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JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca>

The Visuality of Scenes

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March 17, 2017

To cite this article:

Reia, Jhessica. "Around The X: Reflections On Straight Edge, Visuality, And Identity Boundaries" *Imaginations* 7:2 (2017): Web (date accessed) 106-123. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.VOS.7-2.6

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.VOS.7-2.6>



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AROUND THE X: REFLECTIONS ON STRAIGHT EDGE, VISUALITY, AND IDENTITY BOUNDARIES

JHESSICA REIA

Résumé

Lorsque le groupe Minor Threat chanté « I've got straight edge » dans les années 1980, il ne pouvait pas imaginer les proportions que le message straight edge pourrait atteindre. À São Paulo, le straight edge sous-culture a été consolidée dans les années 1990 autour du festival Verdurada et son collectif homonyme, qui est toujours actif. La dynamique d'établir les limites de l'identité straight edge est complexe, généralement constitué par plusieurs aspects visuels. Ce travail vise à analyser la visibilité de la sous-culture straight edge et la Verdurada, en discutant la place qui les straight edgers occupent dans le 21e siècle.

Abstract

When Minor Threat sang “I've got straight edge” back in the 1980s they could not imagine the proportions the straight edge message would achieve in a few years. In São Paulo, the straight edge subculture was consolidated in the 1990s around a collective and its festival Verdurada, which is still active. The dynamics to establish the boundaries of the straight edge identity are complex, usually dealing with several visual aspects. This work aims to shed light onto the visibility of the straight edge subculture and the Verdurada, discussing the place(s) that straight edgers occupy in the 21st century.

In 1981 a band called Minor Threat released the song “Straight Edge.”¹ The band’s vocalist, Ian MacKaye, made it clear that the group had chosen the path of sobriety, noting that they had better things to do than consume drugs, smoke, or drink alcohol. In his words, the band had “got the straight edge.” Straight edge then became a movement, even though MacKaye denies his role as its founder (Kuhn 34). Authors who have written about the straight edge subculture—such as Robert Wood (2006), Beth Lahickey (2007), Ross Haenfler (2004; 2009), and Gabriel Kuhn (2010)—argue that it emerged in opposition to the “live fast, die young” nihilism of punk and the abuse of alcohol and drugs inside the scene. Devoting itself to the enjoyment of musical performances and keeping a distance from the use of alcohol and other substances, the straight edge movement adopted the “X” as a powerful signifier of sobriety and abstinence, to be inscribed on bodies and made to be seen (Foster ix).

A few years later, the values and visual elements of straight edge arrived in the global south, and entered Brazil. Not until the 1990s, however, would straight edge be consolidated as a subculture in that country, through the *Verdurada* collective and its homonymous festivals. At the same time, straight edge both opposed and was intertwined with the Brazilian hardcore punk scene. The subculture also developed deep connections to the city of São Paulo and to the issues, opportunities, dynamics, territories, and social life of that city.

It is important to highlight the decision to use the terms “scene” and “subculture” in this essay. It made sense to talk about a punk scene in São Paulo in the 1970s, but as hardcore bands and labels emerged and overlapped with the established physical and symbolic territories of punk, it became more useful to speak of a “hardcore punk scene” in the city, especially in the 1990s. Today, the expression “hardcore punk” has been adopted by bands, labels, and other participants involved in the scene, and the term now encompasses several musical subgenres, interests, political approaches, events, and forms of visibility. In my years of fieldwork studying this hardcore punk scene, I focused specifically on the straight edge subculture or movement within it. In this research, it became clear that, while those who identified themselves (and others) as part of the straight

edge subculture did so in relation to ideas of sobriety (which they defined quite rigidly), membership in the overarching hardcore punk scene involved a much more fluid range of expected behaviours. In a general sense, we might see straight edge as a subculture operating within a larger hardcore punk scene, with the latter characterized by overlapping networks of bands, audience, venues, territories, and labels, and by the circulation of people and goods.

The constitution of the boundaries that demarcate the straight edge identity within the hardcore punk scene is not obvious from the outside, and are negotiated through conflicts between people over how to be straight edge or to be seen as straight edge by their peers. In his research into the boundaries of straight edge identity, Robert Wood (“The Straightedge Youth Sub-Culture”) shows how “straightedgers share commonalities in sub-cultural identity, but that sub-cultural identity also is a highly fluid, contingent, and contradictory phenomenon that is constructed and experienced idiosyncratically by the very same members” (33-34). In other words, if we look at the subculture from the outside, it can appear to be stable and homogenous. From the inside, however, straight edge is seen as highly diverse and its boundaries are relatively fluid, subject to change, disruption, and fragmentation over time (50). One reason for this diversity is that the boundaries of straight edge have been shaped by values beyond those of sobriety and

abstinence. These include such lifestyle options as vegetarianism and veganism, or the discourses and practices that define purity in relation to political practice or sexual promiscuity. The values of straight edge vary widely from one subcultural grouping to another and within these groupings themselves. Thus, in Brazil, the values of vegetarianism and veganism are of high importance for the *Verdurada* collective, while the acceptability of caffeine or certain medicines is disputed.

