Subculture, the Meaning of Style Study Guide

Subculture, the Meaning of Style by Dick Hebdige

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Dick Hebdige's Subculture is a structuralist approach to understanding the styles of Britain's youth cultures. Hebdige argues that style, through the subversion of common objects, allows Britain's subcultures to symbolically separate themselves from the mass culture to which they belong. By defining this separate system of symbols, these subcultures challenge tradition, denying the context of the mass culture. In this way, otherwise powerless teenagers can be transformed into the socially significant punk rockers.

Hebdige considers a wide range of subcultures, from the infamous skinheads to the spiritual Rastafarians to the chameleon-like mods. He takes an in-depth look at each, considering not only the why of their existence, but also the how. He examines the way in which style reflects and articulates the underlying principles of subcultures, both internally and in the context of society. In so doing, Hebdige explores concepts which are, at their core, inherently human in nature.

Hebdige makes liberal use of both structuralist and Marxist concepts. Society, as presented by Hebdige, is a complex system of interrelated parts, with the significance of people, places and things defined by a dominant consensus. When subcultures seek to define the world in their own terms, conflict is the result. The manner in which this conflict is articulated Hebdige calls style. Subcultures carve meaning from the social space of the dominant culture. The dominant culture reacts by moving to assimilate the subculture into the dominant narrative.

Hebdige also explores the way in which black subcultures influenced white youth subcultures. Punks learn the value of style from reggae's concept of "dread," cultivating an imposing aesthetic inspired by the "otherness" of black culture. Hipsters, in their clean, stylish clothes, embrace black dreams of upward mobility; whereas, beats, in their torn jeans and sandals, embrace black poverty. For Hebdige, blacks serve as a touchstone. They are the standard by which other subcultures are judged.

Of central concern to Hebdige is the inherently oppressive quality of the dominant culture. He discusses the idea of subcultures as cultural noise, representing an interference in the mass culture. This noise suggests a blockage, an area where society has failed to address the needs of certain individuals. Style is the manner in which these needs are subversively articulated. By transgressing on society's sacred definitions, subcultures call attention to these blockages. Either the dominant culture moves to correct these blockages, or else it assimilates, and thus nullifies, the subculture's style.

Hebdige describes several ways in which the dominant culture can undermine style. Through commodification, or media scrutiny, an understanding of style can be achieved apart from its relevant subculture. Removed from its context and judged by foreign standards, the style becomes inert, incapable of articulating the need of the subculture. A subculture deprived of its style is then left to articulate itself in new ways.

Ultimately Hebdige concludes that style cannot be understood outside of its context, conceding that none of the considered youth cultures would recognize themselves in Subculture. In attempting to understand subculture, imagination unwittingly fills the many blanks. Both writer and reader serve as mythologists, obscuring the matter with presuppositions and assumptions. Style is truly found only in its living articulation as style.

Introduction and Chapter 1

Introduction and Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Dick Hebdige's Subculture is a structuralist approach to understanding the styles of Britain's youth cultures. Hebdige argues that style, through the subversion of common objects, allows Britain's subcultures to symbolically separate themselves from the mass culture to which they belong. By defining this separate system of symbols, these subcultures challenge tradition, denying the context of the mass culture. In this way, otherwise powerless teenagers can be transformed into the socially significant punk rockers.

Dick Hebdige defines style as an aesthetic nonconformity. Those who participate in this cultural rebellion, whether consciously or expressively, invite backlash from the majority culture. This scorn then serves to galvanize the countercultural identity, legitimizing the subculture precisely by rejecting its deviance. In this way the autonomy of a subculture is both established and maintained. Such discrimination creates a stylistic vehicle for those desiring separation from cultural norms.

While Hebdige sympathizes with a notion of high culture, a culture defined morally and qualitatively, he is drawn to a more holistic understanding of the concept, one which incorporates the entirety of daily life, from thrills to cheap fiction. Hebdige is concerned with the way that life's everyday elements lose their original meaning as they are mythologized by the mass culture. At this intersection of meaning, between local and mass culture, Hebdige considers that unification, between culture-as-morality and culture-as-everyday-life, is possible. This potential compels Hebdige to define the very concept of ideology itself.

The author argues that ideology is subconscious, principally concerned not with an examination of what is, but rather in defining the world in its own pre-decided terms. When noting which ideas or definitions prevail, the author suggests that the inherent strength of the ideas themselves is of secondary importance to the cultural strength of the groups who champion them. The discourse of a given population, suggests the author, is generally reflective of the dominant culture. To support this notion, Hebdige repeatedly refers to Marxist philosophies of class conflict.

The mass culture mythologizes signification as a means of control. It serves to frame, and thus limit, the discourse of subordinate cultures. In this manner, the dominant culture maintains its ideological hegemony. Hebdige, however, referring to the writings of Barthes, suggests that the connection between sign and signifier can be disrupted, overturned and even reversed. This then is the purpose of style: to connect familiar signs to new signifiers and challenge the dominance of the majority culture, to overturn the "myth of consensus" enjoyed by the mass culture.

