TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF SCENE: COMMUNICATING ON THE BASIS OF THINGS THAT MATTER

Ka definiciji koncepta scene: komunikacija na osnovu “stvari” koje znače

ABSTRACT The article proceeds from four different but equally important concepts of scene by the authors John Irwin, Barry Shank, Will Straw, and Keith Harris. On the basis of these authors’ formulations, some essential elements for conceptualizing scenes are developed – interaction, communication, identity, and local and supralocal spaces. The four authors’ definitions are elaborated comparatively, and certain problems in the operationalisation of the concept are discussed. The authors of this article propose their own definition of the concept of scene, which is based on communication around core or important “things”.

KEY WORDS scene, communication, subculture, space

Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide an insight into some of the more prominent conceptualisations of the concept of scene, and to propose our own definition of it. The concept is part of the theoretical toolbox for analysing expressive social formations (cf. Hetherington, 1998) in (late) modern societies.
While in such societies personal identities are on the one hand shaped by socialisation in the family and by unavoidable needs which a person must satisfy through work (or other activities – e.g., visiting a doctor etc.), they are on the other hand also shaped by consciously chosen forms of socialisation. “The process of choosing expressive identities, for whatever personal reason, tends to lead some people to organise their lives around interests and enthusiasms that are individually chosen but collectively and affectually realised outside of routine daily activities associated with work and family life. In doing so, however, the enthusiasts are more likely to seek collectivities of like-minded others with whom they can identify” (Hetherington, 1998: 94).

The concept of scene can be viewed as a concept commonly used in both theoretical and everyday language, but also as one that is loosely defined. Nevertheless, theorists in the field of music and youth studies have provided some useful definitions, on which we base our discussion. At the end of the article we propose our own definition of the concept, which stresses content-defined and spatially contextualised communication as features in which to ground the concept of scene.

The usefulness of the concept of scene has recently been discussed together with two other concepts pervading studies of youth and music – the concepts of subculture and neo-tribe. At the conference ‘Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes: Youth Cultures in the 21st Century’ in 2003 in Northampton, UK, these concepts were discussed in a pro et contra fashion. The key conference speakers, Shane Blackman, David Muggleton and David Hesmondhalgh, defended or attacked one concept against the others (Kozorog, personal participation), which is also a feature of the subsequently published conference volume (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007). We do not want to go in this direction, since we see these concepts as compatible rather than competing. In our opinion, the three concepts can coexist and complement each other, as they make it possible to approach the same social phenomena from different angles. To put it very shortly, one may say that the “subcultural approach” is structuralist, since it proceeds (at least in its “classical” CCCS tradition) from the structural contradictions in society (we would propose that these are not necessarily class-based, as is commonly held in the CCCS tradition, but also include contradictions brought about by gender relations, centre-periphery relations, nationalism and ethnicity, etc.) and in the light of power relations describes positions, responses and tensions in the social structure. In this case, we are dealing with somewhat monolithic and mechanically temporal expressive social formations. In the words of Phil Cohen, subcultures are “symbolic structures and must not be confused with the actual kids who are their bearers and supporters” (1997 [1972]: 94). It is thus in the analysis of scenes that the latter get proper attention. The “scene approach” represents an “ethnography of practice”, which is why scenes should be perceived as fragmentary and processual expressive social formations. And finally,
the “neo-tribal approach” proceeds from subjects and the question of individuality and identity in late modernity. It is based on a premise concerning the human need to belong, as a consequence of which humans always, regardless of the social context, form communities (Maffesoli, 1996; Hetherington, 1998: 7–8, 36–37, 50–54). In our understanding, the three concepts can be used together, since a subcultural response to historical contradictions does not appear as a monolithic group of followers, but rather as a dispersed, variably connected palette of scenes, within which individuals to a greater or lesser degree anchor and shape their subjectivities (in short, enjoy the homeliness of their neo-tribes), while at the same time performing their “lifestyles” (to mention another prominent concept). Again, this does not mean that every expressive social phenomenon in late modernity can and should be analysed using all of these concepts together.4

The theoretical roots of the concept of scene lie in neo-Weberian microsociology, i.e. in symbolic interactionism, an approach developed within American sociology and heavily rooted in the study of urban culture. The first to introduce issues of urban everyday life as a legitimate sociological subject matter were the theoreticians of the Chicago School of sociology, most prominently Robert E. Park (1997 [1915]), who set the explanation of changes within large urban centres as their key task, since increasingly rapid urbanisation and modernisation have brought about the disappearance of traditional communities and their accompanying practices (lifestyles). On the other hand, cities have also experienced the constitution of new social worlds. The need for belonging and meaningful community participation has manifested itself in new social forms which are far less stable than traditional ones and offer much greater freedom in respect to both belonging and behaviour.

The approach developed as symbolic interactionism by authors like George Herbert Mead, Herbert George Blumer, and Erving Goffman is nominalist, since its starting point is individual action, “actions that are subjectively meaningful behavioral orientations which take into consideration the behaviour of others and are

3 Maffesoli (1996) is occupied mainly with the condition of (“classless”) late modernity, in which a higher degree of individualisation has supposedly emerged. Contrary to this theory, Maffesoli develops a theory of neo-tribal (and therefore collective) identification, which according to him has replaced class identification and is supposedly more open in the sense that it is chosen by individuals themselves.