Within this complexity, the visual aspects of the straight edge subculture assume a significant role. As Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly suggest, with respect to the analysis of human practices, an attention to associations between the visual and material provides a means for investigating how things are made visible, which things are visible, and for whom this visibility is important (4). In this sense, analysing visual and material elements can:

[m]ake things visible in specific ways, or not, and this approach thus draws attention to the constitution of human subjectivities and the visual objects their practices create. This is somewhat different from enquiries based on looking, seeing, analysing and writing text; instead, it considers the (geo)politics of embodied, material encounter and engagement. (Rose and Tolia-Kelly 3)

As Dick Hebdige suggests in his work “Hiding in the Light,” the bodies of youth can be used as an exercise of power, since they deal with the politics of signs:

“Youth culture” as sign-system centres on the body—on appearance, posture, dress. If teenagers possess little else, they at least own their own bodies. If power can be exercised nowhere else, it can be at least be exercised here. The body can be decorated, and enhanced like a cherished object. (Hebdige 31)

The body and its adornment make straight edgers and their values visible. The visual aspects of straight edge subcultures have been analyzed in a number of works which go beyond the X that usually represents connection to the subculture. These include Michael Atkinson’s (“The Civilizing of Resistance: Straightedge Tattooing”) discussion of straight edge tattooing, Ross Haenfler’s (*Straight Edge: Clean Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change*) study of styles of dress within the subculture, and Jesse Helton and William Staudenmeier, Jr.’s examination (“Re-imagining Being ‘Straight’ in Straight Edge”) of “straight-edge symbols.” My study also addresses Joao Bittencourt’s (*Sóbrios, firmes e convictos: Uma etnografia dos straightedges em São Paulo*) analysis of the album covers of straight edge recordings and posters produced by and for the *Verdurada’s* collective.

Al Larsen (“Fast, Cheap and Out of Control: The Graphic Symbol in Hardcore Punk”) presents an interesting analysis of the visual culture of the first wave of American hardcore punk, which included

elements from straight edge subculture. According to Larsen, the use of simple graphic symbols (such as the X) as band logos and to “signal a local or ideological affiliation within the subculture” were important during this first wave, since they could be quickly and easily reproduced. They embodied “hardcore subculture values of participation and collectivity while contributing to the spread of the subculture outside of commercial channels” (Larsen 91). Indeed, most of straight edge’s graphic symbols are still in use by youth committed to sober living in the subculture.

This work is part of a three-year research project on the straight edge subculture in São Paulo. The fieldwork was conducted from 2011 to 2013 using mixed methods: participant observation, photo-based visual documentation, in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews,² the distribution of questionnaires to a non-representative sample of audiences, and the analysis of digital materials (such as forums, social networks, and websites tied to the subculture). The goal here is to present some of the results of this research and, through an analysis of the visual aspects of the straight edge subculture in São Paulo, to shed light on such issues as the boundaries between identities, the sociability of subcultures, the place of straight edge within the city, and the status of its visibility. In this way, I hope to come to an understanding of the place(s) occupied by straight edge values and practices in Brazil more than three decades after their first appearance in the United States.

I’ve Got Straight Edge: Music, Identity, and Sobriety

The conventional narrative holds that straight edge subculture emerged out of the punk scene in Washington, D.C. In the 1980s, elements of this scene began to distance themselves from the punk ethos around them, opposing its nihilism and “live fast, die young” ethos. The significant abuse of drugs and alcohol inside the punk scene and within mainstream youth culture more generally is often identified as one reason for the dissatisfaction of large numbers of teenagers, who looked for ways to “fit in” to a musical underground without adopting the drug and alcohol use of their peers (Wood 100-103).

Minor Threat’s “Straight Edge” is today viewed as a key element in pushing this movement towards the status of a relatively stable subculture. Wood suggests that, even before Ian MacKaye put those feelings into words, discontent with the use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs could be found within punk culture (*Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* 99). Drawing on an interview with MacKaye (a member of Fugazi as well as the co-founder and owner of Dischord Records), Wood claims that “the very idea of straightedge emerged at least partially in reaction to his [MacKaye’s] perceptions and experiences of drinking and drug use among his high school peers. Furthermore, his earliest elaborations of straightedge were attempts to validate and legitimize the deviant practices (at least among late 1970s culture) of *not* drinking and using drugs” (101). Built along these lines were Minor Threat and the other straight edge bands

who followed similar paths, singing about sobriety, positive choices, commitment (“true ‘til death”), and freedom. During this period, the boundaries of straight edge identity became clearer, crystallized within lists of “do’s and don’ts,” unacceptable behaviors, lines that should not be crossed, and the values necessary to support sober living.

Generally, then, straight edge identity is usually established around principles of sobriety and abstinence, often enforced in militant fashion. These principles often express themselves within seemingly conservative discourses against sexual promiscuity. At the same time, other values are progressive—such as the support of vegetarianism, veganism, and animal rights, and an engagement with social change. Haenfler notes that the straight edge movement emerged “during a time of increasing conservatism and religious fundamentalism, an escalating drug war, and Nancy Reagan’s ‘Just Say No’ campaign” (416). While straight edge was not simply a response to this context, it shaped the movement in a variety of ways (Wood 107).

