-conformist youth movements of the 1970s and 1980s, today's youth cultures have no *utopian* social programme, such as that of the beatnik or hippie movement (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 57–71), nor even a *dystopian* social programme, such as that of the punk movement (Hebdige, 1986 [1979]; Sinapi, 2006), to guide their expressive practices, in the sense of expressing a collective imagination of a 'better society' or an 'ideal society' for the future (Deville, 1987; Mazlish, 2003; Ricoeur, 1997).

In contrast, contemporary youth scenes refuse any social models that display such an ambition, as put it out by Mendes de Almeida and Naves (2007), or Ferreira (2007). After all, these programmes tend to promote citizens who are standardized in terms of the duties and rights of society, which are carefully planned by legislators whose function is to ensure the harmony, justice and egalitarianism of collective life: 'the planning of how to inhabit, of production and consumption, the regulation of marriages and births, the political paternalism, the civic catechism, the normative power of science, the angelical and ascetic morals, all of these options constitute the profile of these alternative societies' (Wunenburger, 1986: 5); and this is antagonistic with regard to those of today's goals, values and symbols that are shared by young participants in micro-cultural scenes.

The remains of utopian social programmes that still survive inside some youth scenes (e.g., anarchy, communism or national-socialism) end up being used more often as a repertoire of critical arguments than as sources of real and systematic proposals. The appropriation of some of their arguments by young people is geared more towards that which they *denounce* and *diagnose* than towards that which they *announce* or *predict*. Setting aside the guidelines of a utopian programme of egalitarianism, or a dystopian programme of nihilism, the political sense of current youth scenes rather expresses a *heterotopian ambition of deviance* (Foucault, 1984 [1967]). That is a posture of social openness to plurality and to cultural coexistence through the constant questioning and defying of the principles and institutions which tend to frame and to standardize the experiences of youth. The goal is no longer the collective demand for a change in the system, but an informal claim for a space of existence as a *singular* ('to be different'), *authentic* ('to be myself') and *sovereign* ('to be what I want to be') person (Ferreira, 2009).

## From Universalistic to Particularistic Values

The transformative reflexivity that defines the political culture of current youth scenes is, therefore, no longer associated with collective demands for strictly political, human or social rights—not even the so-called *negative rights*, that is, civil and social rights that, notwithstanding their supposed universal application, must be reinforced in relation to specific populations; not aiming to define them as exceptional situations, but to highlight and prevent in advance potential situations of discrimination and prejudice, like it was claim by feminist, gay/lesbian or black activists. The transformative reflexivity of current youth scenes includes a relevant claim for *particularistic cultural rights*, in the sense of the individual freedom to create and to experiment new aesthetic and ethical models of living—models that may (or may not) be reified as a lifestyle with continuity in biographical time, as shown by Grossegger et al. (2001: 197) or Bennett and Hodkinson (2012).

More than *struggles for equity*, aesthetic expressions of youth micro-cultures display *struggles for subjectivity* (McDonald, 1999)—that is, struggles related to demands not for social equality, but rather for self-realization and self-defining identity. Their political intention is found not only in the recognition of oneself as a *citizen* with equal rights, but in one's particularities as a *person*. By intending to demonstrate and socially ratify a form of singular existence, the stylistic compositions created by some young people in their daily *mise en scène* frequently maximize a *radical difference* (Lipovetsky, 1987: 170) in relation to the dominant codes of aesthetics and 'good' taste.

This radical difference is often achieved through their circulation among several spectacular youth cultures, where an eclectic, hybrid and profuse set of expressive styles and accessories might be mobilized and accumulated through life course, via ongoing transformations, fusions and revivalisms. *Mises en scène* that cause social impact and bring attention to their protagonists, who feel as if they will be 'seen in the world and from the world', as Sartre might say (1943: 339). Although understood by young people as creative efforts, they are often socially received as hostility and provocation, resulting in reactions of disapproval, surprise or shock (Ferreira, 2015). But these reactions does not obligatory mean that whatever stimulated them was informed by any kind of social antithesis and transformative intention, as a *form of resistance to power*. It can be just a social reaction towards the expression of a *form of non-hegemonic existence* on the part of its performers, as one social possibility among many others. It is in this sense that very often youth scenes are conceived as 'alterative cultures', engaged in what Giddens called *life politics*—a politics of lifestyle and of choices (1991: 214–15).