4 In Slovenian cultural studies, a different usage of the concepts of subculture and “subcultural scene” has been proposed (cf. Velikonja, 1999). While the first concept has been linked to the CCCS tradition and described in terms of resistance to the dominant discourses, the second has been described as a kind of consumerist deviation from the first and as part of dominant discourses. In a manner of speaking, subcultures (such as punks) thus appear as the healthy structures of a society (since they critically evaluate it), while subcultural scenes (such as ravers) appear as conformist dupes. We will not follow this division of spirits, but will rather search for firmer ground on which to define the concept of scene.
oriented in relation to them” (Martin, 2004: 33). Although it is based on individual interactions, symbolic interactionism does not imply completely individualised meanings, but rather a common language of symbols, meanings, rules of communication, etc. (i.e. symbolic representation). The approach is characterised by the following dimensions: interactions between individuals, the roles they play, the meanings they ascribe to their own and other people’s actions, and the increasing importance of individualism and new forms of communities in urban centres. The key concepts the approach is based on were also fundamental for the elaboration of the concept of scene, and include: actor, role, drama, stage, rules of the game, interaction, self-conscious acting, communication, negotiation, and meaning.

In the 1960s and 1970s, along with the concept of scene a number of other concepts appeared that at the same time pointed towards both cultural creativity and social stability within flexible urban society. Many of these concepts, such as bag, thing and scene, were folk concepts and (self-) ascriptions (Irwin 1997 [1970]: 66; see also Becker 1963), referring to social worlds in which the (re)production of meaning and the interaction of a number of actors takes place. From among the various folk concepts, John Irwin picked out and elaborated on the concept of scene (1977), possibly due to its proximity to the “theatrical” vocabulary of Erving Goffman, which Irwin had used extensively already in his previous discussion on the status of the concept of subculture (1997 [1970]). Moreover, symbolic interactionism, as we will show, is very present in other prominent conceptualisations of scene as well. This article deals with some of the more influential elaborations of the concept and points out the potential for its application outside the most common uses (like the study of urban culture, music, style, and youth). In the first part of the article we briefly review the work of some of the key theoreticians of the concept, while in the second we propose our own definition and suggest further uses for it.

**City on the scene**

The concept of scene was first explicitly defined by John Irwin (1997 [1970]; 1977), at a time when the study of urban life was dominated by the concept of subculture. In favour of action as opposed to structural theory and convinced that “life is becoming more like a theatre” (1997 [1970]: 69), in which a person is a self-aware actor, with his newly defined concept of scene Irwin attempted to somewhat transcend the concept of subculture (1997 [1970]).

The first of Irwin’s postulates in the definition of scene was phenomenological in nature, i.e. it concerned the insider’s perspective of his or her social world (1997 [1970]: 66–67). The second is the theory of symbolic interactionism, where, although not explicitly quoted, Erving Goffman’s metaphors
from the realm of theatre seem to play a significant role (cf. 1997 [1970]: 69). The concept of scene thus metaphorically reflects the theatrical scene, where individuals enter the stage, take on roles to perform, and later also leave the stage (perhaps to join a different one). An individual is thus an actor, partly subjected to his or her chosen social world of peers (the scene) and partly a self-conscious agent who may introduce changes into a scene and also shift between different scenes. An actor therefore chooses between various available life-styles and is prompted to experience more than one, thus passing through different locally and temporally defined scenes, but nevertheless remaining conscious of what is not his or her scene (1997 [1970]: 67–68).

The city is a contradictory place of privacy, heterogeneity, freedom, alienation, loneliness, and anonymity, in which through scenes constant negotiating and self-conscious acting is undertaken. Irwin identifies the human tendency to “break down larger activity systems into subparts”, which “can occur at a single or across locations when a scene has more than one, as it usually does” (1977: 208). Considering the fact that in a big city the traditional sense of community is lost and that participation through work or politics is quite remote and abstract, many people only find the opportunity for meaningful social participation in leisure activities. Irwin “contends that people seek self-defined significant interaction and escape a bland existence through ‘action’ in small particularistic corners of the leisure world” (Nash, 1979: 435). In order for social participation to be effective, it needs to have depth and durability for those who engage in it. Scenes thus become “action systems”, where “persons in interaction are involved in comparing, sharing, negotiating and imparting cultural patterns”, by means of which they bring “the cultural components into a consistent relationship” and “maintain boundaries around the system” (Irwin, 1997 [1970]: 68). As Irwin demonstrated ethnographically, bars, surfing, hippiedom, skiing, transcendental meditation, yoga, etc. provide activities that form “activity systems” (1977).

According to Irwin, scenes are expressive (“people participate in them for direct rather than future gratification”), voluntary, and publicly available social worlds (1977: 23). Each scene has its central gathering places, such as bars, clubs, sports fields, parks, relaxation centres (for yoga and meditation) etc., which make it public and visible. However, a scene is visible and communicates also through the media, the language its members share, and the images they create. By entering the

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5 The concepts he employs in his work *Scenes* (1977) are drama, theatre, role, audience, acting, impression, expression, and self-conscious acting.

6 In a similar manner, the concept of scene was at the time also introduced into anthropology. In 1973 anthropologist Roger M. Keesing characterised scenes as culturally separate and marked events, on the basis of which individual actors can be studied as those who enter, move through, and leave the scene (cf. Muršič, 2000: 254).
public space of a scene, its members “move on the public stage, enter the drama, or ‘make the scene’” (Irwin, 1977: 27). Irwin identifies several reasons why people enter scenes: the pleasure derived from the fact that they are part of a group; the opportunity to meet a future (sexual) partner; sensory stimulation; the need to experience satisfaction (of consciousness); and the challenges of risky behaviour, i.e. the testing of physical limitations and norms of social acceptance or rejection, i.e. reputation risks (1977: 27–29).