Wood observes that, at least in the United States, the subculture is predominantly masculine, youthful (with few people over 30 years of age), middle-class, Caucasian, and deeply rooted in urban spaces (6-7). The male domination of straight edge spaces is a recurrent issue, and questions of gender identity and sexual orientation have figured within several studies (see Kuhn; Lahickey; and Haenfler). Haenfler suggests that straight edge men do not necessarily

exclude women from the subculture, “but neither do they intentionally include them. The result is ‘female exscription,’” whereby women are simply absent or invisible within straight edge culture (*Straight Edge: Clean Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* 124)—these dynamics could be observed in São Paulo, too.

Music, nevertheless, is the central point of connection for straight edge subcultures, regardless of their location, since it is around music that the subculture has built itself and come to occupy certain territories within cities (both symbolic and physical). Through music a specific straight edge subculture enters into dialogues with others, whether in the same country or elsewhere in the world:

*Gigs enable straightedgers to visit with one another, to form new network ties, to hear straightedge music, to slam dance or mosh, and to purchase merchandise, such as compact discs, records, and T-shirts [...]. As well as music gigs and commercially available music recordings, crucial “culture transmitters” such as fanzines/magazines and straightedge Internet Web sites help to unite national and international straightedge culture. (Wood, *Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture* 9)*

Given the myriad of issues circulating within straight edge culture, the values and choices of its members may not be displayed or understood clearly. One of the main symbols of straight edge is the X, formed by single crossed lines or objects. Straight edgers usually

draw the X on the back of their hands with markers or pens before gigs; others tattoo it on their bodies or use it on T-shirts, hoodies, jackets, and other accessories. (Wood 113-114). Wood suggests that the X is used to trace the subculture’s symbolical boundaries: “The X likely is a means by which straightedge youth identify one another as well as how they demarcate themselves from perceived outsiders. Moreover, according to the music, the X is a means of self-identification insofar as it symbolizes one’s commitment and dedication to straightedge philosophy and lifestyles” (Wood 114).

Debates continue over the origins of the X and nature of its connection to the straight edge subculture. MacKaye argues that it first appeared in Washington D.C. in the 1980s as a mark inscribed on the hands of underage people so they would be allowed to enter licensed music venues:

In D.C. there was a law that says no minors were allowed in a bar. [...] So we were trying to figure out how we could convince them to let us into these damn gigs since we had the legal basis for it [...]. So we went down and met with the club and said, 'Look, let us in, we will not drink, and we will put these Xs on our hands to clearly demark the people who are under age'. We told them [...] We were not involved with getting high; we were just working and creating something. And we felt like music was not something that we should be forbidden to absorb, or to see, or to be around just because of our age. [...] They said 'Let's give it a shot'. And we lived up to our end of the bargain, which was that none of us drank... That was where the X came from, it was a total pragmatic thing... The X was really not so much to signify straightedge as it was to signify youth." (Wood 115-116)

With time, the symbol ended up being adopted on a voluntary basis by those who wished to proclaim their abstinence from alcohol, even if they were of an age that made its consumption legal. This practice became popular after the Teen Idles album *Minor Disturbance* was released in 1980, its cover featuring a "punk with crossed fists, each bearing a large X" (Haenfler 8). Wood sees the X as the preeminent visible marker of straight edge, even if not all straight edgers use it to affirm their lifestyle choices (124-125).

At the same time, the visibility of the X is used to differentiate oneself from mainstream culture and from others within the subculture who have not made

the same life choices. From its origins as a marker of toxic substances, the "X" has been re-appropriated and re-signified by straight edgers:

This notion of visible signifying markers used to cast a subculture apart and provide a sense of ontological difference for those within the subculture from the mainstream populace is certainly identifiable in the ironic and historically weighty SxE emblem: XXX. The "X" and more specifically, the triple "X" has certain connections to drug and abuse culture. "XXX" on a jug or bottle indicates poison; on a syringe, blood pollutant; on the eyes, death. SxE culture co-opted and inverted the sign's referent—poison, in SxE, equals antidote; contaminant = clean living/drug free. (Smith 638)

Some of the roots of the triple X may be found in the Minor Threat's lyrics "don't drink, don't smoke, don't fuck," or even in relation to the rating of films as pornographic, as Helton and Staudenmeier, Jr. have suggested (455-6). In Larsen's account, the X was, in its early stages at least, worn by people without being commercialized:

The X was supremely suited to participatory creation—marked by hand, on the back of each hand, with a few swipes of a heavy duty felt-tip marker. Although "X"-themed merchandise eventually appeared, the original practice was a mark that could not be purchased and did not advertise any specific band. (Larsen 100)

Merchandise is nevertheless an important part of straight edge subculture. The various objects of the scene—which incarnated the values of participation and collectivity and were usually created in DIY ("Do It Yourself") fashion by bands and labels—helped transform the meaning of the X, making it an effective carrier of messages across the subculture:

T-shirt, slogans, song lyrics, tattoos, and other symbols constantly reminded sXers of their mission and dedication: "It's OK Not to Drink," "True till Death," and "One Life Drug Free" were among the more popular messages. [...] Youth wore Xs on their backpacks, shirts, and necklaces; they tattooed them on their bodies and drew them on their school folders, skateboards, cars, and other possessions. The X united youth around the world, communicating a common set of values and experiences. (Haenfler 415)

This complex cluster of contexts, values and visual tokens spread across the globe in the 1980s, reaching countries as far away as Brazil or the Netherlands (see Hanou and Frijins). Straight edge and its material culture travelled through the informal exchange networks of punk, fostering the emergence of scenes and subcultures throughout the world over a lengthy period of time.

Verdurada: Straight Edge Goes South

Straight edge arrived in Brazil at the beginning of the 1980s. The first representation of the famous X on the back of hands allegedly appeared in São Paulo on the cover of the compilation album *Grito Suburbano* (“Suburban Scream”), recorded by local bands in 1982. São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil and known for its many scenes, subcultures, and alternative spaces, such as the *Galeria do Rock* (“Rock Gallery”), which was the site of both convivial and conflictual relationships between young people of all tastes and styles from head bangers to punks. A punk scene emerged in São Paulo in the 1970s as informal, decentralized networks through which records, tapes, fanzines, and bands circulated (Dunn 202-203). While there is disagreement as to where punk first established itself in Brazil (with São Paulo or Brasília as the main candidates), its importance in the suburbs of São Paulo should not be underestimated. Brazilian punk scenes absorbed local political struggles and were shaped by a context of discontent among teenagers rooted in social marginality, economic vulnerability, and political conflicts with the repressive dictatorship of the period.

Grito Suburbano (1982), the first compilation of Brazilian punk, featured low-quality recordings of bands such as Olho Seco, Cólera, and Inocentes.³ The same year saw the organization of the first punk festival in São Paulo, *O Começo do Fim do Mundo* (“The Beginning of the End of the World”). The behaviour, musical performances, and imagery of the punk scene elicited an intense response from mainstream society;

traditional media rushed to portray punks as marginal, bandits, drug addicts, and people with no future (Oliveira 19).

Straight edge emerged as the São Paulo punk scene changed over time, incorporating other genres and subgenres (such as hardcore) and influencing other cultural developments in the city. As Bittencourt claims, and corroborated by my interviews, the consolidation of straight edge really did not occur until the 1990s (37). Indeed, the internet was responsible for much of the global diffusion of the straight edge subculture in the late 1990s (Williams 176). In the beginning, the straight edge subculture of São Paulo was associated with two groups: *Juli-Juventude Libertaria* (Libertarian Youth) and SELF (Straight Edge Life Family), the latter a dissident group that broke off from Juli (Bittencourt 38). After the krishnacore band Shelter played in São Paulo in 1996 the straight edge subculture expanded (38-39). As A.M. (34-years old) told me in an interview, he was “impressed with the number of strangers who had the X marked on the back of their hands at the Shelter concert.”

The *Verdurada* festivals began in houses, attended by a few friends, around 1993-94; by 1996, as the straight edge subculture grew, shows were opened up to the public. Since then, the festivals have been organized by a collective of about 13 people who has maintained the *Verdurada* name. *Verdurada* claims to be the largest DIY event in Brazil. This commitment to DIY principles is one of the most important elements of straight edge subculture; it extends beyond the bands,

festival, and labels into the personal lives and spaces of the people involved. These principles are visible in the material objects which characterize the subculture (such as t-shirts [Figure 9] and fanzines). When asked about their relation to DIY, several told me that this subculture taught them to do things by themselves, without waiting for government or private enterprise: “This is something that punk and the hardcore gave me: if you are dissatisfied with the way things are done, do them yourself” (C., 18 years old).

The collective responsible for planning and carrying out the *Verdurada* festival is made up of people of different ages, genders, and backgrounds. All, however, must identify themselves as straight edgers and vegetarians/vegans to be accepted as members. Individual gigs and the overall festival are planned by the members of the collective, who begin by finding a venue with an available date, then sell tickets, promote the event (online and in the streets), arrange for bands to play, deal with the necessary logistics, buy water and *Mupy* (soy-based industrialized vegan juice), decide who can table at the event, and transport the necessary equipment to the venue, among many other activities. Because each festival includes a debate, the topic must be decided and the relevant movement/specialist/association invited to discuss it. On the day of the event, someone needs to stay at the door controlling the entrance and ticket reservations, selling more tickets when necessary. Inside the venue, other people are in charge of selling the non-alcoholic beverages and food, helping to control the performance times for the bands and solving any problems that might appear.

For a long time, the *Verdurada* gigs took place at *Galpão Jabaquara* (the “Jabaquara Warehouse”), located in the southern region of São Paulo. This “fixed” space within the city became closely associated with the image of the *Verdurada* and its events, concerns, and people. After the warehouse was closed, the festival had to look for another venue in order to continue its promotion, a difficult task in São Paulo. Because of their commitment to DIY principles, low budgets, high noise levels, accessibility standards, and high attendance, the festival organizers needed very particular kinds of venues. These had to be of significant size, close to public transportation (and preferably in the city centre), but far enough away from residential areas that they would not be subject to complaints about the aggressive noise emanating from venues.

