



Subculture: The Meaning of Style

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'Hebdige's Subculture: The Meaning of Style is so important: complex and remarkably lucid, it's the first book dealing with punk to offer intellectual content. Hebdige [...] is concerned with the UK's postwar, music-centred, white working-class subcultures, from teddy boys to mods and rockers to skinheads and punks.' - Rolling Stone

With enviable precision and wit Hebdige has addressed himself to a complex topic - the meanings behind the fashionable exteriors of working-class youth subcultures - approaching them with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that combines semiotics, the sociology of deviance and Marxism and come up with a very stimulating short book - *Time Out*

This book is an attempt to subject the various youth-protest movements of Britain in the last 15 years to the sort of Marxist, structuralist, semiotic analytical techniques propagated by, above all, Roland Barthes. The book is recommended whole-heartedly to anyone who would like fresh ideas about some of the most stimulating music of the rock era - *The New York Times*

Subculture: The Meaning of Style Details

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From Reader Review Subculture: The Meaning of Style for online ebook

Demod says

A bit too abstract for a newbie in terms of subculture.

Lauren Boyer says

1. I'm not smart enough for this book so I can't say anything intelligent.
2. I feel like there should have been pictures because he was talking about specific subcultures that could have benefitted from picture examples? Idk it was just a lot to read and I like to complain

Samantha Horowitz says

The book illustrates the complexity of subcultures and their characteristics. The book is elaborate and hard to read. I felt like it could have been shorter and more understandable.

Rebecca says

Another book I read at University, and referenced a lot throughout my Graphic Arts & Design degree. On the reading list and worked with in our Contextual Studies classes and seminars by the tutor who I was always in awe of, and who will always pop into my head when I hear the name 'Walter Gropius' (that's not related to this book by the way). My copy is peppered with sticky notes and handwritten additions.

It reinforced the inherent attraction to subcultures in music and fashion that I had from a young age, and made me realise that they were worthy interests, and I think is probably partly responsible for really being confident in who you are and what you think. There's also a fair bit on David Bowie which is always a bonus in my book!

I did have to re-read sections over to really get them to sink in, as I can't always get theories such as this to permeate the deeper recesses of my brain very easily! I've not really read it properly in a few years, so its a 'to-read' as well as a 'read'.

Hamad says

Don't be fooled by the size of the book. It may look like a quick read, but Hebdige's writing style is convoluted enough to make it into a much longer read.

The connections to Jean Genet are very helpful, and he does try to put the theoretical parts together with

practical examples from the various subcultures of Great Britain in the 60s and 70s. It was not too mind-blowing, but did raise some interesting questions on race, oppression and what it means to be of the 'working class'.

"...the 'mythologist' who can no longer be one with the 'myth-consumers'...we must live an uneasy cerebral relation to the bric-a-brac of life - the mundane forms and rituals whose function it is to make us feel at home, to reassure us, to fill up the gap between desire and fulfillment. Instead, they summon up for us the very fears which they alleviate for others. Their arbitrary nature stands revealed: the apparent can no longer be taken for granted. The cord has been cut: we are cast in a marginal role. We are in a society but not inside it, producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular"

Deepthi says

This classic text from the Birmingham CCCS offers a comprehensive semiotic analysis of the punk movement as a case study in the spectacular nature of subcultures. Hebdige posits that style in subcultural formations in England function as a form of protest against power structures, transforming the meaning of objects from their original use-based definitions into a visual revolt against a classist society entrenched in tradition. Hebdige assumes that the fashions of the punks, mods, teds, and rastas can be explicated using semiotic analytic techniques. He also assumes that a class-based political structure shapes the worldview of the subculture members.

Hebdige initiates the discussion with a definition of three key terms. In 1969, the definition and usage of the term culture was undergoing a transformation in Britain with the introduction of Marxist theory. Culture transitioned from the primarily historical dimension of the study of relationships changes to incorporate a strongly political dimension described as the study of relationships in conflict. Ideology descended below the level of consciousness under the same Marxist influence, transforming from a set of agreed upon beliefs and approaches to an insidious system of principles, far more effective because it is subconscious and thus naturalized among members of society. Finally, Hebdige brings in the Gramscian notion of hegemony to unite culture and ideology in an uneasy relationship guiding the functions and development of society. This sets the stage for his development of spectacular subcultural style as a form of protest to this hegemonical system.

