

Niche Underground: Media, Technology, and the Reproduction of Underground Cultural Capital¹

Introduction

“...This very topography of popular music in terms of underground versus overground, margins versus centre, has been steadily dissolved this decade, partly because of the web and partly because of the economic upheavals that have beset the music industry” – wrote Simon Reynolds (2009) in an essay for the Guardian. Indeed, in recent popular and scenic discourses, and cultural criticism, one can often encounter this narrative according to which unlimited access made possible by the internet and digital platforms have, in fact, already eliminated the concept of the underground, since music that may be heard by practically anyone, can no longer be called underground (see also Graham 2010b).

In this chapter, inspired partly by this contemporary discourse, I wish to analyze the notion of the underground, in the interrelated contexts of media technologies and socio-cultural dynamics of collectivities organized around music. My argument follows two main tracks. On the one hand, I discuss how in different technological, social and scenic contexts the meaning and use of the underground may change over time; yet, how the reproduction of subcultural capital maintains the existence of the ever-changing underground. On the other hand, I attempt to theorize and historicize the notion of the underground, by using, among others, theoretical tools borrowed from the Bourdieusian-Thorntonian approach of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996) and the approach that I would tag as ‘Cultural technology studies’ (practiced by authors such as Gitelman 2006; Marvin 1988; Jackaway 1995; Sterne 2012; Baym 2010), as presented by Paolo Magaudda’s (2020, present volume) work on scenic infrastructures. By doing so, my aim is to better integrate one of the most widely used, yet still rarely reflected upon term of popular music into the methodological realm of popular music studies, in order to understand better one of the central issues of the field: the formation, hierarchical organization and symbolic creation of niche cultures.

What is underground?

The origin of ‘underground’ as a term and concept is similar to the other keyword in describing musical communities, namely the ‘scene’, in that it initially appeared not in the academic, but rather in the political and subcultural discourse. However, it differs from it in the fact that while the concept of the scene, originally introduced by music journalists, has been met with an enthusiastic response by scholars, and a growing number of academic papers attempted to conceptualize, theorize, develop (and debate and question it, see Hesmondhalgh [2005]) over the past decades (Straw 1991; Hodgkinson and Deicke 2007), underground has proved to be much more of a field for observation for the social sciences. Even the most prominent academic works dealing with communities called underground by their participants have not attempted to conceptualize the term itself, rather to reconstruct its social meanings through the analysis of various ethnographic narratives (Thornton 1996; Fikentscher 2000; Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Matsue 2009; Panuzzo 2010).

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Probably this is one of the reasons why Stephen Graham (2016) called underground “a desperately neglected realm of musical activity” (viii) in his work *Sounds of the Underground*, which was the first book-length academic attempt to theorize the concept and put it into a historical perspective. According to Graham’s approach, underground is closely knit with the notions of fringe, ultra-marginality, non-commercialness, and radical aesthetics, among others:

“I’m writing specifically about noncommercial forms of music that exist in a kind of loosely integrated cultural space on the fringes and outside mainstream pop and classical genres. What I’ll call »underground« musical forms – noise, improv and extreme metal but also fringe practices like post-noise experimental pop and even some kinds of sound art – share a world of practitioners burrowing away independent of mainstream culture. They may be trying to resist that culture politically, but they might also just be satisfying themselves by making music for small audiences and little to no profit. My argument here is that due to shared practical, musical, and in many cases, political allegiances, these practices can be described collectively using the guiding metaphors of the »underground« and the »fringe«.” (vii-viii)

