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Snowboarding Culture and the Totality of Style

By Riitta Hänninen

The concept of style outlined in this article examines snowboarding as a collective system of meaning. The analysis focuses on two comparative schemes. On a conceptual level, the article proceeds in the tradition of youth and subculture theory. The central themes discussed in this context are the inclusiveness (totality), visibility, and differentiation of style. The other point of comparison moves away from theoretical contemplation towards the empirical world and focuses on snowboarding as a cultural phenomenon. A special emphasis has been placed on anarchy and nostalgia as stylistic features of snowboarding culture.

Peculiarities of dress, values and use of language make snowboarding an extremely visible and almost spectacular phenomenon. Thus, it is no wonder that this “trend of today” has also caught the attention of the media. The history of snowboarding dates back to the surfing of the 60s and California, where riding the wave always came first. Contemporary snowboarding, however, exists in a highly commercialised world surrounded with money, brands, and images. Snowboarders ride literally on the edge of two systems of meaning.

Recontextualisation is a functional element of style, reproducing itself in dress as well as other everyday praxes. However, not all traits of snowboarding culture are spectacular or even critical. There are also many less visible expressions that are common and mundane, rather than riotous or destructive. The style encloses a mixture of visual, bodily, and narrative experience. Criticism serves as a semantic tool that allows snowboarders both the means and the perspective for reproduction in their systems of meanings. Recontextualisation can also be identified through a nostalgia

defined as a positive longing for something or someone. It is through these processes that style encloses everyday life and burrows its way deep into the lived, experienced, and imagined world of the snowboarders.

British subculture theory places a special emphasis on the metacultural and societal functions of style. In anthropology, the inclusiveness or totality of style is associated with the study of everyday life, which binds style to the analyses of marginality and creativity. Cultural creativity is a potential for change that exists alongside the dominant order. In addition to the fragmentary aspects of style, inclusiveness also gathers the disjointed structures of meaning that constitute the basis of stylistic expression. The scientific and cultural meanings of style do not always find a common ground of understanding. Snowboarders have their own interpretations, while the researcher is bound to his or her own preferences. The boundary between the concept and the phenomenon remains an asymmetrical one.

Style as a Structure of the Everyday Life-world

Everyday life is a system of meaning dominated by norms and the normal, through which cultural experience becomes interpreted (see de Certeau 1984). According to Rita Felski (2000; see Schutz & Luckmann 1973: 208) the everyday is a phenomenologically, that is, an experientially defined relationship to the world. The everyday is a structure mediated by the ordinary, through which we as cultural beings are bound to our surrounding reality. As a concept, the everyday emphasises the significance of the subjective and experiential as basic elements of human reality (Eley 1995:ix;

Lüdtke 1995: 6). The everyday is not the opposite of work or the festive, but something more inclusive. It transcends the signifying categories of the sacred and high culture by including all aspects of human life.

Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1973) strive to problematise the traditional binary oppositions of the concept of everyday life, and substitute them with the category of experientiality. Formally, everyday life resembles a cultural construct that consists of collective interpretations of reality. For Michel Maffesoli (1996: 40, 73) Schutz's natural attitude is based on a transparency that signifies the self-evident truths of work, action, and history. The existence of the world is taken into account but is seen as an unchangeable object that can be dominated and exploited (Sulkunen 1995: 84f). Maffesoli views style as the concrete projection of all emotions, thoughts, and actions (1995: 75). Thus, style gives expression to cultural structures, which in turn constitute the everyday life-world.

In British subculture theory, sociality is often referred to as a social group consisting of individuals who have a collectively shared sense of style. However, according to Maffesoli, style transcends all social classes and brings together emotionally kindred people. In terms of epoch, style is present in every representation of historical era, linguistic praxis, and ideology (Maffesoli 1995: 66f.; 50f). The same also applies to cultural communication, in which the inclusiveness of style makes itself visible through the aestheticisation of everyday life. Dress and fashion are only a small albeit important part of the cultural creativity culminating in style. The aestheticisation of the everyday transfers creativity from

the spheres of the sacred and high culture to the sphere of a basic element in the life-world. Human creativity becomes the starting point of not only the mundane but also of the unofficial and the spectacular residing within its confines (Willis 1993: 6, 128; Featherstone 1991: 25).