Hebdige keeps to the semiotic tradition of interrogating visual signs in society as a mythic text to be deciphered, and uses the textual analytic techniques employed by Barthes and others. He also includes references to previous theoretical texts to develop his arguments, framing the work in a historical context. Hebdige's tendency to neglect the perspectives of the subcultures he was studying not only goes against the social scientific origins of the term subculture as originated by the University of Chicago, but has prompted criticism in recent years to make the argument that qualitative research is needed to back up Hebdige's and others textual analysis. Hebdige's investigation of motivations is constrained by his lack of qualitative research—he speculates on the reasons for teds' involvement in race-based attacks, but doesn't delve deeply. Similarly, his discussion of West Indian culture is limited by a model that at times casts the Black Man as little more than a metaphor, at the expense of a more sophisticated investigation of relationships between the different subcultures.

Hebdige plumbs the depths of postmodern style and produces a comprehensive record of the historical relevance and referential techniques of various subcultures to be enjoyed by scholars and enthusiasts alike. Hebdige's argument for the subculture as a political formation may be tempered in recent years, but his work

has shaped much of the discussion of subcultures since its publication in 1969. Hebdige's text remains a seminal work in the fields of youth studies, frequently quoted and used as a baseline for current work in the field.

Siobhan says

HEGEMONY and SUBCULTURES

"It is here, at the level of 'normal common sense', that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented and most effective, because it is here that their ideological nature is most effectively concealed. (...) However, the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (...) at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs."

(pp. 11-17)

Andy says

Often fascinating history of various British subcultures, mainly, as the cover would suggest, centered around the late-70's Punk movement, but also including, among other things, a really eye-opening examination of the British skinhead scene (up to the time I read it, I had assumed they were all fascists; not so, as it turned out). A bit on the academic side at times; still, well worth your time.

Tracy Smith says

As a teen in the 80s, I knew few punk rockers and I certainly didn't understand the roots of punk and the role that the movement played in history and culture. Hebdige looks at youth subcultures in post-war Britain and helps the reader to understand the relationship between style and meaning and how that meaning often disrupts society. A very interesting read and I learned quite a bit along the way.

Alan says

A guide on how to read subversion in style.

Elias Vasilis Kontaxakis says

All these articles served to minimize the Otherness so stridently proclaimed in punk style, and defined the subculture in precisely those terms which it sought most vehemently to resist and deny.

What most affected me in Dick Hebdige's analysis of subcultures and their aesthetic significance was actually an anecdote in a footnote. I think I'll save it for the end of this review; it'll redeem the potential over-reading that his book has been criticized for. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, takes a fruitful look at a lot of the deviant cultures from the 1970s UK and finds in them both something remarkable about the artistic content of their anti-establishment tone, and pessimistic in how those tones are subsumed into mainstream culture. The main focus is on the 'punk' movements of the 1970s pioneered by the Sex Pistols, but really the arguments are relevant for any marginalized or subversive culture. Perhaps I should begin by defining such a group: a subculture for Hebdige is one that creates 'noise,' as opposed to sound. This means the group's signs (clothing, language use, artifacts, ideals, etc.) purposely defy understanding. They are in a sense meant to be ironic, or meaningless, in an attempt to highlight the arbitrariness of normative (mainstream) culture. The book then tracks the groups' inexorable transformation, from trivial to threatening to domesticated and finally to profitable. The piece ends on a rather tragic note.