Subcultures, by their very nature, repurpose signs to their own ends, thus threatening the traditional understanding of common objects such as a tube of Vaseline, a safety pin, or pointed shoes. This instills once familiar objects with a dual identity that undermines the hegemony's effort to control the general discourse. The implication is that style, with its inherent subversion, can influence the consciousness of mass culture. The author looks to the subculture most determined to separate itself from the mass culture, the punks, as the quintessential example of the underlying class conflict between local and mass culture.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

The chapter opens with a voice less academic, if no less intellectual, offering a vivid description of the worsening London heat wave of 1976. As the heat persists and intensifies, society's narrative understanding of the heat shifts from playful, to bothersome, to, finally, something nearing apocalyptic. Tempers flare into race riots, inviting whites to demonize the images of urban blacks seen rioting on the nightly news. This strife and turmoil sets the stage for the collision of subcultures that would become the punk movement.

Punk begins as an unstable concoction. From America comes the minimalist aesthetic of The Ramones, with their street influence and self-denying bent. Adding glam rock's narcissism, nihilism and androgyny to '60s American soul, exotic reggae, and the speed of Northern Soul, serves to deconstruct rock music back to its more fundamental roots. This cultural collision develops an equally chaotic and eclectic style, which collectively defines itself through its seeming single-minded purpose of aesthetic transgression. Indeed, punk presents itself a Frankenstein's monster, stitched together from repurposed sights, sounds and ideas. To understand punk, argues Hebdige, one must first understand its origins.

Hebdige presents punk's parentage as a confluence of factors. Reggae and rock, both driven by disaffection, are thrust together in the overheated streets, fused together by common experience and circumstance. Meanwhile, the literary work of beat poets, as well as the music of David Bowie, The Who and The Clash all find their way to the proletariat hearts of the British punks, informing their newborn aesthetic. By the early '70s, the punk movement transforms itself into a nihilistic culture of willful alienation, defining itself in exaggerated, rebellious and even perverse terms as firstly being a culture of absolute nonconformity.

The author points out that, while reggae and punk remain culturally autonomous and very different, punk enthusiasts routinely profess an appreciation for reggae music and occasionally even adopt aesthetic elements from the sibling culture reggae. The Clash's occasional adoption of the Jamaican street style aesthetic, as well as its performance of "White Riot," a song based on the London riots of '76, suggest a deep sympathy between punk and reggae born of a common cultural experience.

To understand the structural connection between punk and reggae, posits the author, it is necessary to look both at reggae's origins in the West Indies and punk's origins in the post-war British youth-culture as influenced by black immigration. Hebdige argues that such an examination would require looking past the usual sociological factors, such as a school, parenting, police and media, to matters of race and race relations, an area which the author feels to have been largely neglected from consideration.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Reggae is a fundamentally different experience from punk, being influenced not by the amphetamine frenzy of rock, but rather the slow groove of ganja. Hebdige argues that reggae is a primarily black narrative, chronicling the culture's engagement with slavery, religion and servitude. Reggae, with its strong cultural discourse, seems alien and threatening to the white mass culture. From the Christianity that once legitimized their enslavement, the black culture forges a new religious narrative, inspired by faith and informed by grace, that is uniquely their own. Reggae becomes the voice of this newborn narrative.

In an effort to understand their new world, explains Hebdige, Jamaican slaves forged a new discourse by mixing their own oral traditions with biblical teachings. The Rastafarian reading of The Bible, which places God in Africa and "the black sufferer" in Babylon, challenges the religious understanding of white Christian culture. Suddenly, a white capitalist society is reimagined as the perverse Babylon. To the Rastafarian, poverty is a blessing and Africa becomes Zion, the Promised Land to which they may all return once Babylon is overthrown.

From the light choppy meter of early ska music, the Rastafarian tradition crept into reggae, slowing it down and instilling it with a heavy messianic feel that was uniquely African. From there it seeped into the black working-class culture of Great Britain through a network of underground retailers. This presented a musical alternative to the unemployed, spiritually-empty black youth of Britain. Burdened by poverty and cultural alienation, many blacks embraced the Rastafarian style, selecting an aesthetic separation that mirrored their own alienation. As race relations continued to deteriorate, this style quickly became the style of a revolution.

Born to culturally submissive immigrant blacks, the young blacks of London were not content to simply inherit the parents' forlorn hope of eventual acceptance. Reggae offered such young people an attractive, alternative discourse and a game in which they themselves made the rules. Rastafarian style, however, with its alien-seeming dreads, heavy music and overt "other" identity, constituted a perceived threat to popular society. In attempting to declare themselves, therefore, the Rastafarians inevitably declared war.

The Rastafarians proved themselves a formidable cultural force. Their righteousness lends them strength beyond a mere threat of violence. They have an identity backed by ritual, place and practices. Reggae, the Rastafarian voice of the revolution, weaves the truth of their counterculture, daring to frame discourse contrary to the mass culture. Ultimately, their style is the glue that holds their substance together, uniting the culture under one Ethiopian banner.

The West Indies immigrants, the parents of the Rastafarians, came to London in garish clothes intended to represent their faith in the bright future that Britain offered. Instead it marked them as targets for discrimination. As the dream failed to reach fruition, those who had migrated to London began a cultural migration back to their Caribbean roots, again donning the trappings of their rejected parent culture. With the introduction of soul, R&B and jazz, and the black-suited soul brother, the immigrants were invited to explore the discourse of their own blackness.

The style of Rastafarianism, whose precepts began with an imagined Africa, eventually came to embrace the natural aesthetics of blackness. Hair was allowed to grow unstraightened. Rastafarian clothes became simpler, more functional, less performed. Pork-pie hats gave way to simple, woven tams. Neighboring white cultures observed this "back to Africa" with both concern and interest, as the blacks of London found a common identity in the very color of their skin.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Hebdige contends that white subcultures borrowed many of their cultural elements from contemporary black subcultures. Where elements of black culture appear in the mass media, the author claims, they are wrongly attributed to whites and laundered of their subversive voice. To many whites, particularly to the beats and the hipsters, the blacks represent a naturalized state of man, existing apart from the societal expectations and imposed constraints of their familiar white culture.