“What if There's Nothing else to do?”

Style is a central feature of the snowboarders' everyday reality¹. Its influence ranges from general behaviour to hobbies, use of leisure time, circles of friends, and other everyday activities. Notions of style and taste are also present in musical predilections and consumer habits. The most important thing, however, is having a good time:

Well, in my everyday life, snowboarding is about not having anything else to do, and the fact that it's fun, you just ride, rip through the snow and jump big, just sheer fun. And then you meet all your friends. I guess that's why you do it. (T6, M88)

The observation of snow conditions serves as a concrete example of the temporal and spatial structure of the experience. Geographical distances are not perceived in terms of the nearest town, but rather in terms of the nearest ski centre. The urban environment, with its leisure time, work, and school, is organised according to the opening hours of the slopes and other practical considerations. The Internet is full of web sites devoted to snowboarding and snowboarding culture. Discussion group topics range from value debates to technical issues and other current events. Everything is about the lure of snowboarding which follows the rider home from the slopes and even on to the streets of the

cities. The slopes beckon the riders regardless of weather conditions. Summer is for skateboarding and wakeboarding, but sometimes even the seasons can turn topsy-turvy. One does not need much snow, if riding is “in the blood”.

“A Chilled Vibe”

At home, cupboard doors are covered with snowboarding themed posters. Behind doors lie other materials: magazines, photographs, videocassettes and undeveloped rolls of film, mittens, gloves, broken snowboarding goggles, waxing gear, and other things. The greater part of any disposable income is used towards snowboarding. In fact, some of the older informants that I interviewed for my doctoral thesis maintained that snowboarding was one of the main reasons to hold down a job. Vacation trips are made to destinations in the northern hemisphere. The mountainous regions of Central Europe win out over exotic and sunny tourist locations, and on a good year, there is snow in Lapland even at the end of May. The ideal is a sense of freedom and casualness that transcends the world of obligations: style matters, but one should not worry about things too much. The important thing is to do what one wants to do and remember that snowboarding can only be practised the right way for its own sake. Not only the here and now matters in this scheme of things, as the future also makes the snowboarders consider their options:

I. ...Photography interests me. I've been doing a bit of that on an amateur basis. But I guess the dream has always been a profession in skateboarding or snowboarding. Not necessarily the traditional thing of being a professional rider and touring the pro circuit, doing photo shoots and

stuff: that is also kinda difficult 'cos even though there's quite a large market, the industry, is in the end, in the hand of quite a small group, so a. it's quite difficult to get a foot in and b. it's hard to start your own company as there are already quite a few of them. (T12, M84)

Communication is all-pervasive, but at the same time, there are also fragmentary elements that in fact make the holistic order possible. The everyday quality of style emphasises a late modern sociality that is built upon random and optional leisure and lifestyle communities. Everyone can belong to several different communities at the same time and change their preferences at will. Snowboarding culture unifies various styles and influences (Sulkunen 1995: 78; Maffesoli 1995; cf. Noro 1991: 239ff).

Many of these traits refer towards the stylistically constructed “dominant order” and other youth culture phenomena such as rock, punk, and hip-hop culture, surfing, skateboarding, as well as snowboarding itself as a historical phenomenon. Dress is a central feature of style, not only in the light of its symbolic aspects, but also because it is visible to the public. The bodily experience associated with the riding style is a good example of “the totality of style”:

I. Style is usually each snowboarder's way of riding and everyone has his or her own unique style. Good or bad style is a matter of opinion, like the riding posture, but usually it's based on calmness and purity, or just the gestures of the rider during the trick. The rider can also have a rap or rock style that also includes dress. But the most important thing is still the riding style. (L2:343, M85)

Style can be defined either as a collectively shared mode of speech that is used within snowboarding culture or as a mode of speech



Switch Front Side Rock. Photo: Samuli Ronkanen.

that is used when talking about the culture from the outside (cf. Maffesoli 1995: 45). As a signifying concept, the snowboarder's individual and social way of being also dovetails with semantic elements, attitudes, and behaviour. The features arising from dress, values, and behaviour are fragmentary, but also bear common features. Alongside the themes revolving around freedom and authenticity, snowboarding reproduces in many different forms the recurring idea of a playful sociality and the importance of personal relationships. The style constitutes the experience of sociality by giving it a symbolic form.