Initially subcultures are harmless. They have innovative dress codes, occupy leisure hours (no one goes to work with a Mohawk), and unify an atypical group of youths. They do exude an anti-establishment aura, which is potentially political, but really the only aim is to interfere with signification. They resist the normative labels and values they view as hypocritical. The rise to prominence for any subculture is actually (usually) from discovery by the world of fashion. As fashion seeks to anticipate trends they look to fringe styles that are gaining momentum. (Perhaps worn by an up-and-coming rock band?) As the subculture's dress code is replicated awareness grows on the subgroup itself. Its deviant values are sensationalized advertized as degenerate in a process known as 'moral panic.' Moral panic has been thoroughly investigated, and I'm sure the reader is familiar: a subculture's values are rarely immoral but because they break taboos (which take for granted consent of meaning) they both shock and entertain mainstream culture. The loud conservatives feel the need to defend traditional values and condemn the subculture; this guarantees its popularity. At the third stage 'experts' and liberal defendants seek to explain or justify the subculture, which not only redefines the group by the very terms it sought to resist, but also repairs the rift in society by placing the 'other' as part of the whole. The subculture is left etiolated by virtue of being 'explained.' It is now domesticated and therefore 'normal'.

The final abuse, for which the only appropriate term is rape, is the commercial exploitation of the subculture. Its values, fashions, and artifacts become commodified for popular consumption. Its cultural leaders receive fame and wealth, not only placing them in the heart of the mainstream, but undermining the fringe roots that first generated the noise. ('If this bloke with nothing but a pink Mohawk and eyebrow ring became rich and famous, why can't you?') Thus counter-culture is mainstream. Companies profit off of groups that are anti-consumer. And as Hebdige so terrifyingly puts it, "symbolic assaults leave real institutions intact." Society effectively murders the subgroup by either converting it to sameness ('What punk kid doesn't have a worried mother and bad acne?') or placing it in a sphere of exotic entertainment that's tamed for viewing ('attending a rock concert for the Sex Pistols'). This leads me to the anecdote I foreshadowed earlier:

"During the Clash's famous performance of 'White Riot' at the Rainbow in 1977 when seats were ripped out and thrown at the stage, the last two rows of the theatre (left, of course, intact) were occupied almost exclusively by record executives and talent scouts: CBS paid for the damage without complaint."

What initiated this entire process were merely a few kids who wanted to talk and dress differently. Not only did society deride these deviants, but eventually labeled and commercialized them. Hebdige celebrates subcultures' aesthetic use of self-identity and political protest, while also lamenting their murder and cannibalization. The only power they have—protest of signification—is insulted, confiscated, and commodified. I feel for these groups just as I don't understand them, but wonder what becomes of their style. Are all subcultures aesthetically impotent? Or can their non-values be reclaimed from the mainstream? In the

end it's probably beside the point: any culture, no matter how marginalized, is valuable for its own sake. Just a pity these are so delicate: once shared they lose their magic.

J.L. Sutton says

Subcultures are a break from the mainstream which offend or unsettle those outside the group, often intentionally. After watching a Sex Pistols concert in 1977, for instance, a British politician is reported as saying that he "felt unclean for about 48 hours." Punk is thus reviled and ridiculed. While still reading Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, I watched the documentary, *The Filth and the Fury: A Sex Pistols Film*, in which a commentator in the late 1970s explained that punk rock was a greater threat to Britain than Russian communism. Amazing! And it is amazing, as I think about it, that my parents in rural Indiana let me buy and then play (and sing along to) *Never Mind the Bollocks* at full volume when I was still in junior high. That was a threat to the Heartland! What were they thinking?

In his study, largely of post-World War II Britain, Hebdige traces how youth subcultures emerge and develop. The focus is on the intersection of music, fashion and opposition to mainstream culture (and how that is expressed as a certain style which can often be traced to the very definition of the subculture). Much of the study centers on punk and reggae; other subcultures Hebdige ties to music forms include the mods, skinheads, hippies, teddy boys and hipsters. It is interesting how these subcultures developed, and, in their own unique ways, addressed political, economic and racial issues. Hebdige also follows reactions of the mainstream to the threat of these emerging subcultures. The book was published in 1979, but one can see many of the same factors at work today in which cultural movements are suppressed, contained and incorporated into the larger culture. An interesting and fun read!

M.liss says

Hebdige limits his scope to a handful of post-war British subcultures (reggae, teddy boys, mods, punks) - appropriate for 138 pages. His theory on the semiotics of subculture, however, can likely be extrapolated to other groups. He pays attention to the way signs are "cut through by class" (17), which is complicated by the punk aesthetic of erasing identity (121).

