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**Neighbourhoodies**  
Courageous Community Colours, Blazing  
Bling, and Defiant Delight

**Abstract**

In today's "flat" and globalized world there is a simultaneous stretch of two opposite tendencies, closely interlinked. One is a flattening global movement seemingly eliminating cultural differences, the other puts emphasis on the urban localities, cultural identities and spatial haecceities, occasions of particular thisness. In a time of liquid consumerism (Bauman) the habitus (Bourdieu) seems to frame a problematic identity Umwelt (von Uexküll).

As we see a global culture appear across the planet identity politics simultaneously gravitate towards issues of the local. In society's top strata people strive to live in posh areas with the right postal code. Subversive counterculture activists try to keep their own multi-ethnic spaces free from yuppies who in turn try to gentrify the same areas into authentic bohemian-chic quarters. In the urban fringes gangs protect their territory and even tattoo their hood names as a sign of authentic pride. Caught in the line of fire of identity politics is the hoodie, an average street-style garment, the canvas on which social conflicts and criminal stigmata are drawn, but also where local pride and reconciliation can be brought about, inspired by its connection to the resonance of musical milieus.

The text expands on a practice-based research project where students from London College of Fashion reflected on their global London identities through the design of a special hoodie - a Neighbourhoodie.

Your habitus is your habitat, your neighbourhood. It reflects who you are, what you do, how you live your life. Your neighbourhood has an impact on your stride, your gestures, your actions - the tacit signals of your body techniques. Like the tones of music, it resonates with the surrounding, capturing the suggestive qualities of the neighbourhood. How do you dress for your hood and how does it dress you?

The Neighbourhoodies is a project at the intersection of fashion design and cultural studies that attempts to visualize belonging and questions of habitus in contemporary street-wear cultures, emanating from the today highly contested hoodie garment. As part of the project, participants are invited to reflect their neighbourhood through an image that is printed digitally onto fabric and made into a special hoodie - a neighbourhoodie.

Introduction - "We are the hood, we are the hoodies"

In today's "flat" and globalized world there is a simultaneous stretch of two opposite tendencies, closely interlinked. One is a flattening trans-urban movement seemingly eliminating differences into a smooth and global "westernized" culture, the other puts emphasis on the urban localities, special spatial haecceities, occasions of particular unicity or of thisness. Both tendencies proliferate in the global media's streamlining of minds, while on the other hand propagating unique "core values" for local event cities.

As we see global "mainstream" culture appear across the planet we can also trace identity politics gravitate towards issues of the local as something which seems authentic. In the top strata of society people strive to live in the right area and get the right postal code, sometimes popularized in media like the phenomenal 90's series 90210 Beverly Hills. The subversive counterculture fighters try to keep their own working class and "marginalized" spaces free from yuppies who in turn try to gentrify these areas into authentic "bohemian chic" quarters where "bobos", the bohemian bourgeoisie, rules supreme. Out in the urban fringe gangs protect their territories and even tattoo the hood names as a sign of authentic pride, something that can be lost if one becomes successful and surrenders to the city centre mainstream.

In the middle of this conflict we will find the hoodie, an average street style garment. Once a casual and anonymous sports garment, it has become the canvas on which the borderlines of semantic struggle in society are drawn. Gone are days when it was the plain advertiser for the local sports team or even of subcultural pride. Over the last years the hoodie have instead come to embody the stigmatized and criminal mind, or what British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott called an "intimidating" uniform, when he supports the bans of hoodies in some British

shopping malls. (BBC 2005) Let's trace a journey to find some mechanisms behind this scapegoating of an everyday garment, and perhaps some ideas on how to use such garment for more positive affects.