“Snowboarding and the Unofficial”
Snowboarding culture is not culturally specific in the traditional sense of the words. Rather, it consists of a multiplicity of loca-

lised meanings, which do not have one place but several ones. The diversity of place becomes apparent especially outside the ski centres. Snowboarding is carried out on the fringes of ski slopes, urban environments, backyards and other unofficial places, which make snowboarding at the same time both a local, specific, and spatially ambivalent phenomenon:

I. Well, I guess the scoping out of new places has always been a part of this, going to sandpits and stuff. The new thing now is touring the handrails around town. You know, checking out all the big stairs. And if there are good rails then we go out at night and get snow from the parking lot of an ice stadium with a trailer, start making an approach ramp and a landing area and then we just ride all through the night in summer:

R. Is this ice stadium thing something you picked up from TV or is it common practice?

I. It's common practice. Some of us have a pick-up truck that we lay a plastic cover on and then just load the snow on to it. Just the other weekend, I was at the premiere of a snowboarding movie in which they just went and unscrewed something from the inner yard of a shopping mall. It was a steel pipe formed a bit like this [gestures with hands] and it was like a rail in some kind of parking complex, they just went and unscrewed it and dragged it with some kind of trailer off to a field where they could lay it down for riding. (T15, M82)

The multiplicity of localities is part of the cultural structure of snowboarding. The degree of commitment varies on an individual basis, but at the same time, it also reflects the influence of social roles on cultural competence (Pearson 1979: 16f). The meanings attached to snowboarding range from the interpretations of the public media to the personal experiences of each individual rider. Age, snowboarding history, place of residence, taste, and gender are all

important experiential factors. The last mentioned element also structures the way in which snowboarding is viewed. In youth culture research, gender has only begun to receive wider attention during the past decade (McRobbie & Garber 1997; Puuronen 1997; Hoikkala 1989). The number of female riders in Finnish snowboarding has steadily increased from the early days of the sport. Exact figures are not available, although in 1996 around 20 percent of all Finnish snowboarders were girls (Areng & Willners 1996: 14; cf. Mikola 2003: 32). This corresponds to the results of a questionnaire I published on the Internet while gathering research material for my doctoral thesis. Female snowboarders sent one-fifth of the questionnaires submitted to me during the winter season of 2002-2003.

The Meaning of Style Revisited

According to Phil Cohen, style is a phenomenon bound to the subcultural: it offers symbolic models for solutions to problems caused by social inequality (cf. Clarke et al. 1982: 30f). Cohen's concept of magical recovery is especially powerful in the work *Resistance Through Rituals* (1982), in which it is positioned as a basic element of sub-cultural expression culminating in style. The style of the skinheads constructs a reproduction of the traditional working class community. An authentically defined reproduction of communality serves as compensation in a situation where the social status of the working class has weakened because of societal changes (Clarke 1982: 99; cf. Hebdige 1982: 877). The conflicts between the mainstream cultures and subcultures have gained a central place in subcultural theory (cf. Jefferson 1982: 85f).

A subcultural style is often tied to other

youth culture phenomena, which work depending on the comparative scheme either as a source of identification or separation (Hebdige 1982: 8; see Heiskanen & Mitchell 1985:30f). On the one hand, there is a general culture that is adapted to the dominant order while on the other there is a number of countercultures whose symbolic action transcends the boundaries defined by the general culture. Subculture constructs a world of its own separated from the ordinary, adult reality. Its culturally fixed points are defined by the youths' own systems of meaning (Hoikkala 1989: 30f; Hoikkala 1983: 40; Heiskanen & Mitchell 1985: 32). The concept of subculture is in many ways problematic. The central features that emerge for snowboarding are especially presuppositions regarding class, group, and gender. However, the relationships between the social and cultural are often random, and do not necessarily always cohere into a unified whole (Fine & Kleinman 1979: 1).