More than changing positions within the objective structures of power, the intent for the use these aesthetic resources is to symbolically work on the social incorporation of *structures of intersubjective reciprocity* (Yar, 2001: 72–73). In other words, the construction of symbolic frameworks that support the openness to the otherness, which promotes the sensitivity to difference, which in turn endorses the *recognition* of the person in its subjectivity (Fraser and Honneth, 2001; Honneth, 2004; Lash and Featherstone, 2001). Seen from this perspective, the political dimension of today's youth scenes is reflected in strategies of the *remoralization of everyday life*, in the sense of bringing the need for dignity in individual difference into current society's moral order, as well as in the sense of recognizing a *culture of civility* which respects the *person*. This is achieved through attempts to widen the dominant conceptions of 'normality'.

This struggle for social recognition of individual difference is not, of course, oriented towards the institutional side of the political system, nor is it a requirement in the realm of legal rights. The sense of activism present in contemporary youth scenes is mainly experienced by its young participants in a mundane and daily form. It mirrors individuals' everyday needs for social respect, affection and reciprocity from those who surround them. Youth scenes are socially framing forms of 'everyday politics' (Riley et al., 2010) that serve to combat the humiliation, slander and insult that many young people suffer daily due to their radically expressive difference. Their demand for recognition is made alongside their claim for a less prescriptive society and their struggle for the dissolution of criteria of 'normality' whose rigidity and degree of institutionalization are prone to transform any and all radical difference into *stigma*.



## From an Ethics of Contestation to an Ethics of Celebration

Struggling for a marginal existence within structures rather than for access to a central position, young peoples' participation in youth scenes is less oriented towards *acting upon* the world than towards *acting on* the world, taking advantage of the best it has to offer and as much as they can. In my point of view, the aesthetic manifestations of current youth scenes do not express *annihilating practices*, in the sense that they offer the possibility of changing the world as strategies whose objective is to destroy the existing social order and replace it with a new one. Instead, they configure *predatory practices*, which take advantage of common and uncommon cultural forms, resources and spaces that are socially available in the world in order to further young people's statements and forms of enjoyment, trying to expand the boundaries of cultural expression, social festivity and personal creativity (through the body, clothing, music, speech, image, etc.).

Unlike the *ethics of contestation* defined by the youth sub- and counter-cultures of the past, the convivial solidarities of today's youth micro-cultures are mostly organized around an *ethics of celebration*. In contrast with passive ways of 'killing time' or with combative ways of living life, the *ethics of celebration* presume a constant search for the cheerful side of existence, as a display of enjoyment and playfulness, vitality and creative energy (Caillois, 2001 [1939]). They assemble values like *experimentalism*, as an attempt to push beyond all kind of limits and boundaries; *hedonism*, as a constant search for pleasure, enjoyment, personal fulfilment and life satisfaction; and *presentism*, as an immediate way of living, valuing the living of the present moment with as much intensity as it can provide, without great worries about the future.

As such, the ethics of celebration is structured towards the exploration of the unforeseeable and the imponderable of everyday life, of routes with no pre-defined points of arrival. The widespread ambition in contemporary youth scenes is thus to live life as a *drift* through the 'exotic routes' that criss-cross the flow of routines, in the constant experimentation of limits and the challenge of risks. As point out by Pais, 'in reality, the term "exotic" (from the Greek *exotikós*) evokes everything which is foreign, unknown, extravagant. In turn, "to extravagate" evokes the idea of proceeding outside order, which, in this case, would be the order of routine' (1994: 100).