According to renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman the industrial modernism, which stressed the values of solid production, has transformed into a consumerism-based "liquid" modernity with "instant living" (Bauman 2000), where individuals have become both consumers and commodities themselves (Bauman 2007). Citizens are, "simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote." (Bauman 2007: 6)

The test [consumers] need to pass in order to be admitted to the social prizes they covet demands them to recast themselves as commodities: that is, as products capable of catching the attention and attracting demand and customers." (Bauman 2007: 6)

In this liquid modernity, globalisation becomes an individualising force, triggering waves of privatization of what were previously concerns of democratic politics. The collectivist imperatives of solidarity around which the welfare states were formed are on wide retreat. The flattening of the world in terms of globalization, of transnational circulation of culture and migration, but primarily trade and direct foreign investments, also means a stratification of capital where uncertainty becomes the one with the everyday. Global companies and cultures avoid commitment and local roots to move swiftly across the planet in search for new market shares (Bauman 1998). Consumers need to "stay ahead" in the market (Bauman 2007: 82ff) and accept an increasingly insecure world of ubiquitous and multi-faceted "liquid fear" in the politics, workplace, social communities and family life (Bauman 2006).

This liquid fear is a public anxiety resonating and amplified between individuals, and promoted through media, which also seems to affect the politics of dress in shopping malls, like banning a garment for its connections to stigmatized criminal elements. Paradoxically, the same contested garments are often sold in the same malls, as hooded garments have been popular for decades. The question of the hood obscuring surveillance might be a "functionalist" argument raised by the authorities, but the politicians go for the more fearful "intimidating" argument.

This globalized world, which could popularly be called "Hot, Flat and Crowded" (Friedman 2008), has also triggered diverse responses, from social movements and activism against gentrification (Klein 2001), to ecologically and community motivated localization initiatives like the recent "transition movement" (Hopkins 2008). In the face of globalization, new emphasis is put on local identities and the resistance to acculturation where majority culture is imposed on minorities. Rather, the opposition to globalized consumer culture by autonomous political movements as well as culturally marginalized groups becomes a hot-house for the growth of local pride. Yet, as another paradox, this autonomous culture also sports its own globalized style, in which the black hoodie is a must-have.

These are also the settings of today's globalized fashion world with a constant growing number of almost cloned fashion weeks, as it seems no city with creative dignity can miss out on

having its own duplicated style ritual. The planet now hosts well over a hundred fashion weeks, all fighting for a place in the light and the glossy magazines. In a similar vein as the roaming style journalists, consumers are encouraged to take on international pilgrimages to flagship stores on top addresses in the fashion capitals. Those who cannot afford such pleasures are to sneak out scavenging to hidden outlets on the countryside.

Nevertheless, as an enigma to these smoothing global tendencies, fashion is also a very local experience. Fashion happens not only at the sanctified rituals of the catwalk, but also on the sidewalk, the workplace, the dressed-up party or the backyard beach cruising. Perhaps most prominently fashion affects us at the shopping mall, where we impersonate the contemporary flaneur to see and shop for pleasure, as we consume to "stay ahead". And of course we want no "intimidating" uniforms around our highly deserved leisure time in ambient easy listening muzak.

Fashion is also a phenomenon affecting the very local aspects of social life. Global trends meet local expressions and cultural appropriations and often music scenes become the resonating bodies of identity. Local gangs or subcultures become a source of identity and in rap culture the neighbourhood is the source of authenticity. This can take the form of song lyrics, but also manifest in prints or even tattoos, often featuring postal codes or telephone prefixes.

Music has been a practice for reclaiming pride and summon responsive energy among displaced communities – to evoke memories from rural or ethnic background, or to experiment with new cultural identities, in resonance or in distortion with the social environment. It has been the folk music of ethnic communities in diaspora, but is also a highly contemporary phenomenon. Famous examples can be the Hip Hop scene of Bronx, Los Angeles' Gansta Rap, East London's Grime or the Dub Step of South London. Ironically the music scenes also become the commodities of the area, readily at hand to differentiate the area as a genuine hood in the globally "creative" economy.

One can argue that certain environmental qualities in some neighbourhoods perform the settings for the evolution of especially vital identities. Some places seem to generate the frictions and vibrations which makes the music scene resonate with the specific frequencies which aggregate into a lively subculture, almost like a living system in itself. Such melodic landscapes come to define the neighbourhood and its inhabitants as a social habitat. To experiment further with these ideas we can make a heretic reading of the concepts of *Habitus* and *Umwelt* in biology to see where it can bring us.