In a manner of speaking, scenes are semi-structured communities. They imply norms, rules, places etc. which are not completely defined (in contrast to, for example, the formal aspects of business organisations), but are rather like general instructions allowing a certain degree of freedom and creativity in behaviour. In such social worlds people have to be alert and act in a self-conscious way. What is more, in order to act properly, they need to know the rules, understand the symbols and signs, and know how to use them.

According to Irwin (1977: 35–38), a number of different actors function within a single scene: those with a financial interest in “the show to go on” (managers, club owners, music companies, organisers); the real insiders (those who are always there, for example, bartenders in pubs or DJs in clubs, the experienced members of the scene) – these are the key actors, who, together with the previously mentioned group, occupy the most important positions in a scene; those involved in the scene as the audience (staying on the periphery of central activities); and outsiders – those who do not participate in the scene. All of these different actors co-shape a single scene.

Irwin points out that the notion of scene can refer to both social events at a particular time and place, in which case the scene “has a definite location and is transitory”, and “a more permanent life style” (1997 [1970]: 67). Indeed, dispersed and transitory social events are the substance of more permanent social worlds. Next, we will briefly recapitulate an important ethnographic study of the music-related social events, activities, and venues in the city of Austin that constituted and transformed its music scenes. In the case study, “scene” is understood as rooted in localised and place-bounded practices, which together make up a specific social world.

The Texas case

In this section we will outline Barry Shank’s (1994) well-known study of the rock scene in Austin, Texas. According to Shank, the creation of a scene is the result of people’s desire to create values and express their identities through musical practices. Somewhat differently than Irwin, who views the individual as in search of meaningful interaction in order to escape the banality of everyday life in the city,
Shank considers such interaction as originating in the individual’s desire (in Lacan’s psychoanalytic sense) and locates the essence of meaningful interaction in providing the individual with satisfaction and identity.

A scene represents a sequence of activities of a number of people, such as musicians, fans, gig organisers, managers, bar and club owners, record sellers, journalists, critics, and music publishers, who function inside and outside their social environments (record companies, shops, newspaper houses, bars, etc.). These activities are directed towards specific values and represent a source of identity for those engaged in them. Since they take place in the public arena, however, these activities cannot avoid contact with the market of late capitalism. Values and identities are never isolated from the powers of the market and are never simply left to individuals. Quite the contrary – they exist within “a historically structured cultural and economic context” (Shank, 1994: x).

Shank’s study *Dissonant Identities* (1994) represents a detailed description of the beginnings and evolution of a number of local musical practices in 20th-century Austin. Shank traces the practices of individuals and organisations, the ways in which selected values and discourses are formed, and identification processes among individuals. In order to explain the characteristics of the scene then existing in Austin, he goes back in time to the very beginning of the 20th century, when an idealised image of Texan identity was formed, personified by the cowboy, and the “cowboy music” tradition was created. This tradition resided within the so-called “honky-tonk” culture, which was an expression of a commercialised Texan cowboy tradition, “and was performed in the atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon masculine moral authority” (Shank, 1994: 37). After the Second World War and especially during the 1960s, with the growth of the student population in Austin and the rebellion that went with it folk (cowboy) music assumed new meanings, and in the same honky-tonk atmosphere new practices developed around it. Students who had rediscovered it in local bars thus expressed their resistance to pop music and the values propagated by mass media. Traditional music began to symbolise a pre-modern and pre-commercialised cultural practice that provided an aura of authenticity and honesty, and the wave of new listeners introduced new values and formed a stable underground expression. An important shift on the Austin scene was later introduced by a new music genre – progressive country, and at the end of the 1970s Austin was also swept up by the punk wave. Since punk espoused an ethos similar to that of country before it, emphasising anti-commercialism and live performances, this new musical expression easily found a way to fit into existing local practices. The scene was thus revived.

The history of Austin’s scene(s) as described by Shank is therefore a history of the ups and downs of different types of music, their autonomous creation and formation within the locality, and their eventual co-optation by the music industry. But it is also a history of the actors and the places (bars and clubs) where musical
meanings and aesthetics were formed. In other words, Shank’s understanding of the concept of scene is based on the following components: the local genealogy of various aesthetics; the meanings associated with them; local places (such as clubs); and individual actors and their role in the local and broader milieus. All of the scenes in Austin were connected to concrete places – the folk scene with Threadgill’s, the hippie scene with Volcano and Armadillo, and the punk scene with Raul’s (to name some of the crucial bars and clubs) – and all were created “as another intoxicated celebration of identification and subjective transformation, of the construction of one’s identity out of musicalised fragments of the past” (Shank, 1994: 192).

Shank defines meanings as an important dimension of scenes. According to him, a scene is an “overproductive signifying community” (Shank, 1994: 122). A large number of symbols, which the members may identify with in different ways, circulate within a scene. A necessary condition for the existence of a scene is “a mass of transformative signs and sweating bodies, continually reconstructing the meaning of a communion of individuals” (Shank, 1994: 128). A scene is foremost a cultural space – a set of symbols and signs – shared by members. In this space individuals form an open personality structure that resides between reality, possibility, and fantasy and makes possible the play of identities.

