Dick Hebdige

THE FUNCTION OF SUBCULTURE

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

NO CULTURAL STUDIES BOOK has been more widely read than Dick Hebdige's 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, from which this essay is taken. It brought a unique and supple blend of Althusser, Gramsci and semiotics (as propounded by Barthes and the "Prague School") to bear on the world of, or at any rate near to, the young British academics and students who first became immersed in cultural studies. That was the world of "subcultures" more visible in Britain than anywhere else: teds, skinheads, punks, Bowie-ites, hippies, dreads...

For Hebdige two Gramscian terms are especially useful in analyzing subcultures: conjuncture and specificity. Subcultures form in communal and symbolic engagements with the larger system of late industrial culture; they're organized around, but not wholly determined by, age and class, and are expressed in the creation of styles. These styles are produced within specific historical and cultural "conjunctures;" they are not to be read as simply resisting hegemony or as magical resolutions to social tensions – as earlier theorists had supposed. Rather subcultures cobble together (or hybridize) styles out of the images and material culture available to them in the effort to construct identities which will confer on them "relative autonomy" within a social order fractured by class, generational differences, work etc.

In his later work, Hebdige (1988) was to rework his method, admitting that he had underestimated the power of commercial culture to appropriate, and indeed, to produce, counter-hegemonic styles. Punk, in particular, was a unique mixture of an avant-garde cultural strategy, marketing savvy and working-class transgression produced in the face of a section of British youth's restricted access to consumer markets. The line between subculture as resistance and commercial

culture as both provider of pleasures and an instrument of hegemony is in fact very hard to draw – especially when youth markets are in question.

It would be particularly interesting to apply Hebdige's methods to 1990s subcultures – the Goths and racist skinheads and, most of all, those groups where fanship, niche marketing and subcultures fuse (like Trekkies, football fans and ravers). And: do fans of high culture now make up a subculture?

Further reading: Clarke *et al.* 1976; Cohen 1980; Gelder and Thornton 1997; Hebdige 1979, 1988; Lipsitz 1990; McRobbie and Nava 1984; Redhead 1990, 1993, 1997b; Ross and Rose 1994.

The subcultures introduced in the previous sections [of Hebdige's book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*] have been described as a series of mediated responses to the presence in Britain of a sizeable black community. The proximity of the two positions – white working-class youth and Negro – invites identification and even when this identity is repressed or openly resisted, black cultural forms (e.g., music) continue to exercise a major determining influence over the development of each subcultural style. It is now time to explore the relationship between these spectacular subcultures and those other groups (parents, teachers, police, 'respectable' youth etc.) and cultures (adult working-class and middle-class cultures) against which they are ostensibly defined. Most writers still tend to attribute an inordinate significance to the opposition between young and old, child and parent, citing the rites of passage which, even in the most primitive societies, are used to mark the transition from childhood to maturity. What is missing from these accounts is any idea of historical specificity, any explanation of why these particular forms should occur at this particular time.

It has become something of a cliché to talk of the period after the Second World War as one of enormous upheaval in which the traditional patterns of life in Britain were swept aside to be replaced by a new, and superficially less class-ridden system. Sociologists have dwelt in particular upon the disintegration of the working-class community and have demonstrated how the demolition of the traditional environment of back-to-backs and corner shops merely signified deeper and more intangible changes.

None the less, despite the confident assurances of both Labour and Conservative politicians that Britain was now entering a new age of unlimited affluence and equal opportunity, that we had 'never had it so good', class refused to disappear. The ways in which class was *lived*, however – the forms in which the experience of class found expression in culture – did change dramatically. The advent of the mass media, changes in the constitution of the family, in the organization of school and work, shifts in the relative status of work and leisure, all served to fragment and polarize the working-class community, producing a series of marginal discourses within the broad confines of class experience.

The development of youth culture should be seen as just part of this process of polarization. Specifically, we can cite the relative increase in the spending power of working-class youth, the creation of a market designed to absorb the resulting

surplus, and changes in the education system consequent upon the 1944 Butler Act as factors contributing to the emergence after the War of a generational consciousness amongst the young. This consciousness was still rooted in a generalized experience of class, but it was expressed in ways which were different from, and in some cases openly antithetical to, the traditional forms.