#### *Habitus, Umwelt and living systems*

From a perspective of sociology the social environment, with its physical arrangements and connected bodily skills, tastes, beliefs and dispositions, is often called *habitus*, a term popularized in the works of Pierre Bourdieu (cf Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu defined *habitus* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977: 72). It is a "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" which produces the

practices of everyday life (78). Habitus is in constant interconnection with the environment, placing the individual in relations to other individuals, social groups and cultures, and in close relation to the material surroundings, as a structure of the mind, a “matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (83).

With its use in biology, habitus connotes the similarity in external form or the characteristic mode of growth of an organism. It is not a form in isolation, but similar to the habitus in sociology, the organism is a morphologic assemblage that exists as a relation between the organism and its surrounding environment and ecological niche. Here, a niche is more concerned with how an animal lives rather than where it lives. It is what Richard Dawkins might call the organism’s “extended phenotype” (Dawkins 1982). Yet, in difference from the sociological perspective, habitus is here based on materialist or realist terms, rather than as a consequence of human and social construction. The biological habitus is grounded “deeper” into our being than social conventions. This affects the whole sensorial spectrum or sensescapes of cognitive life, and is coupled with the “sense of place”.

To use a term by Baltic German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll, the habitus of biology can be regarded as an Umwelt, the physical while subjective spatio-temporal world which guides our evolution and defines the organism’s life on all levels (cf von Uexküll 1921, 1973). Uexküll was disagreeing with the Darwinian mechanistic doctrine of evolution where every organism existed as mere machines, or “Cartesian puppets”, in fierce competition. His Umwelt theory instead tried to capture “the seemingly tailor-made fit or solidarity between the organism’s body and its environment” through the organism’s “subjective nature” (Sharkey & Ziemke 2000). Every Umwelt is specific for each creature and Uexküll describes vividly how organisms such as ticks, jellyfish and amoebae live and navigate within their Umwelts with senses tuned to their specific ecological niche in a manner of feedback and iteration cycles (a theory composed before the dawn of modern cybernetics). The Uexküllian organism is a “subject that, through functional embedding, forms a ‘systematic whole’ with its Umwelt” (Sharkey & Ziemke 2000).

According to Biosemiotics, the tradition following Uexküll, which is the “science of signs in living systems” (Kull 1999: 386), the Umwelt is our semiosphere, the ecological niche of our life, a life which itself is a sign-driven process. Biosemiotics sees the properties of life itself being a semiotic process where signs and meanings replicate in close interconnection to cells, which forms the foundations of organic life. Semiotics is here not so much a decoding task to reach deeper meaning in an anthropocentric manner, but the act of communicative interactions, which in turn affect living conditions. “Signs live, exactly as life signs.” (Kull 1998) As biosemiotics researches the biological origins of semiotic phenomena it is also an attempt to “pave a way of conjoining humanities with natural sciences” (Kull 1999: 386) with the ambitious aim “that the traditional paradigm of biology be substituted by a semiotic paradigm the core of which is that biological form is understood primarily as sign” (Hoffmeyer & Emmeche 1991: 138, quoted in Kull 1999: 386).

For Thomas Sebeok, a key theorist among biosemioticians, “the study of the twin processes of communication and

signification can be regarded as ultimately a branch of the life science, or as belonging in large part to nature, in some part to culture, which is, of course, also a part of nature.” (Sebeok 1991: 22) Biologist Alexei Sharov defines the same interconnectedness between sign processes and life: “Sign processes penetrate the entire body of an organism. [...] Signification is the fundamental property of living systems that can be taken as a definition of life. Hence, biosemiotics can be viewed as a root of both biology and semiotics rather than a branch of semiotics.” (Sharov 1998: 404-405)

Biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela see all living systems as cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition (Maturana & Varela 1980). To understand living systems, we need to recognize how they are organized in interaction with their surrounding. For Maturana and Varela, living beings differ structurally, but are alike in organization, in their ontogenic development, that is, their organizational unity. It is not the physical nature of the components that determine life, but their dynamic organization into autopoietic, or self-(re) producing systems.