For our further elaboration of the concept it is important to note that for Shank a scene implies a face-to-face relationship as well as a location. Places are what conveys a cultural space (or a set of various symbols and signs) through time, and individuals can only acquire insider meanings and feelings through practice. Only in a club can music really be experienced, and only taking part in a live gig gives a person the key competences for decoding the “honesty” of a song. In Shank’s understanding of scene, it is precisely on this level that a scene stretches between the past and the future and that a shared scene of performers and audiences exists.

A scene on several parallel stages

Will Straw, who took Shank’s article from 1988 as his point of departure for defining the concept of scene (1997 [1991]: 494), criticised the rooting of scenes within locality. Unlike Shank, Straw turns his study of music scenes in a direction that could be paraphrased as a variant of Arjun Appadurai’s (1996 [1990]) “disjunctures and difference in global cultural economy” model, and defines scenes on a non-local level. In his view, music scenes do possess local expressions varying from city to city, since in every city the aesthetics, audiences, values, places, etc. are defined by particular structural dispositions, but at the same time all of these localised expressions should be viewed as a single translocal scene. Through the interconnectedness of places, innovations in music are transferred from one place to another: “[T]he cosmopolitan character of certain kinds of musical activity – their
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attentiveness to change occurring elsewhere – may endow them with a unity of purpose and sense of participating in ‘affective alliances’” (Straw, 1997 [1991]: 495). This means that according to “early” Straw (later, as we will see, he somewhat revised his views), the essence of a scene lies in its translocal sensitivity towards musical expressions, and it is up to the analyst to discover which vectors affect it at particular global sites: “[S]ites /.../ provide the conditions of possibility of alliances between musical styles and affective links between dispersed geographical places” (Straw, 1997 [1991]: 504).

In other words, Straw defines a music scene as a supra-local cultural space encompassing a wide range of musical practices. These inter-react, divide and interbreed, producing separate local genre lines and musical cross-fertilization. In Straw’s portrait musical impulses are transmitted between localities, which helps to inform local music-makers about trends and innovations elsewhere, and vice versa. A music scene thus destroys stable traditional continuities and at the same time cosmopolitises and relativises them (Straw, 1997 [1991]).

In his later works Straw modified his original position on the translocality of scenes, stating that “scene” can be an appropriate concept to describe occurrences on very different levels, including localised ones: “‘Scene’ is used to circumscribe highly local clusters of activity and to give unity to practices dispersed throughout the world. It functions to designate face-to-face sociability and as a lazy synonym for globalized virtual communities of taste” (Straw, 2002: 248). He views scenes as “clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them” (Straw, 2004: 412). Thus, for Straw scenes later became both local and translocal, depending on the kind of activities one (usually a researcher) pays attention to. The same can also be said of another author writing on the concept – the ethnographer and theoretician of metal music scenes Keith Harris. In contrast to Straw, however, Harris’s approach focuses on the cultural capitals that shape metal music scenes on different levels (from local to global). Let us proceed to his definitions.

**Local, national, regional, global: metal is everywhere**

Keith Harris has demonstrated that the concept of scene is indeed useful for analysing extreme metal music on local, national, transnational, and global levels. He first defines “scene” as a “space produced by members' 'reflexivity' that has certain intended and unintended consequences. 'Reflexivity' is the ability we all rely on to artfully monitor and manipulate the micro-politics of everyday interaction” (Harris, 1999: 2). In addition, Harris also draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu in order to describe scenes in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of “field” (Harris, 2000: 18; cf. Thornton, 1995). Several forms of cultural capital move within a scene. Individual agents manage them meaningfully, thus creating their own life paths –
careers. At the same time, the conditions for action change through time and through a series of interactions (2000: 18). Therefore, the conditions for action change through time depending also on which level (from local to global) an agent operates on.

Harris shows that on different levels, i.e. local, national, regional, and global, different cultural capitals play a part in the careers of the participants of a scene and in shaping the conditions for their actions (2000). To give an invented example, on the local level an important capital might be a rehearsal space for musicians, which on the wider levels does not play any role at all. In addition to this, however, a scene is grounded in a core thing common to participants on all levels – in Harris’s case, in one of the subgenres of metal music. We will later define these core things as the “things that matter”.

While Shank and Irwin⁷ stress the local embeddedness of scenes, Harris, somewhat similarly to Straw, argues for the possibility of scenes by-passing local contexts and functioning autonomously at a supra-local level. Using the example of the Brazilian metal band Sepultura, he sheds light on the roles that two “quasi-autonomous” (2000: 17) metal scenes, the Brazilian and the global, have played in their career. Thus Harris identifies scenes on different levels (from local through national and regional to global), where, on the one hand, they function as autonomous on their own level, and on the other they are in constant interaction with the other levels. In a world of global connections there exists a multiplicity of interconnected but independently functioning scenes.

Harris's starting point for defining the concept of scene was creativity within a globally enforced popular-music genre, which brought him to the conclusion that scenes function quasi-autonomously on a number of levels. However, something should be added to this perspective, namely, that a particular scene might function solely on a global or some other level. A scene might form around a field of interest that is only of local importance and does not have any global correspondence or, conversely, is a totally global phenomenon – the internet is a suitable medium for creating communication around “things that matter” that might be totally unimportant or even stigmatized⁸ in the immediate (not technologically mediated) interaction environment. Furthermore, it is necessary to stress that as concerns the outward-connectedness of a certain scene, in addition to financial, media and

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⁷ To this line of thought also belongs Sarah Thornton (1995) with her concept of club cultures.

