Dark Enactments in Milan: A Practice-Centred Exploration of an Italian Post-Punk Subculture of the '80s

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Abstract

The present paper intends to propose a methodological framework inspired by second generation practice theories and by John Law's concept of enactment for the study of subcultures related to music and style, as a way to circumvent the frontal contraposition between subculturalist and post-subculturalist approaches that characterize the field. Addressing the case of goth (or dark, as the subculture is known in Italy) in Milan in the 1980s, the paper shows how the subculture was not internally homogeneous, but also how its internal variations did not simply depend on personal interpretations. In Milan, in fact, it was possible to observe different and stabilized ways of enacting dark, depending on the bundle of practices in which subcultural participation unfolded: the activist enactment, the music club enactment, and the loner enactment. The three enactments shared the same canon of subcultural resources (music, style, literature, cinema, figurative arts, and others), and yet they differed for relevant aspects as stance to political engagement, forms of socialization, relationship with urban public space, and ultimately forms of identity construction.

Keywords: Subcultures; Post-Subcultures; Enactment; Social Practices; Post-Punk.

From the late 1990s, the research field on punk, post-punk and other youth cultures related to music has been characterized by an uninterrupted quarrel between subculturalist and post-subculturalist scholars about the heritage of the influential approach of the Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). This debate, that has been already critically discussed in all its complexity (Blackman, 2005; Magaudda, 2009; Bennet, 2011), has led to what for some is a stalemate over key concept of *subculture* (Hodkinson, 2016; Woodman & Wyn, 2016): On the one hand, subculturalist scholars — who take on the heritage of the School of Birmingham — defend its persistent adequacy (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006), and if anything aim to revamp the concept to address more recent forms of subcultural participation (Hodkinson, 2002); on the other hand, post-subculturalist scholars, inspired by postmodern theories, consider the concept of subculture as unamendable (Muggleton, 2000; Bennet, 2015), and propose to dismiss it in favour of alternative concepts

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like *neo-tribes* (Bennet, 2005), *lifestyles* (Miles, 2000), *scenes* (Straw, 1991; Frith, 1995), and others (Hesmondhalgh, 2005).

The implications of the original concept of subculture that are at stake are plural and multi-faced, and can be traced back to three main topics. First of all, they regard issues of authenticity, in particular in front of the commercialization and mediatization of the subculture: post-subculturalists lament how the concept would "effectively [produce] [...] an abrupt theoretical dichotomy between the authentic subcultural members, and the incorporated followers of commodified [(and mediatized, A/N)] subcultural fashions" (Muggleton, 2000, p. 21). In second instance, they regard the relationship with class: In this case, post-subculturalists lament how the concept of subculture would be flawed by sociological determinism, since it would imply an understanding of "class [...] [as] a structure with the casual power to *generate* subcultures as counter-hegemonic responses to specific historical contradictions" (Muggleton, 2000, p. 20). In this way, the concept would fail to account for the effective class heterogeneity of subculturalists. In what follows I will deal with these two first issues only in relation to a third and last point, that for post-subculturalists would regard a "fallacy within subcultural theory to deal with plural authenticities and plural structures of meanings within the same subculture" (Hannerz, 2015, p. 13). Stressing on the "collective and shared dimensions" (Magaudda, 2009, p. 303)[1] of the forms of identity construction related to style and music, in fact, the concept of subculture would describe these identities as homogeneous, persistent in time, and coherent. From the 1990s on, on the contrary, post-subculturalist have been depicting (post-)subcultural affiliation not only as ephemeral and fluid, but also as prone to individual idiosyncrasies and variations (Bennet, 1999 & 2000; Miles, 2000). This theoretical alternative is increasingly lamented by contemporary scholars as inadequate to make sense of the complexity of empirical cases: as noted by Erik Hannerz, in fact, "the postmodern approach conceals similarities through a focus on difference, [while] the 'new' subcultural theorists all too often substitute difference for similarity, arguing that the heterogeneity of style is a matter of individual interpretation of the collectively shared" (2015, p. 15).

The point I will make here is that interrogating (post-) subcultural participation through the lenses of practice theory can methodologically help to account for "plural structures of meanings within the same subculture." Moreover, a practice-centred approach can also help to circumvent the other two issues at the centre of the present stalemate over the concept of subculture, contributing therefore to open a new common methodological ground for empirical investigations done from a subcultural and post-subcultural perspective. To make this point, I will address the case study of Italian — or better, Milanese — goth[2] in the 1980s.

The case of Milanese goth — or dark, as the subculture was known in Italy — has been chosen for two reasons. First of all, to contribute to the study of Italian sub- and counter- cultures of those years: A topic so far almost deserted by the Italian academia (De Sario, 2009; Tosoni, 2015), notwithstanding the present rising interest for subcultures in non-Anglo-Saxon contexts (Guerra & Moreira, 2017). In second instance, exactly because it cannot be addressed in an adequate way neither through a strictly subculturalist, nor through a post-subculturalist approach. On one hand, in fact, the subculture shows high indicators of what Hodkinson's revamped subculturalist approach calls "subcultural substance": *consistent distinctiveness* ("the existence of a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent," p. 30); *commitment* (the "tendency for concentrated and continuous practical involvement among participants," so "to influence extensively the everyday lives of participants," p. 31); *autonomy* (indicating that "a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities which underpin [a subculture] are liable to be undertaken by and for enthusiasts," p. 32); and *identity* (the "perception that they are involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another," p. 30–31). Yet, in contrast with subcultural theory inspired by the School of Birmingham, the subculture also shows high levels of internal differentiation. On the other hand, and in contrast both with "new" subcultural and post-subculturalist theories, these internal variations cannot

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1.   Throughout the text, translations of non-English sources are by the author.