Finding such spaces in the city was a constant challenge. Over the past few years it has become harder for the collective to find a suitable venue in which to host the *Verdurada* gigs. Organizers have told me during interviews that one of the main reasons for this difficulty is the gentrification process taking place in São Paulo, particularly in its central neighbourhoods. When I began my fieldwork the collective was using the Ego Club, located near Praça Roosevelt (which had undergone a long process of renovation), but that venue eventually closed. *Verdurada* has turned to other spaces that are smaller, somewhat precarious, and not ideal for hardcore punk gigs: recently they have used the basement of the University of São Paulo Law School. In addition to changes in the urban environment,

other factors—such as the levels of commitment and available free time of collective members or the frequency with which people leave or move out of the scene—affect the continuity of the straight edge subculture. One result of these factors is that the frequency of *Verdurada* festivals has decreased and their occurrence has become unpredictable. Real estate speculation, gentrification, and urban marginalization have become recurrent topics of debate inside the collective and within the *Verdurada* audience. Their place within the city has become a high-profile concern of the subculture itself.

Looking for the Visual Aspects

A search for the visuality of São Paulo’s hardcore punk scene, and of the straight edge subculture in particular, may lead to several spaces throughout the city or to none. In visual terms, it is not easy to grasp how these forms of cultural expression are rooted in the city, and it is even more of a challenge to see the music—the main feature of the straight edge subculture—clearly materialized and made visible in urban spaces. In his article “Above and Below Ground,” Straw discusses the visibility of Montreal’s Mile End music scene, which was very active in the late 1990s and 2000s. As Straw suggests, journalists who went to Mile End found the visual traces of the scene difficult to capture:

Music consumed in dark rooms, in lofts or bars, is not particularly photogenic. This is particularly the case for music which is not particularly theatrical, and which is often marked by a cultivated casualness. In any case, darkened rooms convey little of the geography of a scene. As a result, most of the images of Mile End which circulate are images from which music is absent. Music was the cultural activity which founded the idea of Mile End as a scene, but the visual signifiers of that scene communicate little of music. (Straw 404)

A similar issue arose while analysing the straight edge subculture of São Paulo: the visual aspects of the subculture can easily go unnoticed around the city, especially when we are not dealing with the music festivals themselves. The visuality of *Verdurada* can be perceived in two different sorts of contexts. The most obvious of these are those contexts in which gigs take place, in specific places at scheduled times as a result of the labour of several people. The other context is constituted by the subtle visual presence of straight edge in the everyday life of São Paulo—in streets, restaurants, cafés, stores, and other public spaces, as well as the *Verdurada* posters glued around the city and band stickers on restaurants’ walls. These two contexts overlap in certain ways, but it is important to highlight the different ways in which they elicit attention or go noticed by outsiders.

Straight Edge in the City

As has been noted, São Paulo contains long-established venues connected to specific scenes. Galeria do Rock, for instance, used to be a space for disruptive practices and conflicts between head bangers and punks. Today, it contains a variety of tattoo shops, record stores, clothing stores, hairdressers, and other amenities, serving tastes that range from reggae and hip-hop through hardcore, punk, and gothic, on several floors linked by spiral staircases. However, the space is no longer for youth only: it has become a tourist destination in which it is not unusual to see entire families strolling along its corridors and shopping. On one of the floors there is a small store called Vegan Pride, which sells cruelty-free and straight edge products. It has long been easy to find straight edgers hanging around here, buying food, hygiene products, or t-shirts with messages such as “Straight Edge Brasil” and “Enjoy Straight Edge, You can’t beat the feeling” (a reference to the 1987 Coke slogan, with the same typography).

Walking a few blocks from Galeria do Rock, one comes to Galeria Nova Barão, with its record stores, modest restaurants, shoe stores, and other commercial spaces. Among these, on the second floor, is the punk rock record store The Record (owned by people who have been connected with the hardcore punk scene for years) and the Veggie Life Store, a space dedicated to vegan, DIY, and straight edge products (and owned by people directly connected to the straight edge subculture). These spaces are discreetly located inside the gallery,

nestled among traditional stores, but they make visible the signs of straight edge culture, on the covers of records, T-shirts, tote bags, pins, vegan products, and the adorned bodies of the regular visitors themselves.

Not far from there, still in the downtown region, lies one of the most famous places of encounter for straight edgers in São Paulo, the ice cream shop Soroko (at Augusta street) (Souza 23). Soroko offers vegan ice cream options, as well as *açaí* (an *açaí* palm dessert), amidst vintage tables, colourful garbage bins in the form of clowns, and old posters. Anyone passing by can notice, at certain hours of the day, a large number of tattooed people in hardcore or streetwear outfits, but the visual aspects of the place and its visitors are not obviously connected to the subculture.