Bound to the blacks by jazz music, the hipsters and the beats each represent different cultural engagements. The hipsters, with their slick zoot suits, represent the traditional upward mobility of the black street-corner man. The college-educated beats, however, with their ripped clothes and sandals, engage the poverty inherent in black culture. While seemingly oppositional approaches, the author argues, both the beat and the hipster are symbolizing blacks to communicate the dynamics of their own white youth culture.

As black culture disseminates into the world and into other cultures, it loses context. The "teddy boys," a disgruntled working class subculture feeling doomed to a life of unskilled labor, are drawn to black music even as they are repelled by the black immigrants with whom they compete for jobs. They commit violence against black communities even as they enjoy black-inspired music, seeing no contradiction between the two activities. The author implies that this is largely due to the mass cultural disconnect between black sound and black culture.

The mods sought to emulate the sharply dressed black "street-corner" man without sacrificing their position in the mass culture. Their compromised, clean-cut aesthetic allowed them to move seamlessly from work, to school, to leisure. Living a dual existence, the mods worked by day, retreating to their counterculture only at night and on weekends. They subscribed to a regimented, idealized aesthetic based on a similarly idealized conception of the mythological, mystical Black Man. The mods subculture existed in role of idol worship, below and apart from the black culture they modeled.

Skinheads, derived from the rougher-edged "hard mods," drew on the style and aesthetic of the proletariat, middle-class aesthetic of black subcultures. Hebdige argues that it was by dancing to black music in black neighborhoods, that the skinheads recovered their "lost" sense of working-class community. The author claims that it was the closed, race-centric nature of Rastafarianism that provided the ideological model for modern skinheads. This inspired skinheads to, like the Rastafarians, reestablish continuity with the narrative of a broken past. As reggae became increasingly insular, the skinheads were pressured to create their own, equally exclusive narrative.

With the rise of glam, a primarily white subculture, comes a preoccupation with capitalism, androgyny and apoliticism. With its gaudy colors and numerous affectations, glam causes some commentators to dismiss it as inauthentic. Hebdige presents David Bowie, glam's champion, as colluding with capitalist aims of returning adolescents to a non-thinking state of consumer dependence. Bowie's model, the author argues, borders on nihilism, an escape from definition or responsibility, even as it addresses the much-neglected question of gender and sexuality.

As glam becomes increasingly esoteric, disconnected from its audience, punk fills a need for something less elite, dirtier, and more immediate—an experience more grounded in the here and now. Devoid of intellectualism, punk's message undercuts the classicism apparent in other white subcultures, instead finding sympathetic themes in reggae. Fascinated by reggae's quasi-religious concept of "dread," punk learns the value of solidarity through aesthetic.

Despite their common ground, punk and reggae exist in very different contexts. Lacking the historical and religious narratives of reggae, punk exists in a secular space, with neither a narrative past nor a prophesied future. Rather than the distant, mystical Africa, punks identify with the nationalism of Britain. From the present and actual, the punks weave a mythologized world, transforming alienation into exile, and hunger into diet. In this way punks embrace identity through negative space, identifying themselves socially and musically, by everything they cannot have or become.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Having addressed white subcultures as a mediated response to the black community, Hebdige expands to the conversation to include other groups, in particular those found in the dominant culture. The author is less concerned with the familiar rites of passage associated with the transition from childhood to maturity; rather he is more concerned with the historical specifics of why these forms occur where and when they do. He hopes to understand the historical context that defines a given subculture.

Hebdige paints a picture of post-war Britain. The country is physically and sociologically altered by war, the ruination of London signaling the end of an era. Despite the best hopes of Britain and despite new modes of expression, the country proves unable to rid itself of class conflict. Instead of breaking down class barriers, social forces serve only to fracture the working class, leaving a multitude of minor discourses still subordinate to the overarching class consciousness.

The splintering of the working class sparked the birth of varied youth cultures and their respective aesthetics. The spectacular appearance of numerous youth styles encouraged some to think that the British youth now represented a single, homogenous class unto themselves. Hebdige, however, cites several studies and investigations, both scientific and observation based, which casts doubt on this assumption. The author instead insists on a holistic understanding of subculture, one which considers a subculture, not only in and of itself, but also in the context of the dominate culture to which it belongs.

Hebdige subscribes to the idea of subculture as a functional mediation between experience and tradition, a means of defining oneself comparatively and contrastingly in the context of the dominant culture. He argues, however, that some aspects of youth culture are in no way reflective of the parent culture, even as mediations. Punkers, for example, seem unconcerned with reclaiming or engaging the values of their parent culture. Instead, they celebrate the death of meaning and champion the downfall of traditionalism. While Hebdige concedes that experience and tradition do play definitive roles in subcultures, the mere mediation between of these two oppositional forces fails to explain the breadth of subcultural values.

Hebdige returns to the notion of style as coded resistance to social forces, focusing on how the specificity of a social experience provides context, and thus meaning, to a given style. The author compares the teddy boys of the '50s with their resurgent counterparts in the '70s. Though the style is virtually the same, the signification has changed. In the '50s, the teddy boys represented the decline of Britain, a true counterculture. In the '70s, the teddy boy style is now woven into Britain's history, now part of the country's traditional discourse. The style is the same, but the meaning has changed to suit its specificity.