2.   For insiders' introductions to the subculture, see Baddeley, 2006 & 2010; Scharf, 2011. For a scientific scrutiny of goth in the 1990s in UK and Germany, see Hodkinson, 2002 and Brill, 2002. For an historical perspective on goth's origins and development after the 1980s, see Spracklen & Spracklen, 2018.

be reduced to the individual level, and "to individual distinction, of tweaking a singular shared meaning so as to stand out as unique" (Hannerz, 2015, p. 16).

A practice-centred approach shows instead how in the 1980s, the internal heterogeneities of the sub-culture were "structured and structuring" (Hannerz, 2015) Milanese dark in a number of distinct and stabilized forms, depending on the different nexus of social practices (Schatzki, 1996) in which subcul-tural participation unfolded. Borrowing a concept from the field of Science and Technology Studies, we will refer to these structured variations as different *enactments* of dark (Tosoni, 2017), an enactment being the performative process in which something is actualized in the world through different social practices (Lien & Law, 2013; Law & Lien, 2013). My point is that different enactments generate from what we define the same *subcultural canon* — the common set of cultural and symbolic resources, tastes and values that define the *consistent distinctiveness* of the subculture (Hodkinson, 2002)[3] — different forms of subcultural identity.

In what follows I will proceed in four steps: in the next two sections I will sketch the tenets of a fully-fledged practice-centred approach to subcultural participation, and of an enactment approach to subculturalists' identity construction. In the third section, I will present the three main enactments of dark in Milan in the 1980s: the activist enactment, the music club enactment, and a third one — the loner enactment — where subcultural participation was enacted alone, or in small groups often made up of members of different subcultures. For this part, I will draw on the results of a three-year research study completed in 2012, based of 24 life stories (Ferrarotti, 2003) of subjects participating to the dark scene from 1982 to 1991, that led to the publication of the Italian volume *Creature Simili. Il Dark a Milano negli Anni '80* (Tosoni & Zuccalà, 2013).[4] In the final section I will discuss some of the main implications of the proposed approach, and I will indicate the empirical and theoretical questions that remain still open, due to the limits of my case study.

1 Exploring Subculturalists' Doings through Practice Theory

As pointed out by several authors, the classic take of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies on subcultures was "primarily grounded in semiotic analyses of style." (Williams, 2007, p. 576). Therefore, "the CCCS tended to ignore what subcultural participants actually said or did, focusing in-stead on 'reading' their resistance through style and ritual" (Williams, 2007, p. 577).

From the 1990s onwards, scholars have devoted a growing attention to subcultural practices, inves-tigated through qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation. Regarding punk, Kirsty Lohman (2017) reviews "a second wave of studies," following the semiotic one, that focuses on the ways punk ideology "manifested itself in DIY and anti-capitalist or anti-corporate economic practices," and "on the social practices of punk" (Lohman, 2017, p. 133). In the former strand of research, the author in-cludes studies by Dale (2012), Gosling (2004), Moore (2004 & 2010), O'Connor (2008) and Thompson (2004), while in the latter she enlists works by Gololobov et al. (2014), Haenfler (2006), Leblanc (1999), O'Connor (2000, 2003 & 2004) and Wallach (2008). Regarding goth, whose academic study was un-dertaken concomitantly to Lohman's second wave in punk studies, researchers have devoted from the

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3. A prominent role in the dark canon was played by music (i.e., goth, new wave and post-punk) and style, but it also in-cluded specific cultural resources in literature (e.g., the poetry of Charles Baudelaire), cinema (e.g., German expressionism), figurative arts (e.g. Dadaism) and others. I adapted the concept of canon from the field of fan studies, where it refers to the "legitimate materials" (Newman, 2008, p. 59) of a franchise, defining a "binding set of resources" (*Ibidem*, p. 60) for fandoms' participatory cultures. Being the result of constant negotiations between fans, and between fans and production (Gray, 2010; Leow, 2011; Liebler & Chaney, 2007) a canon is to be considered always open and dynamic. Adopting the concept to account for the consistent distinctiveness of a subculture, I intended therefore to underline the shared, but also negotiated, dynamic, and sometimes controversial nature of the subcultural canon. For a broader discussion of the con-cept of subcultural canon, and for a description of the practices of assemblage of the canon of dark, see Tosoni & Zuccalà (forthcoming, chap. 7).

4. The 24 interviewees were selected following criteria of typological variation along the variables of gender, of place of residence (in Milan or in the neighboring towns), of generation (subculturalists the entered the scene in the first or the second half of the 1980s), and of the role in the scene (simple participants, and organizers, DJs, editors of fanzines, members of a band). Life stories lasted from 2 to 6 hours, and were collected in 1 to 3 rounds. For a detailed presentation of the approach, see Tosoni & Zuccalà (2003; forthcoming).

very beginning a great deal of attention to subculturalists' doings. In the not so vast literature available, scholars have addressed practices as diverse as subcultural events attendance (Brill, 2007; Hodkinson, 2002; Spracklen & Spracklen, 2018); stylistic practices (Hodkinson, 2002), especially in relation to gender construction (Brill, 2007 & 2008; Goulding & Saren, 2009); media-related practices (Hodkinson, 2002 & 2003; Spracklen & Spracklen, 2018); religious and parareligious practices (Powell, 2007; Healey & Fraser, 2017).