The persistence of class as a meaningful category within youth culture was not, however, generally acknowledged until fairly recently and, as we shall see, the seemingly spontaneous eruption of spectacular youth styles has encouraged some writers to talk of youth as the new class – to see in youth a community of undifferentiated Teenage Consumers. It was not until the 1960s that the myth of a classless youth culture was seriously challenged. This challenge is best understood in the context of the larger debate about the function of subculture which has, for many years, preoccupied those sociologists who specialize in deviancy theory. It would seem appropriate to include here a brief survey of some of the approaches to youth and subculture put forward in the course of that debate.

The study of subculture in Britain grew out of a tradition of urban ethnography which can be traced back at least as far as the nineteenth century: to the work of Henry Mayhew and Thomas Archer, and to the novels of Charles Dickens and Arthur Morrison. However, a more 'scientific' approach to subculture complete with its own methodology (participant observation) did not emerge until the 1920s when a group of sociologists and criminologists in Chicago began collecting evidence on juvenile street gangs and deviant groups (professional criminals, bootleggers etc.). In 1927, Frederick Thrasher produced a survey of over a thousand street gangs, and later William Foote Whyte described at length in *Street Corner Society* the rituals, routines and occasional exploits of one particular gang.

Participant observation continues to produce some of the most interesting and evocative accounts of subculture, but the method also suffers from a number of significant flaws. In particular, the absence of any analytical or explanatory framework has guaranteed such work a marginal status in the predominantly positivist tradition of mainstream sociology. More crucially, such an absence has ensured that while accounts based upon a participant observation approach provide a wealth of descriptive detail, the significance of class and power relations is consistently neglected or at least underestimated. In such accounts, the subculture tends to be presented as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts. As a result, the picture of subculture is often incomplete. For all the Chandleresque qualities of the prose; for all the authenticity and close detail which participant observation made possible, it soon became apparent that the method needed to be supplemented by other more analytical procedures.

During the 1950s, Albert Cohen and Walter Miller sought to supply the missing theoretical perspective by tracing the continuities and breaks between dominant and subordinate value systems. Cohen stressed the compensatory function of the juvenile gang: working-class adolescents who under-achieved at school joined gangs in their leisure time in order to develop alternative sources of self-esteem. In the gang, the core values of the straight world – sobriety, ambition, conformity etc. – were replaced by their opposites: hedonism, defiance of authority and the quest for 'kicks'. Miller, too, concentrated on the value system of the juvenile gang, but he underlined the similarities between gang and parent culture, arguing that many

of the values of the deviant group merely reiterated in a distorted or heightened form the 'focal concerns' of the adult working-class population. In 1961, Matza and Sykes used the notion of subterranean values to explain the existence of legitimate as well as delinquent youth cultures. Like Miller, the writers recognized that potentially subversive goals and aims were present in systems which were otherwise regarded as perfectly respectable. They found embedded in youth culture those subterranean values (the search for risk, excitement etc.) which served to underpin rather than undermine the day-time ethos of production (postponement of gratification, routine etc.).

Subsequently, these theories were tested in the course of British field work. In the 1960s, Peter Willmott published his research into the range of cultural options open to working-class boys in the East End of London. Contrary to the breezy assertions of writers like Mark Abrams, Willmott concluded that the idea of a completely classless youth culture was premature and meaningless. He observed instead that the leisure styles available to youth were inflected through the contradictions and divisions intrinsic to a class society. It was left to Phil Cohen to explore in detail the ways in which class-specific experience was encoded in leisure styles which after all had largely originated in London's East End. Cohen was also interested in the links between youth and parent cultures, and interpreted the various youth styles as sectional adaptations to changes which had disrupted the *whole* East End community. He defined subculture as a 'compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents . . . and the need to maintain the parental identifications' (Cohen 1980). In this analysis, the mod, ted and skinhead styles were interpreted as attempts to mediate between experience and tradition, the familiar and the novel. And for Cohen, the 'latent function' of subculture was to 'express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture' (Cohen 1980). The mods, for instance,