In post-war Britain, argues Hebdige, the mass media defines the cultural experience. It shares sound and images across class and culture, filtering everything through its own lens, to some extent framing the individual's perception of social self. This greater, albeit filtered, awareness gives groups a greater sense of context in the dominant culture. The extent to which a subculture agrees or disagrees with the media's framing also plays a role in the community's self-identification.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Hebdige discusses the idea of subcultures as cultural "noise," representing interference in the mass culture. Such noise suggests a snag or blockage the dominant culture has failed to address for some people, a significant cultural discourse. Subcultures arise to challenge societal taboos that serve the status quo, thus drawing attention to the cultural blockage. These challenges involve transgressions, usually of language or behavior, which seem profane to the eyes of mass culture.

The dominant culture's engagement with a subculture is complex. Perverse styles incite a cultural fear of further hidden transgressions. These fears create a discourse where fearful imaginings are assumed true. The assumption of the violent punk is reinforced and sensationalized by the media, framing the subculture as a social problem. If one punk participates in violence, this behavior is understood (by the general public) to be representative of the entire subculture. In this way the punk aesthetic becomes bound with fearful significance.

As the media continues to refine and frame the subculture, the strange becomes known. Monstrous punks become kids in makeup. The entire phenomena is defined, classified as a social problem and located on the map of mass culture. In this way the subculture is rehabilitated and made subservient to the greater cultural understanding. With the subculture defined, classified and named, it is prepared for assimilation into the mass cultural consciousness. The next step, according to Hebdige, is commodification.

Hebdige admits that it is difficult to establish the boundaries between production and creative expression. Style requires product in the form of clothing, makeup and accessories. This demand compels a supply, which in turn drives market and production. Of particular interest to Hebdige is the way that the signification of an object differs between production and use, as youth cultures assign meaning to objects independently from the idea that compelled their creation. When products directly match punk's aesthetic, the process of commodification is complete - at which point, Hebdige suggests, punk's cultural rebellion is doomed.

The cultural drive to identify subcultures, to make them familiar and thus understandable to the mass culture, takes one of two forms. Either the subculture is dismissed as incomprehensible, or else it is domesticated, revealed to be comprised of "just kids." Hebdige gives several examples of the latter, wherein the media depicted punks as smiling, productive members of society, families and business. This positive, successful depiction of the punk serves to undercut the punker narrative of alienation and disenfranchisement, thus diminishing the subculture's credibility.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Hebdige addresses the topic of style and its role in defining a subculture. He posits that styles are an intentional variation of the normative dress, speech, music and dance of the parent culture. The formula is the same, but the significance of style differs from tradition. Unlike the aesthetic of mass culture, with its unintended signs of wealth, attractiveness, and self-image, style is engineered to communicate something; it is a self-conscious expression, intended to be read. In this way, Hebdige suggests, subcultures consciously use conventional elements to invent an unconventional world.

The author argues that each of the subcultures he has addressed, in addition to being of the working class, represent a culture of conspicuous consumption. Through specific rituals of consumption, or by a refusal to consume certain products, a subculture manifests its style and therefore its identity. The author describes a systemic, material language in which objects can be combined in infinite ways to produce meaning. This "science of the concrete" or "bricolage," allows its practitioners to explain the world adequately enough to inhabit it.

Returning to the teddy boys of the 1950s, Hebdige demonstrates how the practice of bricolage allows the subculture to borrow and subvert Edwardian commodities into their own system of material symbols. Objects familiar to the dominant culture, ranging from combs to motor scooters, thus take on new meaning in the hands of the "bricoleur" who actively transform their meanings by using them to materially express their subculture. Hebdige depicts this dynamic, this decoupling and recoupling of meaning, as a revolution of the object.

Hebdige presents the punk style as a sort of confrontation dressing, a mode of expression intended to rupture the bounds between natural and constructed meaning. The punk tendency to wear sexualized, offensive or discarded objects amounted to wholesale rejection of societal standards. Even in dance, punks rejected traditional notions of symbolic courtship, even to the point of disdaining displays of heterosexuality. Even the "pogo" dance style, common to the punk culture, lacked the improvisation permissible in other styles of dance.

Performatively, punk rockers deny boundary or definition. Musically, punk champions mediocrity before skill, chaos before technique. With names like the Unwanted, the Rejects, the Worst, and with lyrics that discuss sex, violence and bodily functions, it is apparent that punkers seek to place themselves outside the societal narrative. This tendency brings punk rockers into conflict with the law, as they challenge not only conventions of expression but also notions of entitlement, space and propriety. This even extended to the media, with punk rockers seeing fit to write, produce and distribute their own slapdash journalism, reinforcing the style of their culture in defiance of the characterization of punk in the mass media.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Hebdige refutes the notion that subcultures exist as lawless forms, suggesting instead that subcultures observe alternative value systems to differentiate themselves from the parent culture. This separation is achieved materially through the subculture's adoption and adaption of objects seen by the group as meaningful. Skinheads adopt boots, braces and cropped hair to represent the subculture's values of masculinity, hardness and working class. These objects form the collective self-image of the culture.

This notion breaks down when applied to the punks. Punks, by virtue of their perpetual rebellion and impermanence, hold nothing sacred. They are less concerned with specific objects than with the shock and awe they might potentially generate. Since they are lacking in consistent iconography, it is difficult to definitively establish what is or is not "punk" without making assumptions beyond the empirical. Examining specific objects as to their role in articulating "punk" is therefore unlikely to yield further insight.