Besides the term ‘fringe’, that Graham prefers to use, several other notions turn up in the academic literature and public discourse as alternatives or complements to underground. Probably the most widespread attributes are the ‘nonofficial’ (Hagen and DeNora 2011) or ‘unofficial’, ‘counter-culture’ (Klaniczay 2003) ‘avant-garde’ (Graham 2010a), ‘indie’ (Hesmondhalgh 1999) or ‘DIY’ (Bennett and Guerra 2019) that emphasize different aspects of subcultural activities. Such notions as ‘nonofficial’, ‘alternative’, ‘counter-culture’ indicate an outsider stance or opposition to majority culture and aesthetic/political mainstream through emphasizing otherness, independence or active rebellion. In some cases – ‘avant-garde’ and ‘indie’ could be examples here –, they may not only signify something ‘different’ or ‘independent’, but a specific style of music. The concept of counter-culture is much rather politically charged and refers today mostly to the attitudes, aesthetic and political views related to the movements of 1968 in Europe and the reinterpretations of these views or sentiments. (For further readings on the relationship of the indie, the alternative and the underground, see [Matsue 2009; Barna 2012; Szemere 2001])

Another attribute which I intend to apply as a tool in approaching the notion of the underground in the following, is ‘niche’ (Anderson 2006). Niche cultures – highly specialized and selective, narrow markets, cultural segments organized around particular tastes – signify an important distinction between simply ‘less popular’ and carefully targeted products with deliberately narrow audiences in the domain of cultural industries. Since underground genres or artists typically attract smaller audiences than popular genres, but not necessarily less than a merely relatively unsuccessful pop music performer, the sheer size of an audience or scene underdetermines the underground nature of a niche collectivity. An underground genre could form a ‘complete’ genre or scene in itself, such as drone, operating with long-held noises and extremely slow-motion guitar effects, or even experimental music and noise, which do not have any trends that may be called mainstream. However, in most cases, variations of a genre span over the most diverse levels of popularity, from niche interest to mainstream popularity. As for

example, thrash metal, house, drum&bass and techno (Vitos 2012) also had and have their own mainstream, popular performers and underground trends known only by very few, which frequently wander from one register to another depending on the current context.

Graham (2016) himself emphasizes that to provide a strict definition of underground is practically impossible. Partly because of the heterogeneity of different (musical and non-music related) practices that are called underground, and also because underground is a contextual social construct, whose meaning is reformulated and reinterpreted under different socio-cultural circumstances and in different historical periods. Therefore, in trying to grasp the notion of the underground, it seems to be more fruitful to focus not on the 'what' but rather on the 'how' aspect of it. How are niche cultures deemed to be underground created, recognized, and maintained, and how may the concept of the underground change embedded in different scenic infrastructures? In the following, partly building on Graham's findings, I attempt to outline a brief historical overview of the continuity and change of the underground, keeping an eye on the role of media and technology in the context of socio-cultural patterns.

The First Underground: The Political and the Unofficial

Graham (2016: 10) distinguishes two chronologically distinct undergrounds based on the materiality of their distribution networks. Thus, in the earlier period physically anchored networks were predominant (such as fanzines and physical shops), while in the more recent one web-based distribution dominates. Although the role of materiality, media and technology indeed is crucial in shaping underground practices by offering infrastructures, in my approach I will distinguish three overlapping eras, focusing not only on the materiality of distribution, but also on the interaction of cultural, economic and technological factors.

The concept of the underground has carried numerous layers of meaning over the past decades that typically no longer refer to existing conditions, but rather live on as metaphors. One such layer is the name itself, the origins of which may be traced back to the 60s of the last century. At that time the label was synonymous with the lifestyle of groups confronting – whether in the East or in the West – the then current political establishment, status quo or oppression, professing and voicing alternative ideas, intertwined with counter-cultural organization and occasionally anti-establishment rebellion. The first wave of practices that emerged (or rather descended) as underground, were products of, or reactions to oppressive political systems. The formation of the term, the connection between its now metaphorical, once possibly literal meaning and message is clear: representatives of the culture exiled underground by the dominant power on the surface continued their activities (such as playing and listening to music) in the uncontrollable, unseen world (Szemere 2001). "Unofficial art. An artistic »movement«, which neither supports nor attacks the establishment, but resides outside of it. By attacking it, it would acknowledge its existence" – as Béla Hap (1973) one of the figures of the Hungarian underground put it commenting on (one of the) attitudes of the underground opposing the communist regime.

