

Untethered

Identity in Subculture and *The Mighty Boosh*

Julia Sirmons

As an obsessive over minutiae, I used to obnoxiously proclaim the brilliance of the TV show *The Mighty Boosh* by citing a single, minor line of dialogue: “You must love me exactly as I love you,” uttered by Old Gregg (Noel Fielding) a transsexual sea creature who looks remarkably like Rick James in a tutu. Gregg encounters the helpless manchild Howard Moon (Julian Barratt) and is instantly besotted, sunnily oblivious to Howard’s disgust. This exchange, borne of utter absurdity, reveals the poignant potential of comedy in the common experience of the ridiculous.

You can imagine my surprise when, listening to the commentary track for the Old Gregg episode, I discovered that the line was lifted from the 1958 film *The Vikings*, starring Kirk Douglas. I experienced a crisis of authenticity, a sinking feeling when one discovers that an admired cultural product is quotational or derivative. Our current culture suffers from authenticity anxiety, but the Old Gregg example reveals how contemporary media fuels and facilitates such mania. If *Boosh* did not exist in the age of commentary tracks and intertextuality, I would still be blathering away, blissfully ignorant of the link between the show I love and the film I have no desire to see.

The Mighty Boosh, often called a “cult” hit, is fetishized as an authentically hip text. Yet the show itself both revels in and lampoons the trends of revivalism and pastiche. Penned by Barratt

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and Fielding, *Boosh* follows the pompous Howard and his best friend, happy-go-lucky Vince Noir (Fielding). The first television series (2004) took place in the zoo where Howard and Vince work. The second series (2005) abandoned the zoo and moved the duo to a flat in London. Series three (2007) took place mainly in the Nabootique, a second-hand shop owned by the shaman Naboo (Michael Fielding).

The *Boosh* franchise has spawned two live tours, a book, and an iPhone app; there have also been rumors of a film. While all three series have been released on DVD stateside, the show has never been broadcast in its entirety on US television. Nevertheless, it has gained an American following, and two US live shows sold out almost immediately. The facility of Internet downloads ensured that some Americans were aware of the show long before the US broadcasts. Knowledge and love of *Boosh* carried a kind of under-the-radar cachet: When you saw people dressed as Howard and Vince for Halloween, a conversation peppered with favorite lines of dialogue inevitably ensued. Once the show was available through mass media, savvy viewers asserted their authenticity with the familiar lament “I liked it before it was cool.” Such responses echo the ethos of the show, which satirizes the assertion of identity through inclusion and exclusion. A comedic text featuring exuberant exaggeration and detached critique, *Boosh* both glorifies and lampoons notions of authenticity and coolness. The valorization of the show’s off-beat sensibility, appealing only to those who get the joke, is evident in the tendency of both American and British media to describe it as “surreal.” This is a problematic descriptor, often ahistorically and imprecisely used. However in this context, it tends to signify the show’s juxtaposition of mundane and fantastic elements. Such juxtaposition can be spatial (doors lead into alternate universes), temporal (the diegesis is a pre-information age universe, but modern technology pops up occasionally, usually in service of a joke), and ontological (fantastic beings are preoccupied with quotidian pursuits, like Naboo’s Board of Shamen in *Hangover-style* buffoonery during a bachelor party). Thus *The Mighty Boosh* practices a form of pastiche, closest to Richard Dyer’s notion

JULIA SIRMONS

of “form qua form.” It deploys a patchwork assembly of styles, purely for style’s sake.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in *Boosh*’s portrayal of British post-war youth subcultures, which were taxonomized by theorist Dick Hebdige. But the show self-consciously distances itself from the material and racial realities that Hebdige believes underlie all subcultures. From this distance, *Boosh* spoofs the fetishization of authenticity inherent in subcultural expression. The subcultural affinities of the main characters reveal how this is accomplished.



SUBCULTURAL STYLE, PART I: HOWARD. Howard’s look is indebted to the beat culture of the 1950s. The beats exoticized the black man as the “noble savage,” fantasized about exotic escapes, and harbored writerly ambitions. Style-wise, the beat look was “earthy,” featuring natural fibers and colors.

Brimming with pretension, Howard dreams of being an author. In a storyline typical of their dynamic, Howard's attempt to write a great novel (he only produces a single sentence) are trumped by Vince, whose story about a piece of bubblegum is lauded by the publisher Howard is trying to impress. Howard also frequently attempts to "get away from it all," either on an Arctic expedition, a fishing trip, or in a cabin in the woods.

Howard's manifestation of the beat persona marries two discourses, undeniably related but not commonly associated: the cultural "miscegenation" of white and black culture and the history of British imperialism. Howard harbors both an obsessive love of jazz and a yearning for a long-lost Britain where intrepid men made the globe their personal plaything. On his Arctic adventure, Howard follows the path of explorer Biggie Shackleton, an obvious reference to real-life Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, whose exploits typified the personal bravery and geographic reach that exulted the British empire. Howard's favorite magazine, the *Global Explorer*, is delivered by a courier wearing the pith helmet, khaki fatigues, and sporting the bushy mustache of a Boer War soldier.