"Rap or Rock?"

The riders that represent the "old school" of snowboarding embraced the sport in the middle of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In Finnish snowboarding culture, the division is mainly along a northern-southern axle. In terms of dress, the snowboarders are divided into hip-hoppers and punks loosely following the self-same musical and youth culture styles. Differences can also be found in snowboarding styles. Rappers tend to favour the rails transferred from skating to snowboarding, as well as technically demanding stunts. The riding style of the rockers emphasises big snowboarding jumps and ramps, the spectacular, and "big air":

R. What kind of gear do you strap on when go out riding?

I. I stick on my Nitro boarding trousers with pockets, a snowboarding jacket, my cap and goggles. Then I'm all set. And of course my gloves and boots.

R. Do you classify yourself as a rocker?

I. I'm a rocker. Rock's my bag.

R. Okay

I. And then there are the rappers

R. Yeah, there are some of those as well.

I. I'm not really a rapper myself, but there are quite a few of them.

R. Describe a typical rapper for me

I. Well there's the big trousers and big headphones and goggles for a start. And well, I don't know, but it's like rappers do mostly rail slides. It's not like you can say for sure though. You just recognise them on the basis of their clothes, or maybe not on the slopes, since large trousers are cool there. For instance, it's like I've got pretty normal trousers, but then there are like dudes with looser trousers, maybe that's like the major difference. Or maybe rappers have a cooler style than the rockers. Like you know, a riding style.

R. Explain further.

I. Well, it's not like not like it's the same for everybody, but the rockers definitely like to do big airs and jump higher. It's not like you can say anything for sure, but it's just that the gear and the stance are a bit different, or maybe not the stance, but mostly the musical taste and the clothes that go with it. (T22, M84)

“Playful Dress”

Dress is stylistically mixed and playful. Expression varies according to the social status of individual taste judgements, but in such a fragmentary way that it is difficult to identify any contact surfaces. According to the homology assumption, a style that reproduces communality must be compatible with the lifestyle and ideology of the group. Snowboarding demonstrates, however, that the equivalence of the aesthetical and ethical dimension is at least ostensibly

random. The value base is shared and to some extent permanent, although its expression is fragmented and varies through time. The stratification that arises as recontextualisation gathers its material from past points of comparison makes the historical situation complex. The significance of expression appears as a polyphonic and occasionally chaotic structure, in which a present fixed by dress, musical predilections and ideological fragments, gains its meaning through the past.

Apart from visually apparent elements, snowboarding also “recycles” elements adopted from value systems which sometimes connect it with the surf culture of the 1960s, and sometimes with punk ideology, the American suburbs and other marginal phenomena. The articulation of structures becomes problematic because style can only partly be expressed in verbal terms. Visual emphases dominate stylistic expression and serve at the same time as a reflective surface for ideology. Loose trousers are casual and feel comfortable. The overall stance is casual as the whole vibe is easygoing and free. The taste judgments that accompany visual expressions do not directly try to legitimate the existence of the meaning system. They are not intended to explain or produce grounds for anything – they refer directly to their signs e.g. what they are and how they are experienced. The tautological explanation returns to itself, something that also alludes to the dominance of a playful end in itself. This tautological aspect also supports the view of the interwoven nature of the aesthetical and the ethical dimension.

Anarchy and Nostalgia

Bricolage is not a stylistic tendency in itself, but rather a part of the universal logic

of cultural style (cf. Stahl 1999 [online]; Brake 1985: 58f). Steven Connor (1989: 191) defines late modern bricolage as an improvisation in which incompatible and heterogeneous fragments are combined as a contrast to unity and coherence. Bricolage signifies a universal human tendency to interpret new experiences in terms of already existing categories. Each new category and explanatory model can be linked to older categories by virtue of being positioned as a rare exception, opposite or caricature of a previous model (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 17, 21; Kaartinen 1997: 39). The variation of the interpretative horizon gives the sign a new more arbitrary meaning in comparison to the previous system. The end result is a cultural parody in which the predominant role is played by the structural contradictions of western society (Ruohonen 1994: 33). By way of the temporal dimension meanings become multi-layered constructions that permeate the entire history of boarding sports.