⁸ At the ‘Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes: Youth Cultures in the 21st Century’ conference, Eric Chamberlin (2003) described a “pornographic punk scene”, which began as electronic communication through a web-site but later developed into in situ or localized scenes.
technological flows, the participating individuals themselves are also essential (Harris 2000). However, besides being participants of scenes on different levels, like the members of Sepultura, individuals might also simultaneously be participants in a number of scenes varying in respect to content, so that they can, in relation to the weight of their cultural capitals within a certain scene, also transfer ideas and practices between scenes.

Some reflections on the outlined conceptualisations of scene

A short comparison of selected definitions

So far we have outlined some influential understandings of the concept of scene, which we find to be representative in the sense of what each of them accentuates. Irwin provides the groundbreaking definition, focused on the self-conscious actor seeking self-defined significant interaction in order to provide meaning to everyday life and thus creating a shared social world. Shank takes us into a local environment, where local histories and interactions of very diverse actors and activities co-shape a specific social world in which individuals seek satisfaction and construct their identities. Straw takes us away from the local to show how in an interconnected world local phenomena become translocal and thus create a feeling of unity and sense of participation in affective alliances that stretch beyond the local. Finally, Harris shows how on different levels, from local to global, different cultural capitals shape the characteristics of a scene.

A comparison of these conceptualisations reveals that they share several common features. One thing is sure, namely, that all of the scenes described by these authors were formed around specific important things (the “things that matter” – to at least some participants). Without a core “thing” (cf. Irwin, (1997 [1970]: 66, 67), a scene apparently could not exist.

In addition, in our view all of the examined conceptualisations are at least to some extent based on symbolic interactionism, focusing attention on actors and the meanings they interactively invest in and derive from scenes. This is somewhat true even in the case of Straw’s first definition, where actors are somehow missing on account of musical aesthetics, but can nevertheless be felt behind the cross-fertilisation of musical expressions as those who display “attentiveness to change occurring elsewhere” and create “affective alliances” within and beyond local music communities (1997 [1991]: 495). However, as Straw demonstrates (1997 [1991]), what is sometimes of greater importance in shaping a scene are the forms and lines

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9 Helpful for understanding the functioning of these connections and transmissions is Arjun Appadurai's (1996 [1990]) metaphor of “scapes” (finances, technology, human groups, media, and ideologies), which through a multitude of junctures co-shape the present global cultural economy.
of communication (information flows), rather than symbolic interaction (as meaningful exchange of symbols). We will return to this point in the conclusion, where we propose our own definition of “scene”.

Besides common features, one can also find important differences among the selected authors. While Irwin, Shank and Harris to a greater degree focus on individual actors, Straw, but also Harris, is on the other hand more attentive towards the mediums that enable the interconnectedness of scenes. Moreover, even between the three authors who foreground the role of actors in making scenes, there are some differences: Irwin’s actor chooses scenes to interactively play the roles that make his or her existence meaningful; Shank’s actor seeks satisfaction and at the same time constructs his or her identity; and Harris’s actor rationally (and habitually; cf. Harris 2000: 18) manipulates cultural capitals to build his or her personal career. In our opinion all of these conceptualisations of actors can be useful for research, and we will therefore not problematise these aspects of theorising scenes. However, in the following sections of this chapter we would like to make clear some aspects of the use of the concept of scene which we find important for its further definition.

Beyond music and youth

Although Irwin regarded scenes as so important that he characterised our era as an “age of scenes” (Nash, 1979: 435), his study was nevertheless biased towards the study of youth. One of Irwin’s early reviewers, Jeffrey E. Nash, was of the opinion that the concept of scene as introduced by Irwin had a broader significance for the study of modern society and proposed a number of other “activity systems” that could be regarded as scenes: “[T]he car, music, pursuit of health, and religious enlightenment are all activities that make up major scenes” (1979: 436). We think the concept is indeed applicable in the analysis of a very wide range of expressive human engagements.

Nevertheless, the contexts in which the concept has been used have been rather narrow. It has mostly been employed in studies of youth cultures and popular music, which is true of the authors discussed here as well as a number of others (cf. Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Kozorog, 2002; Muršič, 2000; St John 2010; Velikonja, 1999). The concept thus comes across as necessarily bound to music- and youth-related activities, which we find inadequate. For example, in an edited volume devoted to the clarification of the concepts of scene, subculture and tribe (Hodkinson and Deicke, 2007), Paul Hodkinson stresses that some researchers of youth cultures consider the concept of scene useful for analysing the music-related activities of young people, and that the term “essentially signifies the clustering of musicians or fans around particular focal points” (Hodkinson, 2007: 10). In the same edited

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10 We could perhaps also add queer theory (cf., e.g., Taylor, 2012).
volume, David Hesmondhalgh likewise considers the concept through music activities (2007). In their edited volume *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (2004), Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson claim that “the concept of scene /…/ has increasingly been used as a model for academic research on the production, performance, and reception of popular music. Work in the scenes perspective focuses on situations where performers, support facilities, and fans come together to collectively create music for their own enjoyment” (Peterson and Bennett, 2004: 3). We certainly agree that it is important to study youth as a distinct segment of or attitude within society, and music as a distinct social practice, but when talking about concepts, albeit ones produced within specialised subfields of social research, we think one should also consider their potential extension into the broader study of society (as in Straw’s latest works – see, e.g., 2002 – as well as in Irwin’s pioneering interpretation of the concept).