The ethics of celebration emerges in leisure times, seen as moments of rupture, insurrection, freedom and evasion from the routine obligations of work or school, which are often perceived as times of constraint. In these moments many stylistic resources are experimented and creative practices developed, as *arts of good living*. Around these activities young people often build up dense networks of elective and affective affinities, contexts of strong sociability and identity sharing. At the same time, in an increasingly frequent tendency, some of those leisure and/or consumption practices are extended to the area of production (Cole, 2011), becoming *arts of making a living*. The broadening of a vast industry of cultural goods specifically targeting and consumed by young people has widened the possibilities that certain consumption or leisure activities offer of becoming seductive forms of work, which are highly regarded amidst the panoply of young people's job expectations; and in a context of high levels of unemployment, certain arts and crafts that were previously developed in a playful and sociable way are now also explored with professional conviction and ambition, invested in as a means of subsistence.

This is the case of musical practices or of the practices of production of corporal façades (for example, Ferreira, 2014b; Mendes de Almeida and Pais, 2012; Pais and Blass, 2004; Simões, 2010). Youth involvement in such practices often begins as a recreational or consumption activity, simply for the purpose of occupying some free time or expressing a personal look. However, over time some young people begin to conceive these activities as professional possibilities, be it as an *odd job* (temporary) or as a *career* (with a future a future). In this way some young people end up obtaining a peculiar fusion between identity and work, between the life project they built from leisure and consumption and the life means needed for its maintenance, thus keeping themselves fully *in the scene* and doing what they love to do full-time in their existence.

### **Conclusion: Arts of Resistance or Arts of Existence?**

By encouraging their participants' creativity and innovation, contemporary youth scenes can be seen as *creative experimentation laboratories* (Feixa et al., 2001) or *cultural laboratories* (Melucci, 1989). They frequently function as social grounds for experimenting, sharing, celebrating and commodifying more marginal aesthetic tastes and resources, which arise out of the agencies of pop culture and are included in more ex-centric lifestyles. More than the *class* or *ideological* criteria that are characteristic of the traditional sub- or countercultural approach, the current approach to youth micro-cultures is likely to consider the axis of *form*, that is, of their visual and visible identity, transmitted through the *mise en scène* of looks and/or performances with the ability to identify each group of styles. As Delgado Ruiz (2002: 117) states,

each of these youth micro-cultures certainly corresponds to a society, but one in which the human community forming it has already renounced any form of legitimacy, arbitrage and integration other than (not counting one misty ideological ingredient or another) the public display of purely stylistic elements: dress, dialect, body modifications, hairstyle, gestures, forms of entertainment, diets, preferences... (...) The criterion for intersubjective recognition is not rooted in a concert of consciences, but of appearances.

While in certain former social contexts these forms of expression might gain a sense of political activism, in the current daily life of youth scenes they mainly correspond to an effort to stylize an existence that signifies a particular presence-in-the-world, a common reaction against the culturally merchandizing and homogenizing constraints on the contemporary young display. Using artfied resources that exist in youth scenes as raw material, young people are working on a transformation of oneself and styling one's existence as a singular presence-in-the-world, in order to become socially recognize as someone. Trying to make a work of art out of their own lives, as authors and protagonists, they creatively design themselves and their existences as ways to achieve self-fulfilment (*autonomy*), self-discovery (*authenticity*) and self-distinction (*individuality*), and to mark their own spot into the world.

The use of these aesthetic resources leans on the belief that 'creativity', 'art' and the 'artist' are dissolved in and scattered throughout everyday life, legitimizing the idea that there is a potential artist in all of us and a possible work of art in each of our productions or gestures. As such, more than arts of resistance (Scott, 1990), we are

in the presence of *arts of existence*, that is, to use Foucault's words, 'reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their live into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain criteria of style' (Foucault, 1984: 16–17).