> attempted to realise, but in an imaginary relation, the condition of existence of the socially mobile white-collar worker . . . [while] . . . their argot and ritual forms . . . [continued to stress] . . . many of the traditional values of the parent culture.
>
> (Cohen 1980)

Here at last was a reading which took into account the full interplay of ideological, economic and cultural factors which bear upon subculture. By grounding his theory in ethnographic detail, Cohen was able to insert class into his analysis at a far more sophisticated level than had previously been possible. Rather than presenting class as an abstract set of external determinations, he showed it working out in practice as a material force, dressed up, as it were, in experience and exhibited in style. The raw material of history could be seen refracted, held and 'handled' in the line of a mod's jacket, in the soles on a teddy boy's shoes. Anxieties concerning class and sexuality, the tensions between conformity and deviance, family and school, work and leisure, were all frozen there in a form which was at once visible and opaque, and Cohen provided a way of reconstructing that history; of penetrating the skin of style and drawing out its hidden meanings.

Cohen's work still furnishes the most adequate model available for a reading of subcultural style. However, in order to underline the importance and meaning of class, he had been forced to lay perhaps too much emphasis on the links between the youth and adult working-class cultures. There are equally significant differences between the two forms which must also be acknowledged. As we have seen, a generational consciousness *did* emerge amongst the young in the postwar period, and even where experience was shared between parents and children this experience was likely to be differently interpreted, expressed and handled by the two groups. Thus, while obviously there are points where parent and adolescent 'solutions' converge and even overlap, when dealing with the spectacular subculture we should not grant these an absolute ascendancy. And we should be careful when attempting to tie back subcultural style to its generative context not to overstress the fit between respectable working-class culture and the altogether more marginal forms with which we are concerned here.

For example, the skinheads undoubtedly reasserted those values associated with the traditional working-class community, but they did so *in the face of* the widespread renunciation of those values in the parent culture – *at a time when* such an affirmation of the classic concerns of working-class life was considered inappropriate. Similarly, the mods were negotiating changes and contradictions which were simultaneously affecting the parent culture but they were doing so in the terms of their own relatively autonomous problematic – by inventing an 'elsewhere' (the weekend, the West End) which was defined *against* the familiar locales of the home, the pub, the working man's club, the neighbourhood.

If we emphasize integration and coherence at the expense of dissonance and discontinuity, we are in danger of denying the very manner in which the subcultural form is made to crystallize, objectify and communicate group experience. We should be hard pressed to find in the punk subculture, for instance, any symbolic attempts to 'retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in the parent culture' (Cohen 1980) beyond the simple fact of cohesion itself: the expression of a highly structured, visible, tightly bounded group identity. Rather, the punks seemed to be parodying the alienation and emptiness which have caused sociologists so much concern, realizing in a deliberate and wilful fashion the direst predictions of the most scathing social critics, and celebrating in mock-heroic terms the death of the community and the collapse of traditional forms of meaning.

We can, therefore, grant only a qualified acceptance to Cohen's theory of subcultural style. Later, I shall be attempting to rethink the relationship between parent and youth cultures by looking more closely at the whole process of signification in subculture. At this stage, however, we should not allow these objections to detract from the overall importance of Cohen's contribution. It is no exaggeration to say that the idea of style as a coded response to changes affecting the entire community has literally transformed the study of spectacular youth culture. Much of the research extracted in *Resistance Through Rituals* was premised upon the basic assumption that style could be read in this way. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the authors interpreted the succession of youth cultural styles as symbolic forms of resistance; as spectacular symptoms of a wider and more generally submerged dissent which characterized the whole post-war period. This reading of style opens up a number of issues which demand examination, and the

approach to subculture adopted in *Resistance Through Rituals* provides the basis for much of what follows. We begin with the notion of specificity.