For instance, let us imagine a local hunting club. First, its members’ hunting activities are defined by more or less strict rules. Hunting is therefore an institutionalized activity. However, in addition to understanding hunters through their organisational platforms, one should also consider, for example, their opinions on guns and ammunition, their shared experiences of hunting and different territories, the jokes and stories that circulate among them, their recipes for making good food, attitudes towards women, etc. All of these things form what we could term a hunting culture. The way this culture is (re)produced is shaped by both organisation rules and interactions, where the important interactions are not only those among the hunters themselves, but also include the interactions of non-hunters in certain typical places and occasions. We could, for example, think of a waitress in a bar where hunters meet etc. Hunting is therefore something institutionalized and a “thing that matters”, and provides the ground for (repetitive) interactions between members of a hunting club (or several of them), but also between non-members who for various reasons co-shape the communication process through which a whole world of meanings can gradually be (re)produced. The interactions, self-identifications and perceptions of the world of a person feeling an affinity towards hunting can be as strongly defined by this practice as the attitudes of an extreme metal music fan can be by extreme metal music.

Connected to music and youth is also the question of whether the concept of scene presupposes fun or whether it can also be ascribed to work-related activities. Should we not in relation to the workplace also expect to see a great deal of expressive interacting? We think that the concept of scene can also refer to one’s job, although not directly to the job per se. Similarly as in the case of hunting, we are here dealing with institutions. At the same time, however, every institution allows space for non-institutional (non-prescribed) interaction among incumbents, which may quite precisely be thought of as a scene. It is not surprising then that everyday language refers to academic, lawyer, political, manager, worker, science
etc. scenes. Work organisation in late modernity is characterised by the abandonment of the strict hierarchy of position, as well as of the strict separation of working and non-working space. The sphere of work is increasingly characterised by the connecting of employees (sometimes including people who are not employees of the company, e.g. family members) through leisure activities both in and outside the workplace (team building, sports etc). These activities result not only in increased loyalty to the company but also in the creation of small worlds of meaning.

Membership

Harris ascribes membership to the participants of a scene (1999; 2000). Membership here means the feeling of belonging to a group, which we do not count as a necessary condition for the existence of a scene. In the case of metal music, which entails a high degree of affiliation among its consumers, membership is usually present. However, membership is not crucially important for the existence of scenes in general. An individual might not feel affiliation to a certain “We-group” (cf. Elwert, 1995) and might not invest any meaning into the scene that a certain pattern of interactions produces, but might still contribute to its dynamics as far as his or her actions are embedded in it. If a scene can form around a local bar, as Will Straw claimed (2002: 8), the makers of such a scene probably do not have any membership identity, but instead share a certain “structure of feeling” (Williams, 2005 [1977]: 249–256) of togetherness, of participation in an ongoing social process.

When talking about scenes, it is not segments of society, such as evoked by the concept of subcultures (for example, “ punks”, “rockers”, “underground”, “mainstream”), that interact, but a number of subjects with different backgrounds, purposes, and life-styles, who might subscribe to heterogeneous social attitudes. The meanings and practices which originate “inside” a bounded “space” of interactions are thus multiple and conflicting (in a state of negotiation), and therefore lead to unpredictable changes (Harris, 1999: 2). In addition to these (social) fluctuations, a scene is also defined by (cultural) elements of central and lasting importance, among which a certain “thing that matters” (like extreme metal music in Harris’s case) plays a crucial role, making the existence of a scene as a structured social entity at all possible. Scenes usually do create firmly structured communities (and so also a feeling of membership), which employ the connecting elements of scenes (practices, places, values etc., and, last but not least, the communities emerging on a scene) as their representative symbols, into and from which participants invest and draw related meanings, and which are the referents of their identities (cf. Cohen, 1985). Therefore, membership may act as a connecting element of a scene (or may arise as
such in the course of time), but this does not mean that it is crucial for the existence of any particular scene.

According to Irwin (1977: 207–210), among actors who form a scene one can find insiders, supporters, audiences and outsiders, who by definition exhibit varying degrees of identification with it. Thus, as also follows from the abovementioned two examples (hunting and work-related scenes), it is very important to recognise those who as “outsiders” shape a scene. For example, a hunting scene is not formed only through communication between hunters, but, as proposed, also by a waitress in a bar where hunters meet. Therefore, communication on a scene is not of a closed type, it is not only a communication of members or insiders, but includes spillover interactions with more or less important “others”. A scene is thus a non-consolidated and loose social space of interactions, gravitating around “things that matter”. A scene therefore pervades and, very importantly, at the same time also transcends any institutionalised activity, which is why a scene leaks out beyond clearly defined social boundaries. Consequently, what gives shape to a certain scene is best revealed through an ethnographic approach.

**Cities and “small” environments**

As is clear from our exposition of Irwin’s ideas, the concept of scene was an outcome of urban sociology and has thus been tied up with the social life of the city. Straw continues to bind scenes to metropolises (2002). However, in the time from Irwin’s early work to the present, anthropological studies of youth outside metropolitan and urban environments (cf. Muršič, 2000; Kozorog, 2002) have demonstrated the applicability of the concept all along the urban–rural continuum. Today even environments with very small numbers of inhabitants do not form homogenous local communities. Rather, different generations (cf. Muršič, 2000) or even different segments within a generation (cf. Kozorog, 2002) produce their locality (cf. Appadurai, 1996: 178–199) differently. Non-metropolitan, town and village communities may therefore also be viewed as social environments in which different scenes (informed by local or global cultural arenas) negotiate local meanings and access to resources. For example, in the 1980s punks in the Slovenian village of Trate, studied by Rajko Muršič (2000), formed a scene around the globally spread aesthetics of punk rock, which they transcribed through local meanings, making their global–local juncture suitable for negotiating local matters. To sum up, scenes co-shape social life in cities, towns, and villages alike, although certainly not everywhere in the same way.