Going up Augusta street towards Paulista Avenue, one finds another important space of encounter and visibility for straight edgers, the Mate Por Favor. This is a small snack restaurant inside an open-air gallery with a few tables, chairs, and stools, serving vegan, vegetarian, and meat options as well as *mate*, *açaí*, and coffee. The name is a reference to the punk book “Please Kill Me”, written by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, and to the *mate*, (the yerba mate tea beverage served there). The owner has been part of the hardcore punk scene for years and allows people to hang posters on the wall for hardcore punk gigs, including those organized by *Verdurada*. This place is well known among straight edgers; one could always meet them there on Sunday afternoons, to talk or look at the visual materials on the walls, the notices of underground music festivals,

and messages with straight edge content written by its regular visitors. If one paid close attention to the young people hanging around, one could observe, in their choices of food and drink, the signs of their veganism or sobriety.

Other restaurants and venues owned by friends (or friends of friends) from the scene or subculture figure within any “mapping” of straight edge visual references across the city. These include the Vegacy restaurant (also on Augusta street, on the Jardins side of Paulista Avenue) and the Prime Dog (Vergueiro street). The latter started as a hot dog and hamburger stand, but it grew as the demand for vegetarian and vegan options increased; it became one of the most famous fast food restaurants serving vegan options in the city, beloved by many of the straight edgers. As is the case with the Mate Por Favor, Prime Dog’s walls are filled with vegan and straight edge messages, band stickers, festival posters and other references to the subculture. On Saturday nights Prime Dog was a good place to meet colleagues from the subculture and engage in casual conversations.

The act of strolling along the sidewalks of the city brings opportunities to encounter the visual aspects of the straight edge subculture, such as the *Verdurada* posters. In the beginning, the *Verdurada* collective used to hang or glue the posters on walls and streetlight posts close to the main avenues in order to attract people to their gigs. Bittencourt observes that the style and content of these posters changed over time, as a result of shifting external influences on their underlying

aesthetics (156-158). As he suggests, proximity to the anti-globalization movement played a key role in transforming the *Verdurada* collective and its festivals, shaping the debates (or direct-action workshops) hosted by the festival and the visual materials used in its promotion. Before this engagement with the anti-globalization movement in the early 2000s, the posters used to display images of concerts. This would change radically, as images related to the debates of the day became more common (158) (Figures 1 and 2). With the advent of the Internet, it has become easier to promote the events online through virtual posters, listservs, and Facebook pages, etc.—and they still glue the posters on walls and street lights across the city.

Even in spaces heavily frequented by straight edgers, it is difficult to “see the music,” to make it visible beyond the posters on the walls, the band T-shirts and stickers, and the tattoos exhibited across bodies. You can go to the same places, be among these people, and not notice their commitments to sobriety or a vegan life choice and to the underground music scenes of the city. The boundaries of the straight edge subculture are rigid, but other elements shaping their identities may be idiosyncratic, hidden, heterogeneous, or subtle. Some members of the culture have told me they do not even have tattoos or do not dress as “hardcore” as the others, but that they have been there actively organizing gigs inside the collective for more than a decade.



Figures. 1 & 2. *Verdurada* poster from June 1998 (left) showing an image related to the debate about gentrification in Sao Paulo. Another from April 2012 (right): the sign held by the octopus reads “Vende-se” (“For sale”), affixed to a historical building.



Many people who participate in *Verdurada*, inside or outside the collective, by playing in bands, making fanzines and organizing music festivals, claim to have a “parallel life,”—that is, a job, family situation, or other interests that shape their identities and everyday lives. Within these parallel lives, people devise mechanisms with which to camouflage their status as straight edge. Nonetheless, during the musical performances at *Verdurada*, their existence changes for a couple of hours, in moments of collective explosion and ecstasy that are almost cathartic (Bittencourt 120), and in which the visual dimensions of the subculture assume high levels of expressiveness.

The Visuality of *Verdurada*

During the *Verdurada* festivals, the visuality of the subculture pulses even in the smallest details. As noted earlier, one of the key visual tokens of the straight edge subculture, the mark of differentiated identity, is the X on the back of the hands. Most people draw this before or during the festival, using a pen or a marker. I met a few festival-goers with the X permanently tattooed on their bodies. A significant number of people in the audience mark their hands as a way of proclaiming a commitment to sobriety within their lives and inside that space.

Figure 3. Vocalist of the band “Still X Strong” X-ing up before the presentation and wearing a t-shirt with the phrase “Love hardcore, hate homophobia” under his shirt.

Figures 4 & 5. Vocalists with the X on their hands during the bands’ performances.

AROUND THE X:
REFLECTIONS ON STRAIGHT EDGE, VISUALITY, AND IDENTITY BOUNDARIES

Tattoos with vegan and straight edge meanings, symbols, and messages can also be spotted on the visible/uncovered parts of bodies throughout the festival. Atkinson sees these tattoos as a form of resistance, a controlled and rationalized form of dissent that is also corporeal (215). Bittencourt also observed these gestures in São Paulo's straight edge subculture, with young people tattooing the X on their hands even though they knew this might limit their chances of getting a job (107). As Hebdige points out, certain forms of body modification, such as face tattoos, allow bearers:

to burn most of your bridges. In the current economic climate, when employers can afford to pick and choose, such gestures are a public disavowal of the will to queue for work, throwing your self away before They do it for you. (Hebdige 32)

While tattoos are becoming more socially acceptable, having some visible parts of the body tattooed, such as the hands, neck, or face, are still taboo in Brazil.