Specificity: Two types of teddy boy

If we take as our starting point the definition of culture used in *Resistance Through Rituals* – culture is 'that level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give *expressive form* to their social and material . . . experience', we can see that each subculture represents a different handling of the 'raw material of social . . . existence' (Hall and Jefferson 1976). But what exactly is this 'raw material'? We learn from Marx that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'. In effect, the material (i.e., social relations) which is continually being transformed into culture (and hence subculture) can never be completely 'raw'. It is always mediated: inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings. Unless one is prepared to use some essentialist paradigm of the working class as the inexorable bearers of an absolute transhistorical Truth, then one should not expect the subcultural response to be either unfailingly correct about real relations under capitalism, or even *necessarily* in touch, in any immediate sense, with its material position in the capitalist system. Spectacular subcultures express what is by definition an imaginary set of relations. The raw material out of which they are constructed is both real and ideological. It is mediated to the individual members of a subculture through a variety of channels: school, the family, work, the media etc. Moreover, this material is subject to historical change. Each subcultural 'instance' represents a 'solution' to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions. For example, the mod and teddy boy 'solutions' were produced in response to different conjunctures which positioned them differently in relation to existing cultural formations (immigrant cultures, the parent culture, other subcultures, the dominant culture). We can see this more clearly if we concentrate on one example.

There were two major moments in the history of the teddy boy subculture (the 1950s and the 1970s). But, whilst they maintained the same antagonistic relation to the black immigrant community as their counterparts of the 1950s, the latter-day teds were differently positioned in relation to the parent culture and other youth cultures.

The early 1950s and late 1970s share certain obvious features: the vocabularies of 'austerity' and 'crisis', though not identical, are similar, and more importantly, anxieties about the effects of black immigration on employment, housing and the 'quality of life' were prominent in both periods. However, the differences are far more crucial. The presence in the latter period of an alternative, predominantly working-class youth culture (i.e., the punks), many of whose members actively championed certain aspects of West Indian life, serve clearly to distinguish the two moments. The early teds had marked a new departure. They had represented, in the words of George Melly, 'the dark van of pop culture' and, though few in number,

they had been almost universally vilified by press and parents alike as symptomatic of Britain's impending decline. On the other hand, the very concept of 'revival' in the 1970s gave the teddy boys an air of legitimacy. After all, in a society which seemed to generate a bewildering number of fads and fashions, the teddy boys were a virtual institution: an authentic, albeit dubious part of the British heritage.

The youths who took part in this revival were thus guaranteed in certain quarters at least a limited acceptability. They could be regarded with tolerance, even muted affection, by those working-class adults who, whether original teds or straights, nostalgically inclined towards the 1950s and, possessed of patchy memories, harked back to a more settled and straightforward past. The revival recalled a time which seemed surprisingly remote, and by comparison secure; almost idyllic in its stolid puritanism, its sense of values, its conviction that the future could be better. Freed from time and context, these latter-day teds could be allowed to float as innocent pretenders on the wave of 1970s nostalgia situated somewhere between the Fonz of television's *Happy Days* and a recycled Ovaltine ad. Paradoxically then, the subculture which had originally furnished such dramatic signs of change could be made to provide a kind of continuity in its revived form.

In broader terms, the two teddy boy solutions were responses to specific historical conditions, formulated in completely different ideological atmospheres. There was no possibility in the late 1970s of enlisting working-class support around the cheery imperatives of reconstruction: 'grin and bear it', 'wait and see' etc. The widespread disillusionment amongst working-class people with the Labour Party and Parliamentary politics in general, the decline of the Welfare State, the faltering economy, the continuing scarcity of jobs and adequate housing, the loss of community, the failure of consumerism to satisfy real needs, and the perennial round of industrial disputes, shutdowns and picket line clashes, all served to create a sense of diminishing returns which stood in stark contrast to the embattled optimism of the earlier period. Assisted no doubt by the ideological constructions retrospectively placed upon the Second World War (the fostering around 1973 as a response to protracted industrial disputes, the oil crisis, the three-day week etc. of a patriotic wartime spirit in search of an enemy; the replacement of the concretization 'German' for the concept 'fascist') these developments further combined with the visibility of the black communities to make racism a far more respectable and credible solution to the problems of working-class life.