Borders – due to authorities keeping vigilant watch over participants – between the underground and non-underground were necessarily very clear at this time, and the stark difference between their technological regimes and media platforms also reflected the opposition. As the technological means of music production, distribution and media were uncompromisingly controlled by the state (recording studios were run by the state-owned

monopolist recording company, so was vinyl manufacturing, and the only mass broadcasting media available were the state-owned radio and television [Draganova and Blackman 2019; Szemere 2001]), the use of those means clearly indicated whether a given production belonged to the state-supported mass culture or to the counter-cultural, nonofficial underground niche. Thus for instance releasing a vinyl LP album was possible only through the official production channels, by bands who were favored by censorship boards, for the banned or unacknowledged musical collectives the DIY bootlegs of underground live events remained, distributed on tapes and later cassettes. Similarly, niche discourse on music had to remain underground too: while the favored bands were often featured in the (also state-owned and run) newspapers or youth magazines, underground bands were discussed in illegally printed, copied and distributed materials called samizdats (Sükösd 2012). In the meantime, another counter-cultural underground sphere developed in the cold war period in the United States, also characterized by opposition to power and mass cultural values (Cashbaugh 2016; Turner 2006), and manifesting in various activities such as establishing self-supporting commune settlements, circulating DIY materials and organizing musical collectivities such as the Los Angeles Free Music Society from the early 70s (Graham 2016).

The key concepts of the early phase of underground were: illegality and/or semi-illegality, struggle and confrontation with power, opposition to the official political and artistic elite, devotion to alternative social ideals and the expression of those through various media; being peripheral, developing of an alternative canon, transitionality, concealment, access available exclusively via the initiated. This political notion of underground continued to exist, for instance, in Central and Eastern Europe until the end of communism, but starting roughly from the late 70s and early 80s it had to share with another, newer concept in formation which infiltrated and gradually gained ground together with Western capitalism: the underground, set against the cultural space called mainstream.

The Second Underground: Against the Mainstream

This new kind of opposition is no longer political, but rather of economic origin. Mainstream music is released and distributed by major labels targeted to a large, wide audience with the aim of making profit (Shuker 2001; Toynbee 2000). The underground, desiring to differentiate itself from this, began to indicate genres refusing this ambition and audiences deliberately choosing to remain unseen by the general public.

The light, yet expressive definition of underground attributed to Frank Zappa can be dated back to that time, according to which “the mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground.” This one-liner implies, by emphasizing the imperative of choice, that underground assumes the active participation of listeners, in a somewhat hidden, but not a completely closed environment. The key concepts of the underground in this context are: voluntary separation from the mainstream (often representing, of course, the ambivalent attitudes of both denying and desiring the success of the bands who “made it”), production companies and distribution networks partially or completely independent from major labels and some of them functioning based on non-profit business models (Hesmondhalgh 1998; Webb 2007); the conscious use of sounds, lyrics and visuals unsaleable by the mainstream music business, the formation and further proliferation of numerous new niche identities, genres (and subgenres), styles, markets (Anderson 2006).

Since the borders between the underground and the non-underground are no longer quite as clear as in the case of the 'first' underground, consequently, discourses on telling one from another are flourishing. However, instead of focusing on the question of sheer access or the nature of the 'border' between mainstream and underground, seems to be more fruitful to reframe the key dilemmas of the underground-mainstream opposition within the framework of cultural capital.

Sarah Thornton (1996), in the wake of Bourdieu (1987), elaborated the concept of subcultural capital, which, in her analysis, is closely linked to the conceptual web of symbolic practices regarded as underground. In Thornton's interpretation club cultures as communities of taste organized around musical preference form various hierarchies of expertise, relationships and skills, thereby defining what is authentic or hip and what is not. In the discourses described by Thornton, cultural capital built upon authenticity, credibility, 'realness', and other positive subcultural indicators and values is fundamentally connected to the interpretations of underground. Therefore, what is credible and real is at the same time also characteristically truly underground, and what's truly underground is necessarily credible and cool in the context of the whole scene.