This perspective does not ignore or refuse the political dimension of expressive practices and resources for the benefit of a mere aestheticism. It recognizes the political transfiguration of such aesthetic resources, whose use as ingredients in the 'art of good living' implies ethical principles. The construction of life as a 'work of art', according to Foucault, involves the construction of an emancipatory aesthetic that is devoted to the subject's self-fulfilment and self-affirmation (Huijer, 1999). It also implies the search for an ethic grounded in an exercise of individual freedom and sovereignty, and not of obedience to a collective set of rules: 'the notion of an aesthetic of existence hypertrophies the value of individual experimentation' (Costa, 1995: 127–28). By challenging the prescribed ways of existing, the arts of existence represent forms of engaging in social opposition in the subject's quest for singularity and an affirmation of difference.

However, this does not mean that such an experience is undertaken arbitrarily, in the absence of any kind of social and/or moral order. The reinvention of oneself and of new ways of subjectification also implies the reinvention of new ways of relating with the other. Indeed, within the context of the contemporary youth scenes we can clearly find the demand for a libertarian life experience under conditions of *coexistential pluralism*, that is, under the aegis of a 'moral disorder expressed through the existence of multiple moralities, [even though they are] frequently conflictive with one another' (Pais, 2008: 253).

Aesthetic practices in contemporary youth scenes use stylistic resources as an expression and recognition of a subjectivity that is self-perceived as singular, authentic and free, and is celebrated through creative lifestyles that intend to *escape* the saturated formulas available in society. In a system in which some young people perceive their social experience as being subjected to culturally commodifying and homogenizing constraints, some cutting-edge aesthetics may be seen as expressive forms of reaction which allow them to announce their presence in the world, to live an alternative existence in the world, and to provide a means of subsistence in the world. More than *politics of resistance*, it is the *politics of existence* that fuel the aesthetic practices of contemporary youth scenes.

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### Notes

1. Scott (1990) did not study young people as his object, but subordinated groups as peasants, serfs, untouchables, slaves, labourers and prisoners; he imported some key concepts from subcultural theory in his work, analyzing practices as gossip, folktales, songs, jokes

- and theatre, as performances used to construct a social space for a dissident subculture that gives voice to the ones under dominance, and that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant.
2. The native categories—also called *concepts of first order* (Schutz, 1982) or *sensitizing concepts* (Blumer, 1969)—are certain words that individuals use in current language to give an account of their experiences, justify their actions and/or give meaning to their positions in the world. I use the concept of scene in this way, as an emic category.
  3. Questioning the analytic value of ‘subculture’ as descriptive concept of contemporary youth cultures, other conceptual proposals than the concept of scene were advanced: ‘(neo) tribes’ (Bennett, 1999, 2005; Costa et al., 1996; Feixa, 1998; Maffesoli, 1996; Pais and Blass, 2004; Robards and Bennett, 2011), ‘youth micro-cultures’ (Delgado Ruiz, 2002; Feixa, 1998; Soriano Díaz, 2001), ‘youth circuits’ (Magnani, 1992), ‘communities of taste’ (Webb, 2008), ‘taste cultures’ (Miles, 2000), ‘networks of affinities’ (Crossley et al., 2015; McDonald, 2002), among others.
  4. I assume the concept of personal identity as a set of representations, feelings and aspirations developed by the person about herself in a given cultural context and in relation to others. In this perspective, the personal identity is not a socio-cultural identity ‘itself’, more ‘true’ or ‘essential’ than any other, but as a field where come into play a set of socio-cultural identifications. This theoretical detail is fundamental in order to prevent further accusations of having an individualist approach, as it assumes that personal identity is a level of social identity. However, it is an identity level very much valuable within youth scenes.
  5. See, for instance, this story published by *The Guardian* on 13 Friday of March 2015, about the ‘Egyptian Dandies: Street Style Craze Promises Fame for Hip Young Men’, in [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/13/egyptian-dandies-street-style-craze-promises-fame-for-hip-young-men?CMP=fb\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/13/egyptian-dandies-street-style-craze-promises-fame-for-hip-young-men?CMP=fb_gu)
  6. On the differences between the ‘subcultural’ and ‘countercultural’ responses of young people, see Hall and Jefferson (1976: 45–71).

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