Yet, as underlined by Theodor Schatzky,

> a wide variety of theorists today use the expressions "practices" or "social practices" in the absence of an elaborated or even explicit conception of practices. These expressions are also often used almost unreflectively, in a way that suggests that the writer or speaker believes that his/her subject matter is a form of, or rooted in, human activities (Schatzky, 2012, p. 14).

In a large part of these studies — on goth, punk or other subcultures/lifestyles — the concept of practices is indeed underdiscussed and assumed in a taken for granted way as a generic synonym of "things that subculturalists do", the few exceptions being based on the appropriation (and decontextualization) of some key concepts from the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu, like *habitus* (Powell, 2007; Driver, 2011; Branch, 2014), *field* (O'Connor, 2008 & 2016) or (sub-)*cultural capital* (Thornton, 1995; Brill, 2007; Jensen, 2006). The problem here is that differently defined, methodological concepts as "practice" drive scholars to focus on different aspects of the reality under study, and to frame their research objects differently. Even if the attention to the "things that subculturalists do" has enriched our understanding of subcultural and post-subcultural participation, this lack of reflexivity risks hindering the disciplinary dialogue on subcultural practices, and to undermine the attempt to really move beyond the classical semiotic approach. In this last regard, Christopher Driver notices how, in studies from the 1990s onwards, "there are a number of underlying epistemological assumptions that need to be re-evaluated, not the least of which is the conceptualisation of youth cultural practice as a fundamentally symbolic phenomenon" (2011, p. 975). "The assumption that subcultural practice is significant because it is symbolic of social and cultural identities" (Driver, 2011, p. 976) would have led scholars to overlook the relevance of practices as embodied performances, and as a consequence to miss "the significance of the affective impact of human experience so central to the production of both selves and scenes" (Driver, 2011, p. 976). Drawing on a case study on hardcore dancing known as "moshing", the author points out how issues of affection and of bodily competences would "anchor" the self of subculturalists, limiting their possibilities of nomadism through temporary subcultural affiliations depicted by post-subcultural scholars.

While sharing Driver's concerns, I find more problematic, in the light of the present controversy between subculturalist and post-subculturalists, to side with his proposal to address subcultural practices adopting Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Driver, 2011). With this concept, the French sociologist refers to "the kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25), consisting in an embodied configuration of dispositions, that "are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices [...] [and at the same time] also classificatory schemes" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8) for their evaluation. The problem is that Bourdieu's habitus is strictly related to the subjects' material conditions and ultimately to class, and is "not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is in itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). As we have seen, this strict relation between class and subcultural practices is exactly one of the points currently under debate between subculturalists and post-subculturalists. The controversial nature of this hypothesis within the field discourages to take it on board at the level of the key methodological concept adopted (like it would happen with the concept of *habitus*), and demands instead empirical investigation, case by case.

Class relatedness, on the other hand, is not implied by the key methodological concepts of a second wave of practice theories that, starting from the 1990s, inspired the so-called practice turn (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & Savigny, 2001) in disciplines and research fields as diverse as sociology, social and political anthropology, media studies, science and technology studies, and others. Drawing on the works by early theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and of course Pierre Bourdieu, authors

like Theodore Schatzki (1996), Andreas Reckwitz (2002) and Elizabeth Shove (Shove et al., 2012) have deployed what must be regarded as a practice-centred social ontology, that conceives "the social [...] [as] a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings. This conception contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals, (inter)actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, institutions/roles, structures, or systems in defining the social" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 12). This implies the reversal of the perspective of all alternative approaches — including class-based approaches: the primacy goes in fact to the nexus of practices in which a specific portion of a social reality consists, while all the other theoretical issues are to be interrogated in relation to said nexus. For the study of subcultures and post-subcultures, this implies centring the primary analytical focus on the practices in which participation unfolds, and interrogating all the issues typical of the research field in relation to them, including issues of identity construction and authenticity.

In this respect, a rigorous definition of "practice" is methodologically of pivotal relevance. While "social theorists agree that there is no such thing as a coherent, unified 'practice theory' " (Postill, 2010, p. 6), all practice theorists "uphold [...] that practices consist in organised sets of actions, that practices link to form complexes and constellations — a nexus — and that this nexus forms the 'basic domain of study of the social sciences' (Giddens, 1984, p. 2)" (Hui, Schatzki & Shove, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, they all conceive practices as double articulations: "of activities [or actions] as tasks with a function in an overall teleological architecture; and of activities as bodily performances, coordinated in their enactment in complex choreographies." (Tosoni & Turrini, 2018, p. 286). Finally, all theorists agree on the relevance of material "objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself" (Shove et al., 2012, p. 23) in the organization and unfolding of a practice, even if there is disagreement on conceiving these socio-material elements as basic constituents of social practices (e.g., Shove et al., 2012, pro; Schatzki, 2002, contra). More specifically, Theodor Schatzki maintains that the organization of a practice depends on four "types of items":

> (1) action understandings, which are abilities to carry out, recognize and respond to particular actions; (2) rules, which are formulated instructions, directives, admonishments, and the like; (3) teleoaffective structures, which contain enjoined and acceptable ends, enjoined and acceptable projects and actions to carry out for those ends, and enjoined and acceptable emotions; and (4) general understandings — of matters germane to the practice (Schatzki, 2009, p. 39).