Beside the particular electronic music scene – the British acid house scene – studied by Thornton, in virtually all ethnographic accounts of the discourses of underground communities – from hip-hop through metal to world music – one can find this interconnected value system of authenticity and underground existence. Participants having more underground cultural capital at their disposal occupy a higher position in the scene hierarchy, and respectively, who have not succeeded in gathering subcultural capital, have a lower position. In a social network where the greatest symbolic value is the explicit expression of an oppositional stance towards the reigning political power, but technological means are scarce –, such as in the 'first' era of underground – there, revolutionary, non-conformist artistic concepts become of much value, but the state of development of media technology becomes irrelevant. Moreover: underground perception of music spreading through illegal, copied tapes and cassettes is even further enhanced by the poor sound quality indicating attachment to obviously non-state and non-official systems of production and distribution.

In his book *Making Popular Music* Jason Toynbee writes that

“The mainstream has to transcend *particular* communities in order to reach the largest number of people possible. It follows that in order to produce a mainstream the music industries must find musical texts and generic discourse which 'fold difference in', and articulate distinct social groups together” (Toynbee 2000: 122-3, emphasis in original)

In this sense traits of niche cultural production and consumption are exactly the opposite of that of mainstream: reaching deliberately narrow audiences, emphasizing, embracing the 'otherness' of the niche, and reflecting on the nature of belonging. If it comes to the accumulation of cultural capital in the age of the mainstream-opposing era, one of the most important credits in underground niches is authenticity (Graham 2016), which can be expressed through the communication of taste, work ethics, scenic knowledge, and use of particular media technologies, among others. As Fikentscher (2000: 10) puts it:

“...underground activities, whether primarily political or cultural in nature (some are both) can be said to take place in a limited space, inhabited by a limited number of participants who may establish various mechanisms to further the longevity of their activities. One of the most common of such mechanisms is the cultivation and control of insider knowledge. Musical connoisseurship is one of the attributes of underground membership.”

Besides shared knowledge and taste, there are other, lesser known but equally notable factors of achieving an authentic status in underground scenic hierarchies, such as complying with strict work ethics (Kahn-Harris 2004; Tofalvy 2014) and consistently building scenic careers (Macdonald 2001).

The Third Underground: Niche Cultures in the Digital Ecosystem

In the quest for scenic or subcultural authenticity, demand for the telling the experts from laymen, authentic and unauthentic scene members or works of music and canons remains unchanged. The question is that in the digital media and technology environment how is it possible to forge and build underground cultural capital, what are the difficulties, barriers, possibilities, and spaces, and who are the ones to succeed in the new context, forging private cultural capital that may be perceived as underground?

Spaces and norms of the online realm have gradually changed over the past decades, so in mapping out the relationship between the accumulation of underground cultural capital and the internet, we need to consider those changes. As in the case of underground practices, instead of drawing sharp borders it is more expedient to concentrate on the shifts of emphasis from the early web to the era of streaming platforms. On the early web the perhaps most important niche cultural platforms were, aside particular websites, the forums, listservs and chat rooms in which scene members could access and share some of the contents (as to share music in that period was not quite easy) or information related to the scene, or, most importantly, could communicate with each other and maintain their social networks (Lee and Peterson 2004). Back then, before the ubiquity of Google searches, although some of the early search engines already existed, but neither those technologies nor the culture of online search facilitated search-driven browsing and orientation on the web. For this reason underground niche contents on the early web were literally hidden, obscure and hard to find. Partly because of that and the architecture of online spaces it was relatively easy to maintain the offline hierarchies and borders of scenes online, as Paul Hodgkinson wrote about the use of Goth forums in the nineties:

“In the unlikely event that a non–goth *did* subscribe to a goth discussion forum, however, the chances of their persevering for long were also relatively faint, due to the specialist and exclusive nature of discussion, and the tendency for mistrust and hostility towards outsiders (...) Consistent with this, the posting of inappropriate or ill-informed messages by those not sufficiently socialized into goth discussion-group norms was liable to result in being flamed. While sometimes goths found themselves on the end of such treatment, it was

particularly effective in excluding perceived outsiders.” (Hodkinson 2002: 180, emphasis in original)