The interpretative horizons that are typical of youth culture expression can be divided into two main groups. Phenomena that receive an anarchic classification usually comment critically upon the dominant system of meaning and are in clear contradiction to this order. There are numerous examples of this. The bricolage of British Ted culture in the 1950s was based on the remodelling of Edwardian style while the points of comparison for the mod culture of the 1960s were drawn from the button-down shirts and ties worn in business dress. The second group of stylistic expression is embodied in the meaning structures of other youth cultures (Hebdige 1984).

Semantic systems outside the so-called

mainstream culture can also affect the stylistic expression of snowboarding, although the most common influences are youth culture phenomena. Moreover, one must add that the symbolic anarchy associated with youth culture styles can be inherited or transferred from one semantic system to another. The surfing and skateboarding cultures are the key points of reference for snowboarding culture. As for musical genres, rap and rock cultures have gained a dominant position. The “skatepunk” that developed in skateboarding is the equivalent of punk within snowboarding culture, and is furthermore complemented by influences from surfing and other boarding sports.

“Delinquent Style?”

Subculture and anarchy are indeed intimately entwined concepts. Snowboarders view this anarchy as an artificial representation upheld by the media; it might tell us something about snowboarding’s past, but fits uneasily with the reality of the present. However, there also features in the style of snowboarding culture that adhere to a historically defined anarchic stance. Ideological conflicts that have been transferred from one semantic system to another are especially noticeable between snowboarding and skateboarding:

I. I at least used to think, and maybe that’s why I’ve stopped thinking about it lately, that the media views the snowboarders and skaters as the same crowd, a little grungy and alternative, which isn’t necessarily true, although in broad terms it isn’t much off the mark either. I’ve also come across people who think skaters and snowboarders just wreck places and mess up stuff. But you could find that kind of element and vandals and stuff in any kind of sport. Nowadays, I don’t think about what the media has to say about snowboarders, it’s like, whatever. But anyway,

the commercialism in snowboarding is definitely more of a negative thing than a positive thing. (T14, F86)

Anarchy is a context-bound phenomenon. The more central a structure of the dominant order bricolage reveals the more radical its discursive strategy becomes (Becker 1963; Lähteenmaa 1996: 102f). The relationship between differentiation and anarchy is a dialectical, two-way movement: differentiation that happens through style is not only a factual strategy, but also something that opens up on a semantic level and works simultaneously as both a goal and an instrument. The differentiation that emerges as an intrinsic value in terms of sociality manifests itself as a tautological explanation for collectivity; like communality, differentiation is of intrinsic importance – snowboarding is valuable for its own sake.



After the competition: winner takes the board.
Photo: Samuli Ronkanen.

“Alternative Structures”

Snowboarding also reproduces the structures of the dominant order. Attention has especially been paid to gender and the role it plays in western society. For instance, according to Kristin Anderson (1999), there are many similarities between snowboarding culture and the masculine structures dominant in western society. In snowboarding, the figure of the dominant order is constructed through the marginal and therefore its cultural determinants are always stylebound. Conflicts are part of the global history of snowboarding culture, through which they also affect contemporary praxes. Differentiation is an ideologically central theme that reproduces a value system based on freedom, authenticity, and communality. Both the dominant and the marginal define snowboarding culture:

I. I think all those riders who do a lot of jumps, and specifically slide rails, and ride in the pipe, like to have a laid-back and loose dress style. Most of the boys have a certain kind of ski cap, the kind that's currently in fashion. You see a lot of them, but then there are like those with proper ski jackets and loose pants, or more or less so, anyway, but definitely a more loose kind of thing. But then again, if you think of casual riders and those who only visit the slopes once in a while and who might previously only have done some ordinary skiing, and don't really see the need to buy any new gear, then they usually have the same kind of ski jackets like all the other skiers. It's like a terrible word, skier. It's not like a derogatory term, but still. The lamest skiers are like the Russians and stuff. Their clothes are just awful. I mean seriously, we're talking pink ski overalls. It's like an eighties thing or somethin'... it's easy to make out those who ride a lot and those who only hit the slopes once in a while. (T13, F80)

The majority of the negative remarks are directed towards commercialism, competi-

tiveness, and the “traditional sports” outside snowboarding. The International Ski Federation (FIS) and the Olympics have also received their fair share of criticism. The discourses that serve as an instrument of differentiation overlap ideologically; on a symbolic level, they merge and form the dominant order that is alien from the perspective of snowboarding culture. Sport is viewed as a value system branded by commercialism and competitiveness, alongside which snowboarding builds its own alternative world. The opposition of commercialism is based on a critique of the capitalist economic system, but only partly so. Commercialism becomes a problematic phenomenon in the event that it strives to replace the semantic system of snowboarding with its own rationalism:

I. Commercialism is a bit like, well of course you're immediately like, when something is commercial, it seems as if to be in some way credible, you should at least in principle be against it, but I think it doesn't bring just bad things to the sport, for one thing it can raise the visibility of the sport and make it easier to get into. In the beginning, the interest was like nada [forms a zero with his fingers], it was a “you were allowed to be there if you behaved” kinda' vibe, now they invest millions of dollars... Of course, this also has its negative sides. I don't think competition suits the sport at all. As for saying more about competition, it's hard, as I'm involved in all kinds of sports. I've definitely got a competitive streak, in other words I need something to fight for.

But snowboarding like doesn't have to be about counting points and stuff, at least not in my opinion, or maybe I don't do it for that reason, but more because it's just so much fun. All other sports are based on that, at least in ball games, you count points and you have to have something to play for. It would feel a bit stupid otherwise, but riding's a different matter, so you don't necessarily need any judging, but I guess some people like it,

this is also something that divides people into camps. And then there's the other reason why riders do these things, the cold cash, since the top riders receive especially in the big tournaments pretty substantial sums. So that always gathers interest, no matter how much you're against commercialism and everything. (T24, M81)

Commercialism and competitiveness appropriate snowboarding for other ends than riding itself. The same also applies to the protestant work ethic which reduces snowboarding to a leisure activity as well as modernist individualism for which there are emic points of reference in snowboarding culture. Money, work and duty gain an instrumental value: their purpose is to serve as a realisation of the authenticity of being a snowboarder. Synchronic references point towards living contemporary styles. The nostalgic features of the systems of meaning assume their points of comparison from the history of snowboarding and western youth cultures (Donnelly 1993: 119).

Surfing and skating act mainly as positive sources of identification: they are part of the construction of the illusion of a global community uniting all snowboarders. In practice, communality is a living construction in the discursive praxis of a semantic system, which becomes materialised in the everyday reality of local groups. Communality is not the opposite of a non-conformist individuality, but rather a voluntariness through which individuals choose their communities themselves.

Style is at the core of culturally signifying practices. Keywords include overlapping, synchrony, and fragmentariness. Bricolage unifies the fragmented discourses of the “grand narratives of history” so that the present gains meaning through the past (cf. Söderholm 1990: 97). The paradox of

fragmentariness is that as an element of style it actually produces order. Style is a contradictory mixture of new and old (Maffesoli 1995: 51f). Bricolage makes history the central element of style. Myth also delineates the repertoire utilised by bricolage as well as the interpretative horizon in which the combination takes place. It is precisely through this temporal perspective that style gets its mythical and nostalgic features. The operational sphere of style is extensive; in addition to written discourses, photographs, films, print media, exhibitions, and advertising can also be approached as stylistic communication (Barthes 1973: 117; cf. Ehrnrooth 1988: 45).