Each subculture differed from the others, but each shared a common reality: "a struggle both real and metaphorical, which described a world of forms enmeshed in ideology where appearance and illusion were synonymous" (38). Hebdige deconstructs the reappropriation of signs in the dominant culture (Army surplus jackets in the dance hall, the mods' Vespas and neckties, the ruffled shirt, the safety pin through the ear), translating and articulating their subcultural 'meanings.'

He issues a warning: we should be careful to keep our analysis on the level of signifiers (115). We cannot pretend to understand an individual's motivations. We cannot point to a punk's dog collar and say 'your working-class background must have inspired that visual representation of your limited options in society and the workforce.' The subculture adopts the signs on a macro level, and what is signified must also be on that level.

Drawing on Barthes, Hebdige points out that subcultures must communicate using the signs of the dominant culture; this can be problematic, and it forces the subculture to grab hold of the signifiers and wrestle them into new meanings (137). They retain the ghost of their dominant-culture symbolism, and that's why they're interesting.

Peter Landau says

About two years into high school and I hit a wall. I gave up. Not on studying — I still read what interested me, poured over art history books — but academics were over. A year at Syracuse University made that even more clear. I didn't fail, but I was thrown out of the dorms for painting my fingernails black with acrylic paint and pretending to flirt with my guidance counselor. That and the Fuck You graffiti I spray-painted on the windows during parent visiting day. In short, my interests were focused on other things, like punk rock. One of the last projects in high school I was invested in was on alienation. I made a mixtape of my favorite punk songs and played it to the confused bemusement of my teachers and classmates. They couldn't understand the lyrics, so how could they understand the alienation, they said. I guess they missed the point.

Around that time Dick Hebdige published *SUBCULTURE: THE MEANING OF STYLE*, but I never heard of it then, and would have dismissed it as bullshit if I had. Decades later, when I read *I LOVE DICK* by Chris Klaus, basically a love letter to Hebdige, my curiosity was piqued. I'm a fan of intellectuals, even though I'm no academic, merely another art school graduate trying to figure things out on their own. I like the way those smartypants take a piece of art or history or anything really and use it as a springboard for cerebral gymnastics. Hebdige cuts his cloth from the style of British youth culture and in their cut-up threads and mod suits finds the meaning of his subtitle. Black culture is the well from which these looks spring, according to Hebdige, and Marxism is the lens by which he sees their significance. I'm a sucker for that sort of thing. If only I had the nomenclature when an arrogant innocent, I probably would have gotten a better grade in humanities class.

Minli says

Once in a while, I like to exercise my thinking muscles. Sometimes I feel like I didn't get enough semesters of anthro under my belt before I graduated, and this is my way of making up for it.

Subculture is a cultural studies text focusing on British working class youth of the 1970s, from which the punk subculture emerged. Hebdige begins by explaining the historical and social context--immigration patterns, labour relations, politics and racial formations--along with a chronological recount of glam rock, mods, reggae, beatniks, teds, Rastafarians and other movements that influenced punk. This part was actually kind of slow--it might be more interesting to someone partial to those styles--but I liked how Hebdige emphasized youth culture in contrast to parent/mainstream culture.

The second half is where the book really shines, when Hebdige re-defines culture (citing T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes) as the culture of everyday life (yay! this idea was much more novel in the early 1970s). Culture is no longer just the opera or the symphony or another form of high art, but the ideologies and behaviours of people going about their daily business. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Hebdige states that subculture is a challenge to that dominant/mainstream culture through "style" (fashion, music, aesthetics). My favourite parts were the last few chapters, though, when he goes into more detail about the semiotics of style as communication, art and resistance.

It's incredibly comprehensive for such a short volume, and densely packed with theory. Almost too much theory, or maybe I'm rusty, because I had to keep flipping back to the footnotes. Still, despite being a bit

dated, good work is timeless, and I can easily apply much of Hebdige's work on the punk subculture to stuff today. One of his main arguments is that new subcultures form out of a devolution of previous subcultures as they undergo commmodification and are absorbed by the media. This renders those subcultures mainstream and therefore that style no longer a form of resistance, thus leaving room for a new subculture to emerge.

If you walk into a Forever 21, you can see the effect of commodification on bohemianism and steampunk. If I see another shirt with gears on it I'm going to scream.