In this early phase of the internet, further significant platforms providing room for niche cultural exchange were the first peer to peer file-sharing networks such as Napster, Audiogalaxy, DC++, Kazaa or Soulseek. The significance of these platforms was, on the one hand, that they enabled sharing of niche musics that had been disappeared from the shelves of brick and mortar stores and were available only on the long tail of file sharing networks, and on the other hand, made possible initiating scenic conversations either directly between fans, or in genre (or subgenre) themed chat groups (as in the case of Soulseek). Sharing of digital music collections with peers, even anonymously, offered an excellent opportunity for fans to showcase their sophisticated musical taste and connoisseurship. The size and quality of the collection, the ordering of items, folders, albums, genres – similar to the organization of a traditional, offline record collection – all offered clues for the beholders to evaluate the scenic position of the collector. (Furthermore, the potential or actual illegality of sharing underground music on peer to peer networks also contributed to the subsistence of sense of belonging based on counter-cultural sentiments, as in the first, material era of underground.)

With online search coming into the forefront of online navigation and orientation, users – deliberately or incidentally – could get acquainted with online spaces they had not had the chance to see before. Still, some niche performers managed to maintain their obscurity by hiding from Google, thus persuading listeners of music who show interest to find their music for themselves through hard work. One of the examples of this attitude is the case of the genre ‘witch house’, sometimes called drag, in other cases haunted house, the name of which, according to one of the stories about its origin, does not even come from one of the artists, but from a Last.fm user, who suddenly began to give this label to the music thought by him to belong to this genre. Performers discussed on the pages of the Guardian, Pitchfork, Wired and the New York Times (Colly 2010; Wright 2010; Ellis 2010), who play gloomy electronic music assembled, among many others, from hip-hop, drone, goth and film music samples were especially fond of using names difficult to find with search engines, composed partially or totally of symbols (such as oOoOO, S4LEM, /// \\, †††, Gr†LLGR†LL, □ □ □ , twYIY<ght>ZoN). They removed their tracks uploaded to various free webstorage spaces after a while to upload them on different locations, and so on; ambitious music listeners did have to struggle if they wanted to listen to their latest works.

Although the era of web 2.0 had not brought about as radical changes as it was claimed by enthusiastic contemporary commentators and market players, but it did lead to a number of significant changes in the online lives of niche cultures. On the one hand, in the online music ecosystem, dominated by services such as Last.fm and MySpace, users finally had the means to legally get access to musical content and more platforms to discuss, comment on music and interact with peers. On the other hand, those platforms typically facilitated transparent and open interaction of various user groups and individuals instead of supporting the maintenance of closed or secluded online spaces. For instance, Last.fm opened up the possibility for all users to get involved in categorizing and tagging particular even underground bands, regardless of the users’ background, knowledge about the band or scene. Similarly, on MySpace everyone was allowed to create and account, upload their music or getting acquainted with other users. In this

online environment niche cultures unexpectedly got exposed to mass publicity, which initiated conflicts and vigorous debates among those who deemed themselves authentic members of a given niche culture and the commenters, users reckoned by them as intruders (Tofalvy 2014).

As the social web moved swiftly towards the streaming ecosystem (with the dominance of YouTube and Spotify) all those gestures of hiding and obscurity became difficult to realize. However, niche nature of underground music persists – ironically, precisely because of the huge amount of options and music available on the internet. As a result of the process called fragmentation – a growing number of services and content offered by more and more providers – a "massively parallel culture" (Anderson 2006: 184) is being formed. This kind of proliferation of choices and the scarcity of time and attention does not restrain, but on the contrary, actually creates niche consumption patterns.