In considering the problem of punk's elusive style, the author forgoes the traditional semiotic relationship between signs and signifiers in favor of a methodology which allows for a range of meaning. This approach, polysemy, is firstly concerned with the process by which meaning is derived, specifically the relationship between the means of representation and the object being represented. With this method, the actual end product, the meaning itself, is of secondary importance.

Hebdige presents the idea that language is an active, transitive force, ever-changing and always in process. He suggests that it may be this discordant quality that punk style might embody, focused more on the process of (or search for) meaning than with the actual communication of concrete meaning. Punk style, rather than communicating direct meaning, instead gestures to a philosophical nowhere. The "meaning" of the style lay in the aesthetic engagement, not in the signification of its symbols.

The author compares the signified skinheads with the nebulous punkers. The former has simple, identifiable signs that point directly the values of the group: hardness, masculinity, working class. While the punkers share the working-class aesthetic, individual punks don't directly identify with a working class background or history, causing this "working class" element to seem abstracted or surreal. While the symbols are recognizable, they don't signify what one might expect. Punk style, argues Hebdige, has broken not only from the parent culture, but from its own location in experience. The punk aesthetic is utterly without context in and of itself.

Many punks, if not most, are unaware of their style's greater implications. Hebdige believes it likely that the pioneers of the group understood the underlying dynamic but also perceives some punks as mere followers, as well as some who identify with the subculture but are not fully committed to the lifestyle. The author adds that an overt,

sensationalized style isn't necessary for subversive aestheticism, recalling that the mods, who closely adhered to normalized codes, also participated in such signification.

The signification represented by different styles, the author contends, could explain the outbreak of violence between subcultures. The '70s teds, for example, took offense to the punks' corruption of the '50s and working class aesthetics. Hebdige also postulates that the teds may have also taken offense to punk's rejection of certain working class ethics such as forthrightness, plain speech, and sexual puritanism. Not only did the teds take offense to the symbolism of punk's style, but also to the way in which its elements were presented, specifically the way in which its objects were dismantled of meaning.

Hebdige concludes the chapter with a review of straightforward style versus style a style of chaos and flux. The former is concerned with presenting a single, coherent identity. The latter presents a diverse set of signifiers which are likely to change from moment to moment. The former is an absolute; the latter is an approximation. Hebdige reiterates that the relationship between experience, expression and signification is not a constant. Rather, it can form a unity striving for coherence or, to greater of a lesser degree, social rupture. These differences are seen not only in objects of style, but also in the way in which they are assigned meaning.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Hebdige briefly considers the possibility that style might be "appreciated" for its aesthetic qualities alone—as art, in other words. He quotes the opinion of Nuttal, who regards a rocker jacket as art of high degree, symmetrical, ritualistic and possessed of fetishistic power. Hebdige, however, dismisses the idea, concluding that Nuttal has missed the point entirely. The lingering fetishistic qualities of style, Hebdige argues, aren't sufficiently strong enough to establish style as art. Style exists only as part of system, a single cog rotating in a social engine of meaning. Style lacks the universal, timeless quality of art. It only has relevance in the context of social articulation.

The author explains how style is cyclical. Objects begin in the domain of the mass culture, only to be repurposed as style by participants of subculture. This new signification expresses ideas in a raw, unformulated state. Style articulates "noise" in the contradictions between subculture and dominant culture. Once this notion is solidified and codified, however, it becomes explicable and thus accessible to the mass culture. Stripped of its subcultural connotation, style becomes commodified, ripe for mass cultural consumption. In this way the cycle has come full circle. What began in the domain of mass culture is rediscovered and re-located in its original discourse. The safety-pin, therefore, goes from commodity, to punk jewelry, back to commodity again. Its brief role in the punk culture becomes a mere footnote in its identity.

The discussion shifts to matters of race. Hebdige contrasts black subcultures with white subcultures, pointing out that black subcultures are not merely comprised of young people. Reggae, enjoyed by young and old, is culturally based upon a long historical narrative of racial oppression. White subcultures, by contrast, are limited to a transitory social context. Whereas whites have the option of eventually taking on a productive role in the dominant culture, blacks are relegated to a marginal role, handicapped by racial prejudice.

Conclusion

Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Hebdige considers the many authors whose works he has cited throughout Subculture, examining how each has expressed the very truth that Hebdige himself has been trying to articulate. He begins with Genet, whose love for the imprisoned writer George Jackson has helped him to transcended mere selfhood into a type of brotherhood. In his move from criminal to writer, Genet has, in Hebdige's opinion, moved beyond the individual into the realm of revolution. George Jackson, meanwhile, a militant black who used his lengthy incarceration to educate himself, also demonstrates this same sort of cultural self-awareness. Both men regard themselves as an instrument of the black culture to which they belong.

George Jackson complains that he and other blacks, are forced to speak in the Master's tongue, and thus every word they write or utter is undermined by its association with the Enemy's language. Since blacks don't even control the very tools that might help them communicate their oppression, a new voice must be found. Jackson considers the idea that the Master's language might itself be mastered, corrupted, and turned against the Enemy. In this way, contends Jackson, blacks can articulate not the curse of being black, but the experience of captivity.

Hebdige argues here that what Jackson refers to is akin to style. As a prisoner, George Jackson is denied the materials necessary to generate object-based discourse. Instead, he must subvert the borrowed words of the Enemy and use them to create a new discourse, one more amenable to the needs of blacks. This dynamic strongly correlates to Hebdige's notion of style as an articulation of noise between the minority and the majority cultures. George Jackson seeks to subvert the Enemy's tongue just a punk seeks to subvert the commodities of the dominant culture.