Howard's subcultural affinity is a satire of Hebdige's argument that British subcultures sprung from post-war race relations: We learn that Howard literally has a black man living inside him. In the episode "Electro" it is revealed that sometime in the (typically undetermined) past, Howard sold his soul to the Spirit of Jazz in order to become "the best jazz musician in Yorkshire." (The punchline about Howard's "authenticity" writes itself here.) Now, whenever Howard plays an instrument, the Spirit of Jazz possesses him, forcing him to play long improvisational solos. The obvious implications are complicated by the fact that the Spirit of Jazz is not played by a black actor, but rather by Fielding in cartoonish blackface and dreadlocks, feigning a stereotypically gravelly American accent. This is a farce of subcultural origins that were already rooted in a fantasized view of race relations.

Howard's conviction that consistency of style is proof of authenticity is frequently lampooned. While his friend Vince is a fashion magpie, constantly changing his look, Howard rarely

deviates from his uniform of muted trousers, turtleneck, and patterned shirt. But Howard's frequent claims that he is less superficial than Vince are always debunked, most notably when he agonizes over what gauge of corduroy trousers and what shade of beige turtleneck to wear to a party. In what is perhaps the show's most sustained and trenchant critique of authenticity panic—the series three episode “The Power of the Crimp”—Vince is shaken to the core when he discovers that an impostor, Lance Dior, has been aping his look. (In the world of *The Mighty Boosh*, where style is everything, this proves much more frightening than any of the monsters or villains that the duo fight in other episodes.) Howard initially dismisses Vince's dilemma and tries to cheer him with a *Free to Be You and Me*-style ditty titled “It's What's Inside That Counts.” He quickly changes his tune, however, upon learning that Lance has a sidekick named Harold Boom, who shares Howard's affinity for turtle-necks, printed button-downs, and fedora hats.

SUBCULTURAL STYLE, PART II: VINCE. While the show takes great pains to portray Howard and Vince's subcultural identities as equally ludicrous, much of the humor of the show is predicated on the premise that Howard is “the nerd” and Vince “the cool one.” In the world of *Boosh*, where unmoored stylistic pastiche rules the day, Howard's commitment to a single look, and his attachment to the historical conditions behind it (primarily conveyed through his encyclopedic knowledge of jazz), doom him to fogginess. Vince, on the other hand, appropriates a wide array of subcultural signifiers, ignorant of the socio-historical realities behind them.

In the episode “Jungle,” when Howard mocks Vince's outfit, he retorts, “This is the mod style.” But Vince doesn't look like a mod; he's wearing his green zookeeper's uniform, customized with white paint, patches and buttons. Nevertheless, Vince says he's “getting into the mod scene” and produces a copy of the magazine *Mod Monthly*. Vince tells Howard that the man on the cover is “Über Mod” and declares his intent to usurp him, proclaiming “I'm the king of the mods!”

Later, Howard and Vince venture into the zoo's jungle room,

UNTETHERED

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which has the dimensions of an actual jungle. Howard, who dreams of exploration and fetishizes utilitarianism, dresses for the excursion in a Hawaiian shirt, cargo vest, and canvas hat. (He dubs this look “forest casual for the leafy gent.”) He is appalled when Vince shows up in full mod regalia: double-breasted blue pinstripe suit, pink pocket square, and multicolored ascot.

Vince eventually drops his *Mod Monthly*, and we see a furry arm flip through the pages while an off-screen voice murmurs “Ben Sherman, mmm....”¹ Departing the jungle room, our heroes discover that the wolves, under the influence of Vince’s magazine, have become mods: walking upright, sporting suits with pocket squares, and riding scooters. Vince once again proclaims, “I’m king of the mods,” and the wolves genuflect before him.

Throughout the episode, Vince’s take on mod style is dissociated from material reality. He never performs any of the “labor”—like scooter maintenance, hair styling and suit tailoring—that

1. The Ben Sherman clothing company, founded in Brighton in 1963, is a purveyor of button-down shirts popular with mods and later skinheads.

Hebdige sees as central to the mod lifestyle. He does not become a mod gradually through acquisition and activity, but instantly morphs into one. Vince's dissociated, rootless method of expression reflects the state of subculture today, when revivalism, instant information access, and intensified commodification facilitates rapid acquisition of styles, divorced from their original context.

The jungle episode does nod to mod's urban black roots, albeit in typically absurdist fashion. Whilst separated from Howard, Vince impresses a black musician, Rudi van DiSarzio, who helps him on his journey. Again, the black character is played by a white actor (Barratt) in makeup. But the comic distancing goes one step further, as Rudi (as he appears in this episode) is not entirely human: He has a puppet's body attached to a piece of plywood, and Barratt's head protrudes through a hole in the wooden backdrop. Again, the specter of race relations is perverted and dissociated from any real-world notion of subcultural genesis.