A spectacular illustration of this tendency could be the data on plays of songs on Spotify, which inspired the idea behind *Forgotify*. According to Spotify data (Kumparak 2014) 80 percent of the approximately 20 million songs available (in 2013) have been listened to at least once, and 20 percent, about 4 million tracks, have not. On *Forgotify.com*, one can play a random song – offered by the algorithm behind of the site –, which has never been played before (at least) on Spotify. (It is intriguing, however, that in this sense Spotify has a shorter digital long tail than the *Ecast* database had back in 2004. *Ecast* was a company operating digital jukeboxes which were connected to a database featuring 10,000 albums, and 98 percent of the tracks were sold at least once per quarter, so only 2 percent of the songs remained unplayed – according to the "98 percent rule" (Anderson 2006: 7-8).

The bigger is the selection, and the smaller amount of attention can be paid to the individual albums or tracks the more important become the skills that help orientation in the "crowded musical landscape", such as curation (Barna 2017) and digital literacy skills that subcultural values of taste and selection. Digital skills of authentic curation and selection are not bound to the possession of music anymore, but rather to fast searching in the appropriate knowledge bases, and well-timed sharing of tracks, playlists, music videos that best suit current niche trends and needs. In this environment, instead of highlighting the opposition to the mainstream, emphasizing the way of sharing comes increasingly to the forefront. For the content with the promise of high cultural capital one must continue to 'go down' to the less frequently visited niche segments of the Internet – once to the music blogs linking to albums uploaded to file storing services (from Megaupload to iFile) later to Soundcloud profiles and now to Spotify playlists that feature most hip and current music.

Underground cultural capital was always a question of timing too: "The underground espouses a fashion system that is highly relative; it is all about position, context and timing. Its subcultural capitals have built-in obsolescence so that it can maintain its status not only as the prerogative of the young, but the 'hip'" (Thornton 1996: 118). In the attention economy of the fast moving online social media sphere, emphasis shifts toward the extreme significance of precise timing: Who is the fastest to share and present the music currently authentic? What is the music that is accepted as authentic by scene members in the given moment?

Those strategies present an amalgam of practices originated in the first, and even more in the second era of underground niche cultures, providing social contexts and meanings for the accumulation of cultural capital, and ensuring that the underground remains a participatory sphere, an "anintermediated space" where there are no radical divisions between musicians,

labels and audiences, and which is motivated primarily not by business interests but the devotion of sharing niche taste and a sense of belonging (Graham 2016: 12).

Conclusions

The belief that new media technologies, let alone the internet would put cultural formations to an end and disrupt the social status quo, for the better or worse, is not novel at all. This deterministic view has been present from the very beginnings of the world wide web: the internet has been seen as the bringer of equality and democracy (Lessig 2006), later as the leveling tool for the music industry (Hesmondhalgh 2019), and also the liquidator of the underground.

Media technologies in themselves, as numerous historical examples from book printing through television to the newest online platforms show, do not necessarily eliminate pre-existing communities of knowledge and taste, nor internal needs and social demands that shape the hierarchic structures of communities. Rather they serve as infrastructures by providing spaces for communities to interact (Marvin 1988). In this chapter I attempted to argue for the idea that technological innovations deemed to be (with any optional prefix) 'revolutionary' typically effect social configurations only within certain limits, creating new market relations in the cultural economies, channelling in already existing and persisting demands and supplies and conflicts in new ways. Applied to the particular case of the concept of the underground, this means that as long as all these social mechanisms that value hierarchies based on knowledge, taste, and authenticity exist, the accumulation of cultural capital will maintain the separation of self-reflective niche cultures even in novel infrastructural contexts.

Recent online trends indeed affected the rules of underground music networks and communities, but in a special way: transforming yet reserving the role and meaning of underground niche practices and communities. Although the birth of the underground was closely tied to counter-cultural movements, in the past (at least) four decades this relationship changed fundamentally, first with the advent of the mainstream-oriented underground opposition, and more recently with the spread of the digital social media and streaming platforms, forming new underground practices but preserving the core mechanisms of self-reflective niche cultures. As Stephen Graham (2016: 11) wrote, "the »going to« remains", and so remain the ever-changing dichotomies of center and periphery, hip and uncool, popular and unpopular, mass and niche, mainstream and underground.

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