In addition, the teddy boys' dress and demeanour carried rather different connotations in the 1970s. Of course the 'theft' of an upper-class style which had originally made the whole teddy boy style possible had long been forgotten, and in the process the precise nature of the transformation had been irrevocably lost. What is more the strutting manner and sexual aggressiveness had different meanings in the two periods. The narcissism of the early teds and the carnal gymnastics of jiving had been pitted against what Melly describes as a 'grey colourless world where good boys played ping pong'. The second-generation teds' obstinate fidelity to the traditional 'bad-guy' stereotypes appeared by contrast obvious and reactionary. To the sound of records long since deleted, in clothes which qualified as virtual museum pieces, these latter-day teds resurrected a set of sexual mores (gallantry, courtship) and a swaggering machismo – that 'quaint' combination of chauvinism, Brylcreem and sudden violence – which was already enshrined in the parent culture

as *the* model of masculine behaviour: a model untouched by the febrile excesses of the post-war 'permissive society'.

All these factors drew the teddy boy subculture in its second incarnation *closer* to the parent culture and helped to define it against other existing youth cultural options (punks, Northern soul enthusiasts, heavy metal rockers, football fans, mainstream pop, 'respectable' etc.). For these reasons, wearing a drape coat in 1978 did not mean the same things in the same way as it had done in 1956, despite the fact that the two sets of teddy boys worshipped identical heroes (Elvis, Eddie Cochran, James Dean), cultivated the same quiffs and occupied approximately the same class position. The twin concepts of *conjuncture* and *specificity* (each subculture representing a distinctive 'moment' – a particular response to a particular set of circumstances) are therefore indispensable to a study of subcultural style.

The sources of style

We have seen how the experience encoded in subcultures is shaped in a variety of locales (work, home, school etc.). Each of these locales imposes its own unique structure, its own rules and meanings, its own hierarchy of values. Though these structures articulate together, they do so syntactically. They are bound together as much through difference (home versus school, school versus work, home versus work, private versus public etc.) as through similarity. To use Althusser's admittedly cumbersome terms, they constitute different levels of the same social formation. And though they are, as Althusser takes pains to point out, 'relatively autonomous', these structures remain, in capitalist societies, articulated around the 'general contradiction' between Capital and Labour. The complex interplay between the different levels of the social formation is reproduced in the experience of both dominant and subordinate groups, and this experience, in turn, becomes the 'raw material' which finds expressive form in culture and subculture. Now, the media play a crucial role in defining our experience for us. They provide us with the most available categories for classifying out the social world. It is primarily through the press, television, film etc. that experience is organized, interpreted and made to *cohere in contradiction* as it were. It should hardly surprise us then, to discover that much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media.

Thus, in postwar Britain, the loaded content of subcultural style is likely to be as much a function of what Stuart Hall has called the 'ideological effect' of the media as a reaction to experienced changes in the institutional framework of working-class life. As Hall has argued, the media have 'progressively colonised the cultural and ideological sphere':

> As social groups and classes live, if not in their productive then in their 'social' relations, increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices and values of *other* groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which

the social totality composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces
can be coherently grasped.

(Hall 1977)

So a credible image of social cohesion can be maintained only through the
appropriation and redefinition of cultures of resistance (e.g., working-class youth
cultures) in terms of that image. In this way, the media not only provide groups with
substantive images of other groups, they also relay back to working-class people a
'picture' of their own lives which is 'contained' or 'framed' by the ideological
discourses which surround and situate it.