Genet warns that George Jackson's letters are difficult to read. They are hard, venomous and written "between clenched teeth." Hebdige suggests that George Jackson is twice imprisoned: the first prison being literal and the second being the symbolic prison, the prison of language which contains all blacks. George Jackson's words therefore bear the imprint of the context in which they were written, fixed in time and space. It is this painful context which guarantees a limited understanding for those of who are not George Jackson, not imprisoned, and not black.

Hebdige compares three writers: T.S. Eliot, Barthes, and Genet. In Eliot, Hebdige sees a man who finds value in all things—all things save for those signified by the "hollow men" of mass culture. Barthes, meanwhile, fears that experience may fall prey to mythology, defined into non-existence. Genet, however, more perfectly models Hebdige notion of style. He lives a life of diversion, subversion and dissent, concerned less with what the signs say than in how their meaning might be changed. With this fruitless

comparison, Hebdige concludes by agreeing with Barthes: Style, as a form of articulation, cannot be understood outside of the context in which it is intended.

Characters

Punks

Born from the post-war, middle-class youth cultures of Britain and inspired by the music of American and black cultures, Hebdige presents punk as the subculture most determined to separate itself from the dominant culture. With its profane style and simple rhythms, punk embraces chaos as a virtue, subscribing to a "no future" philosophy that borders on nihilism. Determined to shock and challenge, nearly everything about punk style is orchestrated to puncture polite society.

Punk style is comprised of objects refused or rejected by society. Torn and soiled clothing, garbage, bondage attire and similarly profane things give an undeniable impression of otherness. Punk behavior is equally anti-social including acts of destruction, spitting and recreational drug use. In choosing to frame themselves in such undesirable terms, punk wards off the influence of mass culture, its style placing the group far outside the dominant discourse.

Unlike most subcultural styles, punk doesn't use a stable system of iconography. Holding nothing as sacred, punks are more concerned with transgressing the meaning of an object, misusing it for the purpose of shock and awe. Punks are less interested in instilling objects with new meaning. The identity of "punk style" is therefore difficult to establish, as it is constantly in flux, always pushing itself into new areas of transgression. Hebdige argues that punk style gestures to "nothing," which is appropriately fitting for a group that champions nihilism.

Reggae

Though reggae was always a primarily black subculture, it becomes increasingly insular over time, growing closer to its spiritual underpinnings. Strongly rooted in both Jamaican oral tradition and Christian faith, there is strong evidence in reggae of the Pentecostal speech rhythms common to black religious leaders. The intensity of The Word is further enhanced through the co-mingling of religion, Jamaican oral tradition, and the black narrative of slavery. Reggae, over time, moves from mere music to faithful testimony.

The dominant white culture found reggae, with its slow drumming rhythm, so evocative of Africa, as subversive. Reggae, after all, dared to sing of injustice and moral outrage, as well as religious faith. The white Christians natural felt threatened by this new, strange invocation of Christ-centric theology, particularly when reggae would sing of a Babylon that so clearly represented the modern western civilization of which they were a part. The reggae allusions to the fall of Babylon were clearly, to white ear, intended as a pronouncement of revolution.

As reggae began to explore the spiritual implications of its own blackness, members would retreat from the hostility and discrimination of the world to gather at "sound

systems." These exclusively black gatherings were quasi-spiritual reggae concerts, where the subculture could unite and "stare down Babylon." So important were these gatherings, members would occasionally resort to violence to maintain their exclusivity, the outcasts of society casting out society.

Dominant Culture

The dominant culture, or mass culture, refers to the overarching culture to which subcultures belong. It includes schools, parents, law enforcement, the media and other public influences.

1950s Teddy Boys

The original teddy boys wore clothes from the Edwardian era and idolized rock and roll superstars such as Elvis Presley. They were known for committing racial violence against blacks. Society regarded them as a sign of Britain's moral decay.

1970s Teddy Boys

While similar in style and attitude to the 1950s teddy boys, the '70s teds were better regarded by society, seeing them as part of Britain's history.

Mods

The mods were a white subculture known for their love of black music and for their clean, conservative style. Mod style was so idealized, so clean, that it was easily mistaken for that of the popular culture. This allowed mods to move seamless between work, school and subculture.

Skinheads

A white subculture identifiable by its cropped hair, suspenders and Doc Martin Boots, skinheads subscribe to a hyper-masculinity and a strong ethic of working class sensibilities.

Hipsters

Inspired by black jazz, hipsters were whites that adopted the black aesthetic of success, dressing the garb of black street-corner men.

Beats

Beats were a subculture of educated whites who, like hipsters, were inspired by jazz music. Unlike the hipsters, beats embraced black poverty, wearing ripped jeans and sandals.

Glams

Inspired by avant-garde musicians such as David Bowie, the androgynous glams were fond of gaudy, colorful affectations.

Hippies

The philosophical descendants of the beats and hipsters, the hippies were the subculture of "turn on, tune in, drop out" advocating a departure from mass culture via recreational drugs.

Rastafarians

Rastafarians, comprised largely of black descendants of slaves, observe their own unique brand of Christian theology. Many members of the reggae subculture are also Rastafarians.

Objects/Places

Babylon

In Rastafarian Christian theology, Babylon represents the corrupt western society. Overthrowing Babylon is a central concern of the religion.