**Between local and global**

One of the most discussed questions regarding the concept of scene refers to its uses for describing levels of social life as different as the global on one extreme
and place-attached on the other. The problem, as formulated by Straw (2002), is how the same concept can be appropriate for describing face-to-face interactions and at the same time also for globally dispersed activities. David Hesmondhalgh (2007: 41–43) bases his critique of the concept on an analysis of what he defines as the two main sources for the widespread use of the concept of scene within popular music studies, i.e. Straw’s article ‘Communities and Scenes in Popular Music’ (1997 [1991]) and Shank’s book on the rock scene in Austin (1994). Hesmondhalgh sheds light on the discrepancies regarding the concept arising from these two sources. On the one hand, Shank uses the concept for describing the music life within a locality. In his portrait of music life in Austin, it is the subjects’ participation, face-to-face community, and live interactions between musicians, fans, and spectators that produce the scene. On the other hand, Straw views scenes through connections between localities and broader (translocal and even global) cultural flows. After revealing this split in definitions, Hesmondhalgh raises Straw’s own question: “How useful is a term which designates both the effervescence of our favourite bar and the sum total of all global phenomena surrounding a subgenre of Heavy Metal music?” (Straw cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 42). While Straw answers this question affirmatively, pointing to the elasticity of boundaries of present-day cultural formations, cultural flows that transcend localities, and the anti-essentialising character of the concept (2002), Hesmondhalgh is sceptical towards Straw’s position: “Straw observes that ‘scene’ seems able to evoke both the cosy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life. /…/ But how does the term achieve this metaphorical work?” (2007: 43). We would like to answer this question in the concluding section, by pointing to what gives the concept of scene its essence.

Towards a communication-based definition of the concept of scene

In our view the concept of scene should be grounded in communication, which provides its essence. By this we are not claiming that previous uses of the concept have neglected communication. To the contrary – if we regard symbolic interactionism as essential in most of the described uses of the concept, and if interaction is a form of communication, then we cannot claim to be breaking new ground in this respect. However, we do think that previous definitions have not focused on communication enough. Interaction is moreover only one aspect of communication, which, at the other end, as is clear from Straw’s descriptions, also entails many other aspects and latitudes as well. Interaction as examined by Irwin and Shank concerns face-to-face relationships; however, as demonstrated by Straw and Harris among others, many other communication channels also play a role in shaping scenes. Consequently, in regard to scenes as expressive social formations all forms of communication intersect via the “thing(s) that matter(s)” or, in some very
localized cases, merely via social places or venues (which can again be defined as the “thing(s) that matter(s)”).

For the concept of scene we therefore propose the following definition: the concept of scene refers to *spatially contextualised communication on the basis of things that matter, which provide anchorage for identification to the participants of such communication.*

There are five components in this definition which should be elaborated on.

The first is *communication*, which we posit as the basic focus for studying scenes. Communication provides a perspective of continuity, spontaneity, and change, as well as of the connectedness of participants (but also of things, aesthetics, ideologies, environments, etc.). By focusing on communication, the situational (or event-based) aspect of the concept of scene is not overlooked, but is viewed as belonging to the more structural aspects of communication.

*The International Encyclopedia of Communications* defines communication as the “ways in which information, ideas, and attitudes pass among individuals, groups, nations, and generations” (cf. Bauman 1992: xiii). Additionally, in his article ‘Making Music Together’ (1951) Alfred Schutz posited a “mutual tuning-in relationship” as basic to communication, providing the experience of togetherness. Schutz thus points to practices which may manifest as shared conceptions, but which before being anything else are the basis for collective action. We incorporate both notions, the structural focused on “ways” of communication and the situational focused on a face-to-face “mutual tuning-in relationship”, into our understanding of communication. In our view, therefore, scenes should be considered both through communication structures (i.e. the conditions for communication) and through situational events that actualise and (re)define them.

The second component is the *things that matter*, i.e. the things that provide the ground for identification, on the basis of which participants enter or continue the communication process. These “things” should be seen as the backbone of the communication process called scene.

As a process based on communication, scenes are formed around various “things that matter”: aesthetic categories (e.g. musical genre), practices (e.g. sexual ones), objects (e.g. cars), ideologies (e.g. racism) etc. On these foundations, interactions can become repetitive and more permanent and create more or less
stable boundaries of the scene. However, the consequences of such communication are to some extent unpredictable, and because of this the scene as a social context continually changes.

Participants in a scene view the society around them through the “things that matter”. These things and the products produced through interpersonal communication are what brings participants together (as mentioned earlier, however, discourses dominant in the broader social context to some extent shape these “lenses”, so one cannot talk of a scene as of a pure scenery of the broader social relations in the sense that it would be completely external to those relations).

The third component is place, since every communication is performed in concrete places, which also holds true for world-wide-web sites. Even when a “thing that matters” is globally present, as in the case of music genres, it is always locally expressed, for which the notion of place is crucial. It is in concrete places that also “others” engage in communication and co-shape a scene.