This definition of practices seems particularly apt to set the ground to deal with issues of "plural authenticities and plural structures of meanings within the same subculture." First, because it underlines how practices are always inherently social, whether they are undertaken alone or with other people.[5] The general understandings, the action understandings, the rules and the teleoaffective structures that organize them are in fact always shared among practitioners, and do not depend on the idiosyncrasies of the individual practitioner. This does not mean that each single practitioner cannot hold individual interpretations of the practice, or that they cannot eventually break its rules: yet, in light of the overall organization of the practice, to expert practitioners these interpretations appear indeed as individual interpretations, and these behaviours as transgressions (or as innovations) of the practice. In this respect, by adopting this definition of practice we can account for the presence of individual interpretations of the subculture, and at the same time for its *consistent distinctiveness*.

Secondly, because it underlines how tastes, values, and meanings that define a culture (or a subculture) are not "free-floating", but are always "embedded" in specific social practices: (sub-)cultures are always accessed through, and mediated by, social practices — including practices of media consumption. The engagement in different nexus of practices, therefore, may mediate (sub-)cultures differently. Moreover, this conceptualization also underlines how practices are characterized both by specific action understandings and teleoaffective structures, and by "general understandings", that "in Schatzki's (2002) formulation, [can be] [...] common to many practices" (Welch & Warde, 2017, p. 184). In this respect, this definition of practice also allows us to account for the *consistent distinctiveness* of a subculture (to be

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5.   Among others, Kirsty Lohman (2017) counterposes punk's "social" and "individual" practices, the former implying socialization with other members.

acknowledged in its canon of symbolic and cultural resources, tastes and values), and at the same time for a plurality of forms of subcultural identity and authenticity (deriving from the specific understanding, rules, and teleoaffective structures of a practice, or of a nexus of practices): a point that, under a methodological point of view, will be addressed adopting the concept of enactment from the field of science and technology study.

2 Exploring Subcultural Identities through an Enactment Approach

David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (2003) have underlined how "different applications of the work of both Bourdieu and Butler have helped to establish a resolutely anti-essentialist approach to subcultural theory" (p. 11): since the late 1990s, the idea that subcultural "identities are not ontologically distinct or pre-existent, but are brought into being, constructed and replayed through every day actions, dress, adornment and other cultural practices" (Evans, 1997, p. 181) has become a tenet in the field. Since then, several authors have generically termed "enactment" the process of performative and discursive subcultural identity construction, authentication or invalidation (e.g., Piano, 2003; Stahl, 2003; Goulding & Saren, 2009; Hannerz, 2015). While adopting this same term, I give to the concept a more restrictive meaning, reconnecting it to the practice-centred approach outlined so far, where "fixed social concepts, such as nation or gender [...] [are reformulated] as processes of enactment and (specific) categories of practice (e.g., Brubaker, 1996; Butler, 1993)" (Welch & Warde, 2017, p. 184).

This conceptualization of *enactment* is derived from John Law and Marianne Elisabeth Lien's investigations into empirical ontology (Lien & Law, 2011; Law & Lien, 2013), in the context of what some scholars have defined as the "turn to ontology" in Science and Technology Studies (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013). Law and Lien's empirical ontology moves, in fact, from concerns that are very close to the ones we are dealing with, consisting in "handl[ing] empirical difference" (Law & Lien, 2013, p. 364) in 'entities': Atlantic salmons in their case, subcultural identities in ours. Their approach addresses these differences by "focusing on practices rather than people or groups" (Law & Lien, 2013, p. 364), and it entails two key "methodological moves":

> A salmon is not general but specific. It depends on how "it" is being done in practice. We do without the assumption that there are salmon out there with a definite form, in existence outside the practices in which they are being done. That is the first move. And then, here's the second, it follows that since those practices aren't the same, different and multiple salmon subsist in different and multiple worlds. This, then, follows once we study ontology empirically. There is no ordered ground separate from practices and their relations. If there is order, it is a provisional and specific effect of practices and their ordering relations. There is no "salmon" behind the various practices that do salmon (Law & Lien, 2013, p. 366).

These methodological moves represent a valuable leverage to avoid what Alan O'Connor defines "substantive thinking" (2016) on subcultural identities, and that on his opinion still characterizes the field notwithstanding the aforementioned anti-essentialist turn. In substantive thinking, as O'Connor clarifies for punk,

> the author [...] seeks to describe and typify punk subculture. [...] [E]xamples or instances that do not fit the author's model are written off as exceptions or anomalies. Much academic writing on punk in effect constructs an ideal type (in Max Weber's sense) that might be useful as a thought experiment, but that completely sets aside the diversity within actual punk scenes. (O'Connor, 2016, p. 68).

Along the same lines Erik Hannerz (2015) laments that "even when different kinds of participants are included [in a sample] they are nevertheless ordered according to commitment and authenticity, with one group of participants being [...] given the privilege of defining the others" (pp. 192–193), concealing as a consequence "plural authenticities and plural structures of meanings within the same subculture."

An enactment approach, on the contrary, does not move from the construction of an ideal type, or from endowing one "group" with the privilege of defining the authenticity of the others: instead, it does

without the assumption that a subcultural identity — dark, in our case — has a definite form outside the social practices in which it is enacted mobilizing the subcultural canon, and since these practices aren't the same, it assumes that there are different and multiple forms of subcultural identities: different and multiple darks.