Clearly, subcultures are not privileged forms; they do not stand outside the
reflexive circuitry of production and reproduction which links together, at least on
a symbolic level, the separate and fragmented pieces of the social totality.
Subcultures are, at least in part, representations of these representations, and
elements taken from the 'picture' of working-class life (and of the social whole in
general) are bound to find some echo in the signifying practices of the various
subcultures. There is no reason to suppose that subcultures spontaneously affirm
only those *blocked* 'readings' excluded from the airwaves and the newspapers
(consciousness of subordinate status, a conflict model of society etc.). They also
articulate, to a greater or lesser extent, some of the *preferred* meanings and
interpretations, those favoured by and transmitted through the authorized channels
of mass communication. The typical members of a working-class youth culture in
part contest and in part agree with the dominant definitions of who and what they
are, and there is a substantial amount of shared ideological ground not only between
them and the adult working-class culture (with its muted tradition of resistance) but
also between them and the dominant culture (at least in its more 'democratic',
accessible forms).

For example, the elaboration of upward and downward options open to
working-class youth does not necessarily indicate any significant difference in the
relative status of the jobs available to the average mod of 1964 and the skinhead of
1968 (though a census might indeed reveal such a difference). Still less does it
reflect *directly* the fact that job opportunities open to working-class youth in general
actually diminished during the intervening period. Rather the different styles and
the ideologies which structure and determine them represent negotiated responses
to a contradictory mythology of class. In this mythology, 'the withering away of
class' is paradoxically countered by an undiluted 'classfulness', a romantic
conception of the traditional whole way of (working-class) life revived twice
weekly on television programmes like *Coronation Street*. The mods and skinheads,
then, in their different ways, were 'handling' this mythology as much as the
exigencies of their material condition. They were learning to live within or without
that amorphous body of images and typifications made available in the mass media
in which class is alternately overlooked and overstated, denied and reduced to
caricature.

In the same way, the punks were not only directly *responding* to increasing
joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression
etc., they were *dramatizing* what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by

constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth (hence the swearing, the references to 'fat hippies', the rags, the lumpen poses). The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms. In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s – with massive unemployment, with the ominous violence of the Notting Hill Carnival, Grunwick, Lewisham and Ladywood – it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as 'degenerates'; as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain. The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety. But these statements, no matter how strangely constructed, were cast in a language which was generally available – a language which was current. This accounts, first, for the appropriateness of the punk metaphor for both the members of the subculture and its opponents and, second, for the success of the punk subculture as spectacle: its ability to symptomatize a whole cluster of contemporary problems. It explains the subculture's ability to attract new members and to produce the requisite outraged responses from the parents, teachers and employers towards whom the moral panic was directed and from the 'moral entrepreneurs' – the local councillors, the pundits and MPs – who were responsible for conducting the 'crusade' against it. In order to communicate disorder, the appropriate language must first be selected, even if it is to be subverted. For punk to be dismissed as chaos, it had first to 'make sense' as noise.

We can now begin to understand how the Bowie cult came to be articulated around questions of gender rather than class, and to confront those critics who relate the legitimate concerns of 'authentic' working-class culture exclusively to the sphere of production. The Bowie-ites were certainly not grappling in any *direct* way with the familiar set of problems encountered on the shop floor and in the classroom: problems which revolve around relations with authority (rebellion versus deference, upward versus downward options etc.). None the less, they were attempting to negotiate a meaningful intermediate space somewhere between the parent culture and the dominant ideology: a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed. To this extent they were engaged in that distinctive quest for a measure of autonomy which characterizes all youth sub(and counter) cultures. In sharp contrast to their skinhead predecessors, the Bowieites were confronting the more obvious chauvinisms (sexual, class, territorial) and seeking, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, to avoid, subvert or overthrow them. They were simultaneously, first, challenging the traditional working-class puritanism so firmly embedded in the parent culture; second, resisting the way in which this puritanism was being made to signify the working class in the media; and, third, adapting images, styles and ideologies made available elsewhere on television and in films (e.g., the nostalgia cult of the early 1970s), in magazines and newspapers (high fashion, the emergence of feminism in its commodity form, e.g., *Cosmopolitan*) in order to construct an alternative identity which communicated a perceived difference: an Otherness. They were, in short, challenging at a symbolic level the 'inevitability', the 'naturalness' of class and gender stereotypes.