Beyond the corporeal visibility of the subculture, the commercialization of a diverse range of objects is another important practice worth noticing. As noted earlier, people and collectives tabling at the event offered a wide variety of products such as fanzines, clothes, records, and accessories at what they called a

“popular price.” Since the application of straight edge symbols, mainly the X, is visible in printed ephemera, clothing, tattooing, band stickers, and cover albums, it is easy to commercialize straight edge products. Among the wares, I saw objects such as a watch with an X, wallet chains with the words “straight edge”, t-shirts with messages (Figure 6), and fanzines.

Regardless of the line-up, the season, or even the venue, *Verdurada* offers people opportunities to buy articles from the bands performing that day, thus helping to “keep the scene alive”: “There are many blogs and sites spreading news about bands and sites from which to download albums. However, the scene does not survive through its visualisation on YouTube, downloads, and Facebook chats, but, rather, by people coming to shows, buying band material and making real friends” (L.A., 21 years old). After attending several *Verduradas* one can observe the t-shirts of Brazilian or international bands who have already played there worn by the audience or band members. The visual relevance of t-shirts to those seeking to read the subculture is particularly strong, insofar as these are used to clearly state musical preferences, political positions, dietary restrictions, DIY principles, sobriety options (as with the t-shirts in Figure 6 above and Figures 8 and 9), and support to lesbian-feminist bands who have never played at a *Verdurada* (but are part of the broader hardcore punk scene).

Figures 6 & 7. Tables with books, records, and t-shirts for sale (left). The t-shirts have straight edge phrases such as “Stay positive,” “VGN SXE” (Vegan Straight Edge), “Livre de Drogas” (Drugs Free), and an “X.” The other table exhibits feminist fanzines and the “Fight Club” book (right).



Few bands have openly declared themselves to be straight edge, but several have been formed by people committed to a sober living. One of the main bands associated with *Verdurada* is the Still X Strong, a self-described “vegan straight edge band.” They keep the X

in their name, as well as the reference to the strength of their choice; members of the band always play with the X on the back of their hands. Their first album covers also depicted the X and/or references to their commitment to abstinence (such as Str8 edge and the

X; see Figures 10, 11, 12). The most recent releases from the band are aesthetically different, with no specific graphic symbol related to straight edge—not even the bands’ name, with its “X”—as it can be seen below (Figure 13). The lyrics of their songs often refer

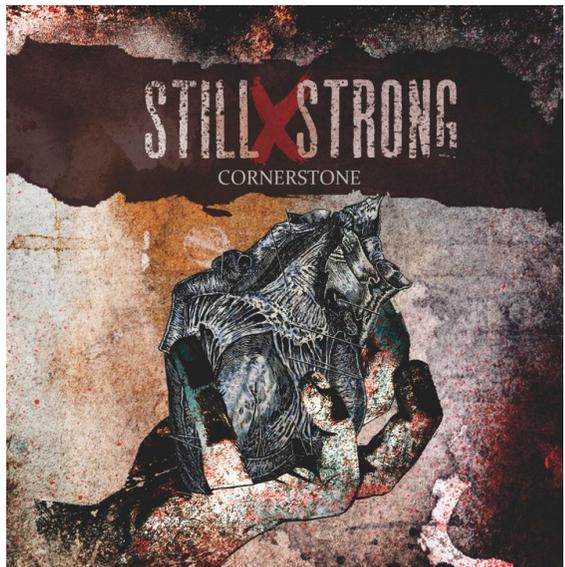


Figure 8. A man in the mosh pit wearing a hoodie with the words “Straight Edge Elite.”



Figure 9. A member from the band Larusso wearing a t-shirt with a “Faça você mesmo” (“do-it-yourself”) message on stage, minutes before the presentation started.

AROUND THE X:
REFLECTIONS ON STRAIGHT EDGE, VISUALITY, AND IDENTITY BOUNDARIES



Figures 10, 11, 12 & 13. Still X Strong album covers, clockwise from top left: Demo (2007), Split (2008), Cornerstone (2011), and Girl (2012).

to veganism and straight edge life choices, but the changes on the covers suggest a fractured visual identity, highlighting the fact that straight edge iconography is not always visible or obvious, but sometimes hidden (from the surface at least).

If we focus on spaces themselves, we see how the configuration of certain details offers more elements with which to read the event. None of the *Verdurada* festivals I followed had a person responsible for security (such as a security guard) at the entrance or inside the venue. During fieldwork I rarely heard stories of fights and violence at *Verdurada*; the relatively safety of these gigs evidenced, for example, by the kids hanging out in the audience with their tattooed parents, truly absorbed by the aggressive sounds coming from the guitars, basses, and drums on stage. According to A.M., *Verdurada* is a space suitable for a wide range of audiences, including children, since it is alcohol/drugs free.