Under a methodological point of view, this entails starting from mapping the practices in which the subcultural canon is put into play — going dancing, consuming, being politically active and so on and so forth. From the analysis of the life stories gathered for the present case study, three different kinds of practices emerge: (1) practices that are common to all life stories, and that are deemed of key relevance for subcultural participation: basically, practices of cultural consumption and stylistic practices; (2) practices that are common to a part of the sample, and that are deemed of key relevance for subcultural participation: as we will show in the next section, these practices define the differences among enactments. For example, political participation is deemed of key relevance within the politically engaged enactment, while going dancing is one of the core practices of the music clubs enactment; and finally (3) other practices, that subjects do not deem as of key relevance for subcultural participation (and yet, as we will see, they can be shaped by subcultural participation).

In sum, each enactment unfolds in a nexus of practices of the three kinds, where practices of the second kind mark the differences among enactments. Here, three further observations are needed: first, a practice of the second kind — deemed as of key relevance in an enactment — can appear as a practice of the third kind in another enactment: for example, as we will see, political participation can appear in the life stories of subjects engaged in the music clubs enactment, and in the same way subjects in the politically engaged enactment may go to dance, yet these practices are held as "individual" and "personal", and as irrelevant for subcultural participation. Second, "deeming a practice of key relevance" is not a matter of individual perception, because it is related to social criteria of authentication or invalidation of subcultural identities within each enactment. Or rather, to social criteria of attribution of subcultural capital in Thornton's sense (1995) — an ideological resource through which subculturalists acquire a respected status — since, as we will see, the only subcultural identities that are invalidated throughout our sample are the ones of weekenders and "part-time" darks. This implies a relevant theoretical point: subcultural capital is acquired in different ways within different enactments, and has value within each enactment. Finally, while we find his practice-centred approach very inspiring, we resist O'Connor's proposal in considering a subculture — in his case, punk — as a field in Bourdieu's sense, or "a relatively autonomous area in which specialized activities take place" (O'Connor, 2016, p. 69), because, as we are going to show, every enactment unfolds within multiple fields, because these fields can differ from enactment to enactment, and because "aspects of subcultural motivation, practice, understanding and identity connect to broader equivalents across so-called 'normal' or 'mainstream' society" (Hodkinson, 2016, p. 569).

3   Enacting Dark in Milan 1982–1991

Milanese dark in the 1980s represented the local appropriation of a canon of symbolic resources (a shared set of values and tastes in music and style, but also in literature and art) deriving mainly from the U.K., and usually intercepted through mainstream, independent and niche media (Thornton, 1995). Yet, in line with the literature on the reception of music-centred subcultures outside their context of origin (for Italy, see, for example, Wright, 2000; Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2003; Baldini, 2010; Bottà, 2012; Persello, 2016), the subculture cannot be regarded as a mere emulation of UK goth: in the process of appropriation, in fact, its canon was enriched and partially transformed, and took new and specific meanings deriving from the socio-political conditions of the local context. Moreover, this process of appropriation cannot be regarded as a homogeneous and monolithic phenomenon: on the contrary, it took different forms depending on the different ways dark was was locally enacted. As anticipated, in Milan in the 1980s, it was possible to identify three main enactments of dark: the activist enactment, the music clubs enactment and the loner enactment.

3.1   *Creature Simili: The Activist Enactment of Dark*

"Creature Simili" — "Kindred Creatures" — was the name used in the early 1980s at the anarchic punk squat Virus to address those people who hung out there, and yet were not regarded as "real" punks. What marked their difference in the eyes of punx[6] was not only their style — the dark's total black — or the music they preferred — post-punk and goth[7] definitely more than the hardcore punk that was all the rage at the squat in those years. More relevantly, Creature Simili were considered politically ambiguous because they did not find themselves at ease with the rigid line of frontal political contraposition that the squat had chosen. In years in which the repression of the political movements of the 1970s was still harsh (Mudu & Piazza, 2016), in fact, the Virusians were engaged in intense political activism, through leafleting, public protests, and occasional clashes with the police. Moreover, all the cultural activities of the squat — such as meetings and assemblies — were rigidly politicized, and all mandatorily revolving around issues of resistance to the repression, and of defence of the squat and other "freed spaces". The rules on grating the access to the Virus' stage were a clear example of this cultural approach: all the bands that were invited to play (like Wretched and Negazione) addressed in their lyrics the same political themes that were of concern to punx. No band could perform if they weren't participating to the political activities of the squat. Other issues did not receive much attention, including those that were held as crucial by Creature Simili: existential issues related to identity and self-expression, to the body and to alternative sexuality. In the same way, while punx could privately "indulge" in forms of expression like art, literature, theatre or even just dancing, these practices were by and large perceived as not relevant for the political struggle and therefore dismissed as of secondary relevance for the subculture: they were perceived as practices of the third kind, when not looked down at as forms of political disengagement.

While identifying with the anarchic political beliefs of the squat, Creature Simili found this cultural line too suffocating, and deaf to the new existential concerns that were arising at those times: concerns related to identity and self-determination in a society where the neoliberal values had become mainstream. Conversely, they found these anxieties resonating deeply within the UK post-punk music of those years, and with the cultural resources it was deeply intertwined with: from French existentialism to the historical avant-gardes, from the theatre of Antoin Artaud and Lindsay Kemp to novels by Kafka, from the *Poètes Maudits* to the Italian *Scapigliatura*.