Africa

Africa has a special significance to Rastafarians, who see it as the Promised Land to which they might return once Babylon is overthrown.

London

London is where many of Britain's youth subcultures are based. Hebdige makes several references to London throughout the book.

Safety Pin

Punk style is famous for its safety-pin piercings. The practice has become symbolic of punk "shock chic."

Rod of Correction

A stick, thought to have spiritual significance, often carried by those of Rastafarian belief.

Jamaica

The country of Jamaica, often referred to in Subculture as the "West Indian" origin, features prominently in cultures of Rastafarianism and reggae.

Vaseline

Vaseline is sometimes used by punks to produce gravity-defying hairstyles. It also symbolizes homosexuality in some contexts.

Sound System

Both an object and a place, a sound system is a place where members of the reggae subculture gather to listen to music. Sound systems are often regarded as having spiritual significance.

Swastika

Punks sometimes wear swastikas, a symbol of Nazism, to produce shock and revulsion in the viewer.

Fanzines

Punks wrote, produced and distributed their own fanzines. They were makeshift, full of errors and crudely copied.

Amphetamines

Many subcultures, including punk, were thought to use meth amphetamines. Hebdige uses the word "amphetamine" to describe the fast, frenetic style of punk rock.

Ganja

Marijuana is the sacrament of Rastafarianism. Hebdige uses "ganja" as a metaphor to describe reggae's slower, heavier musical style.

Union Jack

Punkers would often wear union jacks on their clothing. This was symbolic of the punk's British nationalism.

Bondage Attire

Punks would sometimes wear bondage attire, exploiting the shock value of publicly displaying sexualized symbols.

Themes

Style

The main theme of Dick Hebdige's Subculture is style, realized as an intentional deviation of normative dress, speech, music and dance. Hebdige depicts style as an inherently subversive practice, intended not to define oneself individually, but rather to affiliate oneself with a group who seeks a collective identity separate from the one provided by mass culture. In this way style is both inclusive and rebellious, bringing people together to stand apart.

Hebdige explains that style is achieved materially, by taking familiar signs (such as common objects or clothing) and investing them with a significance which differs from common understanding. In this way a safety pin can cease to be a safety pin and instead become "punk jewelry." By challenging society's definitions, style seeks to overthrow the "myth of consensus" enjoyed by the majority culture. In this way, it is thought, style serves to combat the one-size-fits-all hegemony of mass culture.

Being a materialist practice, Hebdige explains, style runs the risk of commodification. The mass culture, by transforming style objects into commodities, can locate a subculture's style within its own symbology. Once safety pins are sold as jewelry, for example, they are once again defined by the very mass culture that punks sought to resist. This undermines the coded resistance of the subculture's narrative as its icons are dominated by an authoritative system of evaluation.

Articulation

At the core of Hebdige's Subculture is the drive to articulate feelings, ideas and principles. This is achieved by constructing or denying narratives. Rastafarians articulate their faith by carrying a rod of correction, a fetish invested with spiritual significance. Punks articulate their rejection of dominant culture by subverting its iconography, transgressing on tradition and rupturing consensus. These articulations fall within the range of Hebdige's definition of style.

In the absence of style, Hebdige suggests, it is the dominant culture that articulates meaning. Society places expectations on individuals based on, among other things, age, sex, race and religion. This begins with parenting and continues through schooling. For adults, the world is articulated by laws and framed by the media. Commodification, meanwhile, establishes the value of objects and, in so doing, limits their range of use. Where "noise" exists between individuals and consensus, subcultures are born.

The irony, as Hebdige points out, is that the act of trying to describe a subculture is itself a form of imposed articulation. It is inherently oppressive. Further, if the goal is to "know" and "understand" a subculture, the practice of imposed articulation is sheer folly. As Hebdige explains, the moment a culture is removed from its defining context, it loses

the specificity of its meaning. To articulate a culture "after the fact" is to regard it as something entirely different than what it was.

Revolution

When Hebdige talks of style as subversion, he presents subculture as counterculture, as a pushing back of social space to make room not for the self, but merely for the freedom to choose an alternative. The mass culture weighs heavily on its participants, threatening to define and locate everyone and everything within its discourse. Subculture then is a bulwark against the decided, an attempt to eke out a small corner in which social fluidity is still possible, even if it means being subject to a narrower context.

When considering the variety of people who comprise Hebdige's subcultures, it is interesting to note that they are either young or black, and are nearly always of the working class. This makes sense. Of all potential individuals, these are people least allowed the luxury of self-definition. The young, the black, the unsophisticated, these constitute Hebdige's "subordinates," the individuals most likely to suffer forced definition. Subcultures, in this context, might be regarded as a sort of social union; an organization of peers, united by common experience, working together to decide for themselves their own fate.

Despite his Marxist influence, Hebdige stops just short of using the language of revolution, insisting, with a quote from Sartre, that subculture merely represents the right of the subordinate class to" make something of what is made of them." It is clear, however, that the dynamic touched upon by Hebdige's Subculture is at least related to the forces that spur men to revolt. As the author continually reiterates, the struggle for identification is opposed by the dominant culture. The need for identity ensures that conflict is inevitable.

Style

Perspective

Dick Hebdige's Subculture is an academic work that tries to articulate the relationship between style and culture. Hebdige's depiction of style, which is strongly informed by Marxist philosophy, is both materialist and subversive. Subcultures, the author argues, use iconographic objects to define a social space separate from an all-defining mass culture. Hebdige values the hows and whys of social definition, depicting a cultural struggle between those with power and those without.