Nostalgia returns a past estranged from the contemporary to the present moment. The classical definitions of the concept emphasise the value-charged aspects of cultural creativity: nostalgia evaluates the past as better than the present. It returns it to something which is not or something that has never even been in the first place. (Knuuttila 1994: 11ff). In snowboarding culture, nostalgia speaks on behalf of a freedom of choice culminating in both individualism and communality. Freedom is an indispensable starting point for cultural creativity, but only a communality based on collectivity turns nostalgia into a culturally constructed emotion (Koivunen 2000: 345).

According to Angela McRobbie, the nostalgia of youth culture differs from the traditional definition of the concept in that it does not strive after authenticity or try to reconstruct the past as it sometimes used to be. Nostalgia is a tool producing mythical representations, which it exploits and through which it attaches itself to topical

discourses of the moment (1996: 147, 152f). The hermeneutic kinship between nostalgia and anarchy explains partly why both qualities can be linked to an individual object or discourse (Hutcheon 1998 [online]). Attribution does not happen according to the particular, but rather between the signifying subject and discourse within the interpretative event. As a qualifier associated with the interpretative event, the contradictory relationship between nostalgia and anarchy reverts to the parallel existence of two interpretative horizons.

Social utopia represents a point of departure from the contemporary and real. It is the imaginary counterpart of the present. In snowboarding culture, the concepts are hierarchically ordered: anarchy can live in a subordinate relationship to nostalgia and utopia and vice versa. The anarchistic functions of nostalgia are apparent especially where the history of snowboarding serves as an instrument of differentiation. In analogy to surfing culture's "eternal summer", utopia and nostalgia produce a discourse of eternal winter representing the inclusive aspects of snowboarding culture. Another product of this differentiation is the image of an anti-commercial communality which Linda Hutcheon (1998 [online]) sees as "the by-product of an individualism born out of the constricts of modernism and late modernism".

"Finnish gangsta-boys"

The contradiction between the global and the localised level of snowboarding culture makes both these definitions of nostalgia imaginary. Classical nostalgia is defined as a longing that is directed towards the past. The late modern version of nostalgia adheres itself to the historical reference point of this

longing and asks what kind of relationship it can have to an object which is so estranged from the interpreter that he or she could not have lost it in the first place (Hutcheon 1998 [online]; Knuuttila 1994). The same applies to Finnish snowboarding culture as there are both American and domestic elements in its nostalgic forms.

The authenticity of foreign influences fosters critical interpretations within Finnish snowboarding culture. It is a long way from the American suburbia to the Finnish mind-scape, and not only in terms of geographical distance. Even a modest sense of community is sufficient for a contact surface, although the necessary points of convergence are not always easy to find:

I. ...It's a bit like the skate scene, there are two schools, there's like a heavy/punk type thing and then there's another with like tight jeans, metal-studded belts and ripped sleeves, the stereotypical pink sneakers and all that. Then there's like a loose hip-hop/rap crowd with like a bling bling, yo yo vibe, and the Trulls [a Finnish snowboarding team] who at least in Finland have been pretty serious trendsetters when it comes to this bling bling side of things, their pants like droop, and their waistline is somewhere above their knees and stuff. It's just their thing.

R. Does this have anything to do with the world associated with this dress style?

I. That's a pretty difficult thing to answer because now they're trying to promote this kind of black ghetto youth image from MTV or somethin' that includes bling bling gold chains or whatever and a bitchin' merc that's so customised that the tail pipe drags along the ground and the rims of the wheel are so big that they nearly pop out of the mudguards, and the drooping pants and, of course that friggin' jacket that's open so that they can show off the bling bling jewellery and all that. (T28, M76)

Historical reality is not fixed, but rather something imagined and under continuous construction. Nostalgia and anarchy tell us from what kind of repertoire and to what purpose the elements utilised in recontextualisation have been selected. At the same time, they again raise the question of the homologies of snowboarding culture. The relationship between expression and values is not always stable. Relationships can vary from the presupposed coherence of the homology thesis to quite considerable inner contradictions (Hebdige 1984: 126f). It is clear, however, that the visible forms of style, as well as the whole phenomenon, direct our attention to the constitutive elements of snowboarding culture.