> *People from the Virus were not really into that kind of thing. They only wanted bands who were politically engaged, so they'd only talk about Crass, Flux of Pink Indians, Anti Cimex: anarchist bands that resonated with their experiences. And this was because punx were undoubtedly interested in music, but they were interested in politics even more. If you spoke with someone who hung out at the Virus, of course they knew who Siouxsie and the Banshees were. Or Joy Division. Or Killing Joke. But these bands didn't fit very well with their way of seeing things. I mean... Bauhaus never sang about anarchy, occupations or protesting nuclear weapons and war.* (Roy, M)

Some events exacerbated these divergences, like the protest against the Italian band CCCP in February 1984, when the band was invited to play at the squat by Creature Simili and was harshly contested by the punx (Tosoni, 2015b). The group left the Virus, created a new collective, and officially called it with that same name they were already informally using: Creature Simili.

In any case, leaving the squat did not imply political disengagement. The new collective kept participating in the political activities of the Virus, and started to organize others on their own. They called them "mental attacks": sorts of situationist actions performed on Saturday afternoons in the main commercial streets of Milan, aimed at sensitizing people to the lack of non-commercial social spaces in the city.

The enactment of dark proposed by Creature Simili was very visible and influential not only in Milan and in Northern Italy, but also all over the country. Since 1982, in fact, Quelli di Amen (The People of Amen) — a relevant group within Creature Simili — published Amen, the first and most important

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6.   The "X" in "punx" was the way in which anarcho-punks marked their difference in graffiti and leaflets from other, non-activist enactments of punk.

7.   For a musicologist approach to goth music see Elferen & Weinstock (2016).

Italian dark fanzine. Amen was distributed all over Italy in more than two thousand copies, and each issue included a tape of Italian post-punk bands. As it was typical of this enactment of dark, the editorial line of the fanzine included music along with political issues related to religion, nationalism, sexuality and gender:

> [We devoted a lot of] *attention to sexuality [...], to the urgency of getting rid of the archaic legacies of the past [...], [to] transgender, homosexuality, self-determination [...]. At that time, we thought that Amen was more an anomaly than an integral part within the dark scene, but I realize now that for many people we were a point of reference. We were so surprised to sell so many copies and receive so many letters.* (Angela, F)

By 1984, thanks to their political activities, Creature Simili had gained a reputation within what was left of the radical left in the city, savaged by the on-going repression. After some failed attempts to occupy an independent space, they were hosted within Leoncavallo, at that time the most important squat run by Autonomia Operaia (Autonomism) (De Sario, 2012). At Leoncavallo, in fact, Quelli di Amen had successfully organized several Italian dark bands gigs since 1982, with a success that was unforeseen even to the organizers themselves.[8] This space, called Helter Skelter, soon became one of the reference points for the dark scene of all of Northern Italy and Switzerland. The cultural line proposed by Helter Skelter was once again characterized by the same radically politicized and activist stance that had already been typical of Creature Simili and Amen, blending cultural activities of international level — with bands, artists and filmmakers invited from all over Europe — with political actions. This experience, that among the other things introduced cyberpunk in Italy (Nacci, 2018), lasted until 1987, when it came to an end (due to an internal crisis within its organizing group), together with the enactment of dark it promoted.

3.2 *Enacting Dark in Music Clubs*

The end of the Helter Skelter didn't imply the end of the first dark-wave in Milan, since the activist enactment was not the only one in the city. A second relevant one had in fact emerged during 1983, in the alternative music club scene spread all over Northern Italy, that had its centre at the Milanese disco Hysterika: in this enactment, going dancing was in fact a practice of the second kind. As punks had initially looked down on Creature Simili, Creature Simili looked down on people enacting dark in this different way, considering them interested only in the most superficial aspects of the subculture.

> *At the beginning, we kinda laughed at them, because it seemed just fashion to us: something very superficial.* (Nino, M)

For Creature Simili, in fact, the authenticity of subcultural identities had to be certified with coherence between cultural consumption, style and involvement in active political commitment: in this enactment, activism was a practice of the second kind. On the contrary, for the participants of the alternative music club scene, activism was a practice of the third kind: even if many of them were politically active on a personal level, activism was regarded as not relevant to enact dark:

> *The problem was that we were non-politically active, as they used to say: we didn't go around putting up posters; we didn't organize concerts. We did participate at demonstrations: many of us did. But we didn't participate as a group.* (Sergio, M)

People involved in this second enactment of dark had, in fact, a completely different take on politics. Dismissed the hope of changing society that characterized the radical movement of the 1970s, for Creature Simili (as for punx), active political struggle assumed an ethical value in itself, and became a relevant aspect of identity: as we have stated, it certified subcultural authenticity. For the people in the disco club enactment, on the contrary, there was no point in paying the high personal price implied by an hopeless political activism under the harsh repression of the state. Resistance had rather to be carried

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8. See Section 3.3.

out through identity politics, and at a cultural level. Yet, this silent refusal to adopt the new values of hedonism and consumerism had to be publicly exhibited through the visual shock provoked by dresses, makeup and hair styles. Especially for women, this shock factor was a way to refuse and deconstruct the gender stereotypes promoted by television and other media at that time:

> *I didn't wear makeup properly. It would be more correct to say that I drew stuff on my face: spiders, bats, spider webs. I wore miniskirts, torn stockings, and big long shirts that completely hid my body. And of course, smeared lipstick. I didn't care that people found me ugly, unattractive and not feminine at all. If being feminine meant being [what was shown in television], then I preferred not to be classifiable at all.* (Sara, F)

This sort of identity politics overheated the relevance of fashion and style, and of urban spaces (in particular, the city centre) as a sort of theatre: a stage where to show off the refusal of mainstream values. Not surprisingly, within this enactment, style was by far more spectacular than in the politically activist one, and seen with some suspect by Creature Simili. While adopting similar visual codes they in fact found it too formulaic, and too much looked after: for darks in the activist enactment urban space was more a space for political action than a stage where to be seen. For this second enactment, on the contrary, style was at the centre of the criteria of subcultural identity validation: a poser was not who was politically disengaged, but who changed their style depending on the occasion, shifting to a conventional way of dressing to avoid conflict at school, family or workplace. Since aesthetic assumed an ethical value, a chameleon-like attitude was deprecated as a sort of betrayal. Admittedly, also in this enactment the way of dressing changed depending on the situation and on the specific practices in which darks were engaged: especially in discos and clubs, attended on a regular basis, clothes were more sophisticated and, especially for women, also more openly seductive and sexualized (Brill, 2008) than in gatherings in urban public space. Moreover, and in a way that was completely unknown within the enactment of Creature Simili, being able to dress properly, with taste and creativity, was actually a way to gather subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995; Brill, 2007). Botched attire could even imply marginalization from the group:

> *There were differences in style, but in any case style mattered. I remember these guys: we called them "the prodigies" for their look, because, in our opinion, their style was very coarse. In our view they were kinda [...] boorish, because of their style, basically.* (Paola, F.)

The same applied to the ability to show refined competencies in cultural consumption, especially in music. Once again, being always up to date and in the know about niche bands inside the goth canon was an important way to gain a reputation.

Hysterika closed in 1991, and this date could also be symbolically regarded as the end of this second enactment of dark. Even if in the 1990s new clubs will open in Milan and its hinterland, dark will be enacted in a new and different way: practices performed in urban spaces — like socializing and "shocking" — will become less relevant, and a strict coherence in style less mandatory, since aesthetic and ethic would progressively lose their close connection. Dark will become mainly a club culture, and the stylistic hybridization with fetish will hypersexualize clothing. Many of the people who in the 1980s had brought the alternative music club scene to life will move to the new rave scene, either as participants or organizers.

3.3 *The Loner Enactment of Dark*

In Milan, and especially in its hinterland, dark was also enacted in a third way, even if in this case it's not possible to properly talk about a third (sub-)scene — if not mediated. Dark, in fact, was also enacted alone, or in small and isolated groups, not infrequently heterogenous in terms of subcultural identities. In this case, subcultural belonging — the feeling of being part of a broader symbolic community — was not sustained by the participation to large groups of people, but mainly through cultural consumption:

> *There were people who owned so much stuff — vinyl records, books, clothes — and the desire to accumulate was important. It was something new and different from the previous cultures. It was the construction of a personal world, to be furnished piece by piece, and the longing to create a sort of shelter that was not immediately conflictual.* (Roxie, F.)

Of course, music played a key role, even if this didn't imply attending music clubs. The practice of going dancing was in this case a practice of the third kind (not relevant to enact dark), and sometimes was openly refused as too frivolous. On the contrary, concerts where attended with religious enthusiasm as sort of rites during which the community, otherwise only symbolic, became temporarily embodied:

> I was almost fifteen and I didn't go dancing in dark clubs, so attending a concert was something essential and unique [...], it meant feeling part of a community, of a movement. When everybody was singing the lyrics of a song by The Cure together, and I was among them, I could finally feel that it was not only me, secluded in my room, obsessively listening to Faith and Pornography. It was a sort of liberating rite (Sara, F).

Some of these concerts were organized by Quelli di Amen — and at a later point by Helter Skelter — at the Leoncavallo squat:

> The artworks [we used to advertise our concerts] were very targeted, and so we discovered a whole universe of isolated people dressing in black. You could really feel that these people had found a situation in which they could recognize each other. For the first time, we saw so many people that probably had a lot in common, and that had developed their interests in a way that was defiladed, intimate, segregated in closed spaces: they had undergone a sort of transformation in their own private sphere, with gothic literature, H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe as milestones, but not overlooking the Italian Scapigliatura movement, romanticism, and decadent poets. (...) It was very surprising to see so many people sharing a common identity. (Angela, F)

In any case, the explorations of the subcultural canon were deep and systematic not only in music, but also in theatre, literature, art, and cinema, often chasing the lavish homages and quotations that could be generously found in post-punk band lyrics.

Reading fanzines was also very important, and some of them were published regularly — sometimes in very few copies — by loner darks themselves. In this respect, these darks cannot be regarded as those subculturalists who Todd Dedman (2011) defines "peripherals" (those who limit their participation to the subculture to superficial forms of consumption), and who he distinguishes from "purists" (those who shape the subculture more actively). This enactment of dark had, in fact, its own peripherals and purists, since isolated darks often had very refined cultural competencies, and were often very active in the DIY production of music and fanzines.