Subculture often reads like a textbook on semiotics. There is much emphasis placed on material objects and the conflicting ways in which they are defined and used. Of particular concern to Hebdige is the way in which one culture dominates another by deciding the meaning of common objects. What Hebdige presents is a revolution of language, as subcultures dare to redefine objects by changing their use or context. In this way, argues Hebdige, a subculture might bring change to the mass culture of which it is part.

While Hebdige makes every effort to maintain a disconnected, academic voice, there are moments of passion, even conviction, written between the lines. It is apparent that Hebdige admires the intricate construction of the "spectacular subcultures" and the way in which they defy the mass culture. It is also apparent, by virtue of the lengths to which he discusses the matter, that Hebdige is concerned with the oppressive qualities of mass culture.

Tone

Hebdige writes and reasons like a semiotician. He's less concerned with the apparent, preferring instead to strike out for the hidden. Hebdige doesn't see a punk's ripped t-shirt. Rather, he sees an attempt to rupture societal expectation and definition. It isn't merely the t-shirt itself which is damaged, but the very consensus of what a t-shirt actually represents to society. To Hebdige, objects do not represent static, physical things, but the underlying ideas themselves, ideas which might be changed, redirected or even destroyed entirely. The main thrust of the book concerns itself with the way in which objects are invested with meaning.

This focus on definition vs. re-definition, subculture vs. dominant culture, necessarily instills Subculture with a tone of rebellion. Hebdige tells the story of groups who refuse to be defined by the culture to which they belong. To this end, these subcultures must carve out an identity from the raw materials of society. This challenges the authority of the dominant culture to reclaim these materials or risk losing the power to write the cultural discourse. By linking ideas and objects, Hebdige depicts the struggle for identification as a conflict over ideological resources.

The substance of Subculture lay not with people, objects or events, but in the concepts which they represent. Hebdige presents a world populated with dueling realities, each trying to symbolize the objective world in its own image. Narratively, this presents a meta-world of chaos and impermanence, where meaning exists only as an inflection of social discourse. This hyper-subjectivity permeates the text, lending it an air of disconnected intellectualism. For Hebdige, reality is not being, but rather a constant state of becoming.

Structure

Subculture is organized into nine chapters, not counting the introduction and the conclusion. In the introduction, Hebdige defines subculture, establishing it as an inherently subversive force that inspires an articulation of deviance through style. This leads directly into chapter one, where Hebdige introduces the oppression of the cultural hegemony and its complex relationship with the subversion of style.

Part one of the book, which begins with chapter two, concerns itself with case studies. Hebdige first touches on race relations as mediated between subcultures, introducing black culture and specifically reggae. Chapter three continues this line of inquiry, discussing Rastafarianism and its relationship to punk and other white youth cultures. Chapter four addresses white cultures which were inspired in some way by black culture and music: hipsters, beats and teddy boys. This line goes on to explore how later white cultures, such as the punks, were also culturally informed by black culture.

Part two of the book, beginning with chapter five and continuing on to the conclusion, offers an intense reading of the information covered in the earlier portions of book. Here the text dives deeply into the ideological underpinnings of culture, language and style. Semiotic language becomes very common as Hebdige engages the symbols of culture to unpack the meaning behind their use and context.

Quotes

"The meaning of subculture, then, is always in dispute, and style is the arena in which opposing definitions clash with the most dramatic force." —Introduction, page 3

"Some groups have more say, have more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favorably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world." —Chapter 1, page 14

"The unlikely alliance of diverse and superficially incompatible musical traditions, mysteriously accomplished under punk, found ramifications in an equally eclectic clothing styles which reproduces the same kind of cacophony on a visual level." —Chapter 2, page 26

"Africa finds an echo inside reggae in its distinctive percussion." —Chapter 3, page 31

"The bonds which link white youth cultures to the black urban working class have long been recognized by commentators on the American popular music scene." —Chapter 4, page 46

"The unprecedented convergence of black and white, so aggressively, so unashamedly proclaimed, attracted the inevitable controversy, which centered on the predictable themes of race, sex, rebellion, etc., and which repeatedly develop into a moral panic." —Chapter 4, page 47

"In the face of what was necessarily a somewhat crude and cerebral appropriation, the subtle dialogue between black and white music forms which framed the trembling vocals was bound to go unheard." -Chapter 4, page 50

"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 and objectify and communicate group experience." —Chapter 5, page79

"Notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with idea of social order." —Chapter 6, page 87

"The cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture." —Chapter 7, page 100

"The punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered." —Chapter 8, page 113

"Much of this book has been based on the assumption that the two positions 'Negro' and 'white working class youth' can be equated." —Chapter 9, page 131

"In the course of this book, we have learned like Genet to be suspicious of the common-sense categories which are brought to bear on subculture." —Conclusion, page 136

Topics for Discussion

In what way might a subculture be seen as beneficial to the dominant culture?

Why might a subculture seek to avoid commodification?

In what way are Hebdige's theories influenced by Marxism?

Hebdige implies that gem-studded safety-pins contributed to the downfall of the punk subculture. How might this be the case?

Why is it ironic that '50s teddy boys committed violence against blacks?

Hebdige suggests there is a kinship between punk and reggae. In what way are the two subcultures similar?

Hebdige says that the mods "went missing." What does this mean? What happened to the mod subculture?

Would mass culture be better off without subcultures? Why or why not?