Communication may take place across global or local networks, and face-to-face interaction is not exclusively a characteristic of the latter. However, it should be added in regard to local scenes that whereas on the local–global axis usually only a single “thing that matters” provides the basis for the communication process, on the local level, where a small number of subjects interact, multiple “things that matter” may play a part in shaping a scene. What unites followers of different “important things” into a single local scene are local places in which they enter into a shared communication process.

In an ethnographic study of youth in a small town of approximately 3,500 inhabitants in Slovenia (Kozorog, 2002), it turned out that occasionally differentiated focal points (things that matter) formed one and the same scene. Kozorog was confronted by the dilemma of whether to consider communication around marihuana use and communication around alternative music as separate scenes. Marihuana may indeed provide an exemplary case of what a scene is: growing, sharing, tasting, knowing its effects, etc. creates a relatively closed circle of interactions. But even though participation in the local marihuana scene was limited and shaped by specific capitals (such as growing your own plants, sharing the drug with others, having knowledge of various practices, effects, tastes, etc.), the marihuana communication circle was not entirely closed. Even those who did not possess any marihuana or never shared it with others could enter the circle at certain points (for example, were invited to smoke by an insider). This was especially the case at particular places frequented by people involved in marihuana-related activities. For various reasons, these same places were also frequented by those
involved in music and art activities. As an ethnographer the researcher therefore could not treat the marihuana and alternative music scenes as separate but as one and the same, even though not every music lover was a marihuana user and not every marihuana user a music lover. Through these different “important things” the participants entered a single circle of interactions. A close look at the mechanisms of such a scene reveals that a particular individual might only be interested in one of the two activities, but through it he or she nevertheless interacts on the scene and creates social bonds and boundaries. Thus, a person might identify with only a certain circle of the participants of the scene, for example, those with whom he or she usually undertakes his or her beloved practice. Nevertheless, his or her presence is constitutive of the scene as a whole due to his or her physical presence at the essential places of a scene and the various combinations of personal acquaintances (X is in immediate and repetitive interaction with Y, but not with Z, with whom Y is in such interaction, and so on) through which his or her communications “echo” along the scene. It is therefore clear, as Straw claims (2002), that local places (e.g. bars) may indeed be of great importance in forming local scenes – places are the communication platforms of scenes. However, this might be more a characteristic of “small environments”, where scenes are not very “specialised” since there is usually not enough people concerned with any specific narrow field of interest to make a scene happen around it.

The fourth component is identification, with which we want to stress that the “things that matter” to the participants in such communication do so more on an identificational than any other (e.g. existential) basis. Although, for example, scenes can also form around professional activities, the concept refers to informal and identification-based communication.

However, different participants of a scene may identify with the core “thing” to a different degree. We can recall the example of a waitress working in a bar where hunters meet, who may not be passionate about hunting but is nevertheless crucial for the communication process of a local hunting scene. A different case in regard to identification is when different “things that matter” form a single local scene shaped by (a) local place(s) (cf. Kozorog, 2002). In such cases, again, a person may or may not identify with all of the “important things” that crystallise a scene.

The fourth component in our definition is actors. The actors on a scene are always individuals and can belong to various formal and informal groups, organisations, institutions, etc. Actors appear as agents on different levels – local, regional and global. The “nature” of the scene depends on the actors’ interests and
values. The physical presence of participants (in the case of an internet scene there is, of course, no such thing) points to the theatrical connotation of the word “scene” (theatricality is present in internet communication as well). An individual occupies a certain position on the scene and plays a certain role, which may occasionally be totally coded as his or her acts and acquired cultural capital stir up specific expectations from co-participants. But theatricality is not visible only at the level of individual behaviour. A scene as a whole is also a scenery covering (or giving shape to) broader social relations. The participants of a scene view their social environment through the things that matter – as mentioned earlier, however, discourses dominant in the broader social context to some extent shape these “lenses”, and one therefore cannot talk of a scene as a pure scenery of the broader social relations in the sense that it would be completely external to those relations.

It is also important to understand a scene in its processual form, which means that by definition the dimension of time is involved. When, where, and how a scene was born or withered away is sometimes difficult to determine, above all because, as we know, a scene produces unpredictable results and with them continually changing social contexts. Harris claims that scenes are internally constantly shifting, splitting, and combining (Harris, 2000: 25). However, since our aim is to ground the concept in communication, its use is probably more important for describing processes at a specific time (synchronously) than for describing the time periods of social entities’ existence.

Conclusion

What we are proposing is thus a concept for understanding the communication processes around a variety of things that might provide identification to those involved. Those engaging in such communication can be people of very different social backgrounds, experiences, life-styles, attitudes, etc., which provides the framework for quite unpredictable social contexts and consequences. Communication is based on communication systems and interactive events, both of which include the spatial dimension of scenes. This means that the theatre–actor aspect of scenes is important. However, the communication process cannot be reduced to events. Rather, scenes must be considered through a multiplicity of such events and through systems that support their unity. Events are an important aspect of scenes, since they shape communication both diachronously, (re)producing conditions for communication, and synchronously, existing
simultaneously in multiplicity and occurring at the same time in different places, where through the specific dispositions and attitudes of their (local) participants they influence the future development of a (broad) scene. In light of all this, it is not really a contradiction to describe the activities of people who come together at a local bar and the activities of internationally dispersed groups of people who communicate around certain interests as all forming scenes.

References


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