Like Uexküll, Maturana and Varela see this is a matter of biological phenomenology. Our cognition “brings forth” our Umwelt. But the senses which brings forth the world does not do so by communicating an abstract “meaning”, there is no ‘transmitted information’ in communication. Communication takes place each time there is behavioural coordination in a realm of structural coupling. (Maturana & Varela 1987: 196)

From this perspective, there is no “something” which is communicated, as the communication itself is an integral part of the act of cognition and living in itself. Here, Maturana and Varela compares the social mechanisms of structural coupling with the communication between ants, organisms which are tightly connected into a bigger unity, the ant colony. Ants use chemical coupling between individual members of the colony by a continuous interchange of stomach contents, each time they meet. The colony communicates through a “communal stomach” with which each ant is connected. This continuous chemical flow is called trophallaxis. The autopoietic system of each ant is bound together into a “co-ontogenic structural drift” (Maturana & Varela 1987: 186)

So not only do organisms depend of their environments, finding a niche or models of mutualism or symbiosis. They also couple structurally through their Umwelt to form a higher order of organization, into something like a social organism, by acts of shared cognition. When examining the linguistic realm, Maturana and Varela means that human societies are built similarly to anthills. If insects communicate with trophallaxis, humans coordinate social unity through “linguallaxis” (linguistic trophallaxis) for ontogenic coordination of actions (Maturana & Varela 1987: 211f).

We can compare such linguallaxis to how sociologist Gabriel Tarde saw culture and behaviours spread in viral ways between individuals. To Tarde, culture exists between individuals and members of a society or community, because it is constantly repeated, like an echo of sound waves, rather than being imposed from above or stemming from an inner essence of “man”.

Objects and artefacts are only dead representations of the imitated ideas which form a society. Culture resonates between humans simply because the social aspects of human life are about imitation and repetition;

Without fashion and custom, social quantities would not exist, there would be no values, no money, and, consequently, no science of wealth or finance. (Tarde 1903: 16)

A cultural phenomenon of mimicry and rebellion, such as fashion, is similar to the trophallaxis synchronizing the behaviour in the anthill. What is called “synchronous isopraxis”, like the contagious yawns, is something we share with other animals. It is a basic biosemiotic behaviour among humans. In the words of network theorist Conrad Becker, synchronous isopraxis are the “human tendencies to imitate clothing styles and to pick up the nonverbal mannerisms of others” and is something “rooted in paleocircuits of the reptilian brain.” (Becker 2002: 120). We like to be “copying, emulating, or aping a behaviour, gesture or accessories including impulsive tendencies”, often through highly ritualized behaviours which “makes it easier to be accepted, looking alike suggests same views and feels safe.” (Becker 2002: 120). Fashionable isopraxis can easily be paralleled to the culturally enhanced “affects” of Baruch Spinoza, or the ritualized “mimetic desire” of Rene Girard.

It is just like the phenomenon of tropism, an organism’s turning movement in response to changing stimuli (a plant facing the sun); we also turn along with the light of fashion, as it is an energy and powerful stimuli guiding behaviour in our Umwelt.

We live in our neighbourhoods, and our neighbourhoods live in us, on co-existence with the fears, values and fashions shared among inhabitants is our Umwelt. By careful reverse engineering and acupuncture design interventions, we might be able to make our Umwelt resonate with other affects than those of the “liquid fear”. To reclaim the hoodie we could learn from the realm of sonic vibrations.

#### Rhymes and the Hood

As mentioned before, Uexküll saw the Umwelt as an ecological environment of interactions. A local ecology is like an orchestra, with a specific organized composition, with accords of music and arrangement where each species or organism play a distinct tone or note. An Umwelt, an ecological niche, is also a music niche - defined by the specific resonance qualities of the hood. Uexküll, even though not anti-evolutionary, opposed Darwin’s theory of evolution which he saw as too “vertical” and chaotic. Uexküll instead proposed a an evolutionary understanding where he interpreted organisms “as ‘tones’ that resonate and harmonize with other things, both living and nonliving.” (Buchanan 2008: 8) Every individual has an “I-tone” (Ich-Tone), which plays in accord with the Umwelt. This meant a much more “horizontal” and relational model of evolution than Darwin’s, emphasising the musical choreography of evolution rather than accidental and cruel mechanisms of the vertically drawn natural selection of the fittest. Uexküll saw relations whereby “organic and inorganic thing cohere together in great compositional harmony” (Buchanan 2008: 8). It is the relational aspects of resonance

between Umwelt and organism which creates the resonances guiding the morphology of a species by which could called “vital materialism”. Thure von Uexküll, also engaged in biosemiotics, captures it like this;