Of course, no tour of subcultural styles would be complete without an examination of punk, and *Boosh* devotes an entire episode to it. For Hebdige, punk was cumulative pastiche: It incorporated stylistic signifiers of preceding subcultures, crudely patched together with the safety pins and bondage straps so fundamental to its look. Punk remains fascinating because its ideological roots run so close to the surface. The influence of Situationism on punk impresarios Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren is well documented. Furthermore, punk was so outré, so in-your-face in its provocation, that its agenda was hard to miss. A picture of Queen Elizabeth with a safety pin through her mouth leaves little doubt about its political dimensions.

While its patchwork structure makes punk an especially good subject for *The Mighty Boosh*, its overt politics also make it a unique challenge. This tension is plumbed in the episode "Journey to the Centre of the Punk." Here Vince, again without any evident motivation, has decided he's a punk. Since punk style is so distinctive, he reproduces the look ably. However, since punk's politics are equally evident, he also knows that he's supposed

UNTETHERED

to be angry about something. Howard, whose own subcultural affiliations make discontent and *anomie* his rightful turf, for once holds the upper hand. His interrogates Vince:

HOWARD: I don't understand you. One minute you're a new raver, next minute you're mod. Always flickin' about on the breeze of fashion.

VINCE: Yeah, well I'm a punk now, alright?

HOWARD: Oh really?

VINCE: Yeah, and I'm angry!

HOWARD: Oh yeah, what are you angry about?

VINCE: About stuff!

HOWARD: What stuff?

VINCE: All the stuff...that's goin' on in the world.

HOWARD: Yeah, like what?

VINCE: Government, climate change...

HOWARD: Climate change?

VINCE: Gettin' hot, Howard! You not noticed?

HOWARD: And that's making you angry why? Because it makes your hair a bit more difficult to straighten?

VINCE: That, and it's a bit clammy.

In a desperate attempt to prove his punk bona fides, Vince takes a bite out of one of Howard's priceless jazz records. Later, while on stage with his new punk band, Vince falls ill and starts scat singing. Howard, interpreting the scat, discovers that Vince's body has been invaded by a "rogue jazz cell" (a be-tentacled version of the Spirit of Jazz). As Vince is allergic to jazz, the cell will kill him if it is not stopped. Naboo shrinks Howard and injects him into Vince's bloodstream in order to destroy the cell. In this, perhaps the show's most flagrant example of subculture divorced from causes and sources, the human body ceases to be flesh and blood and is remapped as a site of subcultural warfare. The punk issue is so challenging for *Boosh* that it actually provokes the only instance in the entire series where Howard can save the day. But at the last minute he is unable to kill the jazz cell because, in an obvious homage to *Star Wars*, it tells Howard that it is his father. Howard correctly deduces that this is a lie, as his father is "a geography teacher in Leeds," but he accepts



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that they might be distant cousins. After they are normal-sized again and the ruse is revealed, a revived Vince stabs the jazz cell with a safety pin that used to grace the nose of Sid Vicious. Since the pin is “chock full of punk diseases” and punk and jazz are anathema, this does the trick. The “authentic” subcultural fetish object solves the fantastical problem.

Still, in his failure to fully embody the punk ethos, Vince performs one of the show’s most deceptively trenchant bits of cultural critique. Before succumbing to the virus, he performs a song titled “I Did a Shit on Your Mum.” It concludes with the triumphantly bratty lines “I did a shit on your shit/I did a shit on your shit! I did a shit on your shit!/Irony completed!” Here *Boosh* strikes the exact tenor it always seeks: a subcultural reference that is insightful in its very superficiality, pure form and pure comic gag.

CONCLUSION. On one level, *The Mighty Boosh* can be read as an extended critique of the notion of authenticity in style. Its apparent lack of concern with technological and socio-economic realities actually marks it as very much of the current moment. The show courts two kinds of spectators: those who know a line of dialogue originally comes from *The Vikings* and those who don't, those who recognize Vince's graphic stitched cowboy suit as an homage to Gram Parsons in his Flying Burrito Brothers days and those for whom the look is something entirely new and revelatory. The contemporary climate of hyperreferentiality, instant access and subdivision of communities based on ever smaller areas of shared interest means that these two groups of spectators have simultaneously never been closer nor further apart. *Boosh* often references to Camden Town, the London neighborhood famous for its open-air markets: It's one of the few places where one can see mods, hippies and punks decked out in full regalia. The show's fiction constitutes a kind of virtual Camden Town, a site where old subcultures are revived and float free, prompting multiplying patterns of inclusion and exclusion, those twin subcultural impulses.

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