Visibility and Contradiction

The visibility of style arises from the interplay of two or more semantic systems. Thus, it becomes culturally visible either through conflict or through its historical context. The public's attention can quickly subside, however, when its interest in style lessens and diffuses into part of the dominant order (Clarke et al. 1982: 14). Transparency can make style both visually and culturally non-declarative or in other words invisible, whereupon its existence is based on a weakly objectified or otherwise discretely constructed praxis (Krogstad 1990: 250). The forms of signification are also entities subject to change. Their significance is especially emphasised in the functionality of semantic systems that have moved from the marginal to the dominant order. The growing popularity of snowboarding has divided snowboarding culture into two parts (cf. Christensen 2001).

Marginality can be a part of the dominant order and at the same time maintain its

intrinsic motivation. Style comments upon questions about the nature of the dominant order. It comments, questions or rebels. The everyday quality represented in the aesthetic and the ideological forms of style is in both cases one and the same phenomenon. Visibility is that which causes the contradictory situation and makes the phenomenon obvious by implying a deviation from the norm.

The phenomenon differentiates, or as is often the case in the context of media and commercialism, is differentiated from the dominant order to form its own world. Apart from visibility, opposition is also a culturally visible element of many youth culture phenomena. Visibility acts as the opposite of obviousness and can be transformed into the obvious in the same way as the unofficial becomes popularised and moves from the margin to the official. The unofficial becomes part of the everyday life of the self-evident. Visibility transforms once again into obviousness and the phenomenon disappears from the interpretative horizon.

Marginality and resistance live side by side in contemporary youth culture. In the wake of branding, the marginal becomes increasingly often a part of the dominant culture. This contradictory situation arises from competing interpretative horizons; youth culture seems to exist simultaneously in both the guise of marginality and as a legitimised capitalistic product. Snowboarders ride on the edge of two systems of meaning. Marginality springs from a subordinate relationship in which the dominant strives to maintain its position either by absorbing the subordinate as part of its own order or making the marginal invisible, e.g. ignoring it (Connor 1989: 194f). Thirdly,

the dominant order can resort to exoticizing or purposely upholding the marginality associated with otherness.

Visual and cultural visibility alludes to the communal base of style serving as the interpretative context of individual emphases. In the world of media and advertising, style is linked to a system of exchange operating on a larger symbolic level (*ibid.*). Totality permeates the collectively shared semantic system of snowboarding on all its levels. The branded forms of marginality are about the terms of exchange between the dominant and the unofficial. According to Jean Baudrillard, a symbolic order dominated by totality is typical of a marginal phenomenon: it is directed towards something other than the pursuit of financial gain. In a capitalistic system, the symbolic lives in a subordinate relationship to economic rationalities. Its values serve either directly or indirectly as a means of financially defined benefit. In western societies, semantic systems that can be equated with pre-industrial systems of exchange are only likely to be found in marginal symbolic systems (1990; cf. Mauss 1990).

The commercial pursuits of the dominant order are directed towards the economic benefit arising from branding. Symbolical exchange has moved from the Marxist dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed to a new horizon of meaning. For snowboarding, cultural visibility is an intrinsic value, through which it strives for not only economic benefit but also authenticity and cultural autonomy. The existence of popular culture phenomena is based on a reciprocal system of exchange (Connor 1989: 194f). It is precisely through this “web of contradictory meanings” that snowboarding culture constitutes a world of its own.

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Note

1 The references to source material are based on the fieldwork for my doctoral thesis on Finnish snowboarding. In addition to the themed interviews, I also published the responses to the questionnaire in a web environment. L1 and L2 refer to the questionnaire responses while T refers to the themed interviews. R refers to the researcher while I refers to the informant. The individual code of the informant is followed by the gender (F/M) and year of birth of the respondent. The background information in the responses to the questionnaire has been gathered according to the precision given by the informant. I wish to thank Samuli Ronkanen who has kindly provided me the visual material for this article.

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