Nature may be compared to a composer who listens to his own works played on an instrument of his own creation. This results in a strangely reciprocal relationship between nature, which has created man, and man, who not only in his art and science, but also in his experiential universe, has created nature. (von Uexküll, T 1992: 281)

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari quote the work of von Uexküll at several occasions in their influential book *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004). They see the refrain, *ritournell*, as a reoccurring song, framing a territory, ordering it; “The song is like a sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos.”(343) The song organizes and draws a circle around an uncertain and fragile centre. The bird song is a perfect example; it is a refrain that is a territorial assemblage between bird and environment where every milieu is vibratory, as it is a refrain actually guiding the life cycle and reproduction of the bird, and resonating between its DNA code and the surrounding coded milieu or Umwelt. “Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction.” (345) The rhythm is the transcoded passage of communication or coordination between milieus, but it should not be mistaken for the meter or cadence of marches, but it is the rhythm or patterns of code, or DNA, or Umwelt. Here, nature is indeed music, rhythms playing throughout the organic and inorganic environment.

The rhythm defines a territory through the emergence of matters of expression which becomes a territorializing mark, a signature, like the role urine and excrement play in marking. (347) The rhythmic markers assemble to produce territorial counterpoints, which in turn shape melodic landscapes. But the refrain has a territorial and bordering ability; “rhythm is located between two milieus, or between two intermilieus, on the fence, between night and day, at dusk, twilight or *Zwielicht*.” (346)

The borders or fronts of neighbourhoods also take cultural and traditional expressions along which the *ritournell* can be experienced. A Jewish enclave may be enclosed with an *Eruv*, framing the borders with a highly mounted textile thread, and thus extending the home during Sabbath, and so the social fabric weaves the “nest”. An ethnic group might use communal cooking along the street as a refrain recreating home by means of culinary expressions, the gustatory senses of specific spices and olfactory markings. Muslim communities have loudspeakers on minarets to announce the calls to prayer, thus framing the neighbourhood sonically, not too different from the refrain of birds.

It is along the borders we hear the rhythms clearly, as they meet, merge and transcode, often along contested lines or resonating bodies. The same patterns we can see along the borders of our Neighbourhoods where, just like among birds, contests of refrains are held. Whereas in nature “if the robber sings better than the true proprietor, the proprietor yields his place” (349), similar “slams” or “battles” are held between neighbourhoods to-

day. Local pride is expressed in the works of poets, street musicians, dancers and DJs, where skills in spoken word, turntablism, breaking or voguing are the “robber songs”.

As discussed in the beginning, many cities and districts have had a special “sound” to their music, a signature refrain which resonate and is amplified throughout their Umwelt. To many, such refrains might seem hostile, uncertain, create dissonances or produce feelings of “liquid fear”. But just like the music scenes of some neighbourhoods could use the tensions and frictions of social life to bring about new rhymes with resonated in their Umwelt, and further in the world, so could we use the hoodies. The dub step and grime mixed the beats resonating in their environment and put the street tongue on that canvas, so can the affects of neighbourhoods be painted on hoodies. Just like mentioned by Deleuze, we should not give in to sad affects;

Sadness, sad affects, are all those which reduce our power to act. The established powers need our sadness to make us slaves. The tyrant, the priest, the captors of our souls need to persuade us that life is hard and a burden. The powers that be need to repress us no less than to make us anxious (Deleuze 2006: 46)

So let us respond to the liquid fear of hoodies by creating new hoodies which resonate with the passionate affects of our Neighbourhoods instead of public fears. Let us reveal and expose the reverberating qualities of our communities, take pride in the local expressions of our hoods. The Neighbourhoodies is such an attempt, reinterpreting our local Umwelt into a second skin, a digitally printed image, which in turn is recreated into a hoodie. A garment of community camouflage, of blazing “bling”, of supportive self-esteem and defiant delight.

We wear our hoodies and play our beats to let it echo between the hoods, that we are indeed the world, we are the Umwelt.

Or in the words of good ol' MJ; “We are the hoods, we are the hoodies”

Additional information about the project, as well as exhibition catalogue and patterns can be found at the author's research website - [www.selfpassage.org](http://www.selfpassage.org)

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