During most of my fieldwork the venue being booked most frequently for *Verdurada*'s gigs was the Ego Club (Nestor Pestana street). Sometimes, in the entrance, they hang papers with messages of sobriety and respect or inside jokes. The interior has red walls and lights, mirrors, a small stage, and a space usually dedicated to the bar, with fridges promoting beer brands famous in Brazil. During the *Verdurada*, this space was used to sell water and *Mupy*, we well as some (unhealthy) vegan food such as hamburgers, coxinhas (a vegan version of a traditional Brazilian snack usually made with chicken), esfihas, kibes, cupcakes, etc (Figure 16). The list of food options uses "local formulations" (Larsen 101) of the straight edge X, such as the "X" in "coXinha"

Figures 14 & 15. Children in the audience.

to allude to straight edge. The menu also lists “Kassab,” referring to São Paulo’s mayor at the time, Gilberto Kassab.

The space offers a small stage for the bands, minimizing or collapsing the distance between performers and audience. In front of the stage there is the mosh pit, with its fast and sometimes aggressive dancing during performances. The mosh pit occupies a significant (ephemeral) space and it is more common to see men dancing than women. Behind and beside the mosh pit are spots for those who are not participating in the dancing, stage diving, or head walking.

When a debate takes place between performances, everyone interested in participating sits down (sometimes in circles) to watch, listen, and ask questions. The quick shifts between energetic dancing and the quiet, seated listening that characterizes the debate are impressive. While the entire audience is not always interested in discussion, the floor is always full of people.

After the last band, a vegan dinner is served to the audience (it is included in the price of the ticket); the night ends with the possibility of sociability among those in the line for food that gradually forms outside of the venue. Each person who wants to be part of the dinner can get in line and receive a disposable plate, usually filled with rice and vegetables. Since it is outside, in front of the venue, the dining is not necessarily comfortable (one has to eat leaning on walls or sitting on the sidewalks), but several people see in this moment an opportunity for socializing and talking with their friends before heading somewhere else or going back home.



JHESSICA REIA



Final remarks

To the surprise of many people the straight edge subculture is still active in Brazil, after more than 20 years of uninterrupted existence. The subculture has organized the *Verdurada* festivals since 1996 and, despite many changes (in the city, as well as inside the subculture), the core values and principles of

straight edge identity continue to revolve around a commitment to sobriety and abstinence. The importance of this subculture resides, in part, in its stability, its connections to the hardcore punk scene, its promotion of debate and engagement with political issues, and its DIY musical production. An ongoing question is how much the constitution of the identity boundaries for straight edge are obvious from the

outside, particularly since they are difficult to read even for people inside the subculture—the choice of sobriety is not always obvious and visible. The making of identity boundaries is a many-sided process, replete with conflicts over how to be seen (and recognized) as straight edge by one's peers. Some visual elements, such as the Xs marked on the back of the hands, are ephemeral, transitory, and appear mostly during the



Figure 16. The bar at a *Verdurada* event, filled with water, *Mupy*, and vegan food.



Figure 17. Burgers displayed at the bar, with an unused beer fridge in the back.

festivals, connected deeply to the subculture's musical expressivity. Other visual elements, such as tattoos, serve as more permanent statements. All of the objects in orbit around straight edge identity (t-shirts, zines, records, accessories) play an important role for those willing to show, to outsiders and other straight edgers alike, the commitment they have made to sober living. As a result of this complexity, and through the

importance of its visual elements, this subculture and its members invite reflection on the relations between visibility (in its ephemeral and permanent forms) and materiality. This visibility forms part of the experiences and practices that shape the identitarian boundaries of straight edge. The traces of the subculture within the city may be ephemeral (as is the case for posters and transitory venues) or invisible (insofar as some stores

and restaurants cater to all kinds of audiences). In this respect, the visuality and materiality of the straight edge subculture invite a reading of the world that extends beyond its fixed and permanent elements. Indeed, the visibility of scenes may be ephemeral, subtle, and fluid, shaped by the scenes' appropriation of the surrounding city and its objects and by the vantage point from which they are seen.



Figure 18. One of the few women I spotted in the mosh pit.



Figure 19. Audience during the debate.

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Image notes

Figures 1 and 2. Source: *Verdurada's* Flickr account.

Figures 3 to 9 and 14 to 19. Author's personal archive.

Figures 10 to 13. Still X Strong, Bandcamp page (<https://stillxstrong.bandcamp.com/>)

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ).

Notes

¹ The song “Straight Edge” is a track from Minor Threat’s 7” EP (1981), later reissued as part of the collection *Minor Threat* (1984) and also the *Complete Discography* (1989).

² The in-depth interviews were conducted in São Paulo and by Skype/Telephone along my fieldwork. I prefer to use their initials and the ages shown here represent the alleged age at the time of the interview.

³ See: <<http://super.abril.com.br/cultura/funk-garotos-do-suburbio>>, accessed on 11 January 2016.