Publishing and reading fanzines was not the only form of mediated communication within this enactment: writing letters all over Italy to a vast network of pen pals (whose addresses could be found in those same fanzines and magazines) was a practice of primary relevance, and somehow it anticipated the role that the Internet would play years later (Hodkinson, 2003):

> I started putting ads in music magazines, looking for pen pals, to find people that might somehow be similar to me. I exchanged letters with so many people [...]: sometimes it looked like my mailbox was about to explode! [...] I met some of them in person, but many wrote to me from far away, even from Sicily [...]. I understood that many of them were isolated, just like me, and we all dreamt about London [...]. One of my pen pals even became my first boyfriend: we exchanged letters for two years before seeing each other for the first time! Then, later on, I created my own fanzine: Settimo Senso. (Donatella, F)

Finally, this last enactment shared with the music club one the same identity politics and the same strategy of visual shock performed in public spaces. In many cases, it was expressed in the small towns neighbouring Milan, where enacting dark in public was harder since it easily carried the risk of verbal and physical assault. Not surprisingly, for loner darks incoherence in style was therefore deprecated as a sign of inauthenticity even more than in the music club enactment. In contrast with it, however, also getting "gothed-up" for concerts, events and other forms of gathering was seen with some suspect, since too extreme outfits seemed impossible to be adopted also in everyday life. Therefore, while for some the loner enactment represented a sort of a first step in a subcultural career that would have led them to join

the other enactments, for many it remained the only proper way to live goth: while sharing with other darks the same hangouts in Milan — pubs, music shops, clothes shops — they chose never to join larger groups.

4   Conclusions

As we have seen, a practice-centred approach brings out how in Milan, in the '80s, dark took three different forms, depending on the nexus of practices in which subcultural participation unfolded. While sharing the same subcultural canon, these three enactments of dark had relevant differences. First of all, they differed in their criteria of subcultural capital attribution (Thornton, 1995) and of authentication of subcultural identities (Hannerz, 2015). The activist enactment, in fact, required coherence between style, cultural consumption and political engagement, while the other two coherence in style throughout all the situations of daily life. Moreover, the loner enactment was more resistant to the radicalization of style in occasion of subcultural events, and the music club enactment more picky regarding stylistic and musical competences. Second, they differed in terms of patterns of socialization, with the loner enactment lived alone or in small and often heterogenous groups — but with intense mail-mediated social relationships — and the other two implying the participation to large groups of subculturalists. Third, each enactment also had its own sub-scene: while the urban public space was in fact of key relevance for all of them (yet, with different roles), the squat and the disco clubs circuits remained distinct, even if the circulation of members between them was quite common, with subculturalist moving from an enactment (and sub-scene) to another, depending on their own attitudes. Moreover, a relevant part of the loner enactment's sub-scene was actually "virtual", mediated by fanzines and mail exchanges. Finally, the three enactments differed for stance toward politics, with the lone and disco clubs relegating activism — central for the first enactment — to subculturalists' individual choices.

Under a methodological point of view, this approach circumvents the frontal contraposition between subculturalist and post-subculturalist approaches moving its main focus to social practices. In this way, it deals with plural structures of meanings within the same subculture at an intermediate level, without methodologically over-emphasizing neither the collective nor the individual levels of the experience of subcultural participation. Moreover, and coming to the other two points at stake in the present debate, it does not methodologically assume nor denies any specific relationships between class and subcultural participation, but demands the issue to be empirically investigated; and finally, it avoids "substantive thinking", not granting to a specific group of subculturalist the privilege to define the authenticity of all the others.[9]

The approach we have sketched has the ambition to be applicable both to subcultures and post-subcultures. Yet, it has been tuned up through a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to address the presented case study. Therefore, it leaves unexplored several theoretical questions whose answers exceeds its limits. The main one, in my view, concerns the relationship between subcultural canon and enactments. The canon of dark was in fact particularly stable throughout the 1980s. Even when specific sub-canons took shape, in those years they didn't give rise to new enactments, at least in Milan. It's the case, for example of the sub-canon of neo-folk, associated to a recognisable style in music and cloths (more martial, and mimicking military uniforms), whose enactment was an integral part of the music club one. Under a political point of view, this sub-canon was prone to lean to the extreme right: interestingly, since political participation and activism were held as matter of personal choices within the enactment (as a practice of the third kind), this didn't create a rift, or even particularly harsh frictions, within a sub-scene that was by and large closer to anarchist and extreme left positions. In any case, and notwithstanding the specificity of our findings, the relation between subcultural canon and enactments must be conceived always as a relation of mutual shaping: when performed, the subcultural canon is always re-established, but also re-negotiated. Addressing other subcultures or lifestyles would allow to explore different, and more dynamic forms of this relationship.

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9.   As an exception, we have not systematically analysed weekenders and part time goths, held as not authentic by interviewees in all the enactments: properly, this would be a fourth, unanimously invalidated enactment of dark.

Finally, also some aspects of our research object — the local appropriation of dark — need further investigation: first of all, because our main focus on the level of enactment led us to neglect the analysis of the specificities of the local canon compared to the UK one. When dealing with local appropriations of international subcultures/lifestyles, a complete analysis would require an attention to both the levels of canon and of enactment. Moreover, the present case study focused on the case of Milan and of its hinterlands. From twenty follow-up interviews with non-Milanese readers of *Creature Simili* (Tosoni & Zuccalà, 2013) no other enactments of dark had emerged — even if the three enactments where not present in all the cities, and sometimes they showed relevant differences. Nonetheless, the representativeness of the case of Milan for the Italian context cannot be ascertained without extending the analysis to other local scenes.

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