sub/culture?
Sup, Culture

Rooted in anthropology.

Process & product.

Aesthetic excellence?

... all the characteristic activities and interests of a people. Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the 12th of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dartboard, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, 19th Century Gothic churches, the music of Elgar. ... (Eliot, 1948)

First, without appreciating good literature, no one will really understand the nature of society, second, literary critical analysis can be applied to certain social phenomena other than ‘academically respectable’ literature (for example, the popular arts, mass communications) so as to illuminate their meanings for individuals and their societies. (Hoggart, 1966)

Is culture fixed? Who does this fixing?

... particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture. (Williams, 1965)

Language of culture?
Roland Barthes
What is semiotics?
ROLAND IS ONE...
Semiotics: Myth(s) of Culture

- The study of signs & signifying systems.
- From linguistics to semiology.
  - Models from structural linguistics to read cultural phenomena.
- But…what are signs and how do we read them?
  - Code, language, myth, speech, image, object, style, etc.
- Conceptual frameworks.
- Style & politics of resistance.
Ferdinand De Saussure

- [Language is] of all social institutions, the least amenable to initiative. It blends with the life of society, and the latter, inert by nature, is a prime conservative force. (Saussure, 1974)

- Arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.
- Dialectics of identity and difference.
- Like language, culture is a system.
- Culture is arbitrary?
- What lies beneath?
• “Ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness. 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” (Hebdige).

• Ideology has no history: “All human societies reproduce themselves in this way through a process of ‘naturalization’. It is through this process – a kind of inevitable reflex of all social life - that particular sets of social relations, particular ways of organizing the world appear to us as if they were universal and timeless.”

... ideology has very little to do with ‘consciousness’... It is profoundly unconscious... Ideology is indeed a system of representation, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with ‘consciousness’: they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their ‘consciousness’. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them. (Althusser, 1969)

It is precisely its ‘spontaneous’ quality, its transparency, its ‘naturalness’, its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time, ‘spontaneous’, ideological and unconscious. You cannot learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things. In this way, its very taken-for-grantedness is what establishes it as a medium in which its own premises and presuppositions are being rendered invisible by its apparent transparency. (Hall, 1977)
Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony

• The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural’ (Hall, 1977). Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range’ (Hall, 1977), so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological’: which appears instead to be permanent and ‘natural’, to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests.

• Hegemony is not universal and “given” to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be won, reproduced, sustained. Hegemony is, as Gramsci said, a “moving equilibrium” containing relations of forces favourable or unfavourable to this or that tendency.’

• Style as the challenge to hegemony.
Myth, Ideology, Hegemony

- From signs to myths

Myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it' and it does so typically by imposing its own ideological terms, by substituting in this case ‘the fairy tale of the artist’s creativity’ for an art form ‘within the compass of every consciousness,’ a ‘music’ to be judged, dismissed or marketed for ‘noise’ – a logically consistent, self-constituted chaos.

- Common sense, normalization, and neutralization.

- Otherness & maintenance of natural order.

- A sign does not simply exist as part of reality – it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore it may distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view, and so forth. Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation. . . . The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too. Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value. (Vološinov, 1973)

Second-order semiological system (absorption)

Dominant groups & dominant ideologies

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling class, therefore the ideas of its dominance. (Marx and Engels, 1970)
Sub-culture

• 1914, Man: A matrilineal system of inheritance was a feature of the sub-culture of the south, on which the Brahmanic super-culture was imposed.

• 1936, R. Linton, Study of Man: While ethnologists have been accustomed to speak of tribes and nationalities as though they were the primary culture-bearing units, the total culture of a society of this type is really an aggregate of sub-cultures.

• 1948, T. S. Eliot, Notes Def. Culture: We may find ourselves led to the conclusion, that every sub-culture is dependent upon that from which it is an offshoot.

How do we read subculture?
Refusal: Jean Genet’s Dirty, wretched object

- Genet: “I was sure that this puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would be able to exasperate all the police in the world; it would draw down upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages.”

- Hebdige: “Much of the available space in this book will therefore be taken up with a description of the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as ‘style’ in subculture. As in Genet’s novels, this process begins with a crime against the natural order, though in this case the deviation may seem slight indeed – the cultivation of a quiff, the acquisition of a scooter or a record or a certain type of suit. But it ends in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal. I would like to think that this Refusal is worth making, that these gestures have a meaning, that the smiles and the sneers have some subversive value, even if, in the final analysis, they are, like Genet’s gangster pin-ups, just the darker side of sets of regulations, just so much graffiti on a prison wall.”

- Deviance & intentionality: “It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read.”

- Style as a challenge to hegemony and to the natural order.
Graffiti

- Expression of impotence and power.
- The Power to Disfigure
- Normal Mailer: “Your presence on their Presence . . . hanging your alias on their scene.”
- Art & style
- Subculture as a (pre)modern phenomenon?
The Dandy: Style Contra Mundum

George “Beau” Brummell (1778–1840)
Jazz

In *Subculture*, Hebdige attempts to plot race & class relations in style.

The process of fashioning social distinction through style.
David Bowie
British Subculture, Mr. BBC
Style as Bricolage

- Style as a pastiche of genres, as a subversion.

- Surrealism, Dada, avant-gardes

- [Bricolage] refers to the means by which the non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the world around him. The process involves a ‘science of the concrete’ (as opposed to our ‘civilised’ science of the ‘abstract’) which far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the minutiae of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a ‘logic' which is not our own. The structures, ‘improvised’ or made up (these are rough translations of the process of bricoler) as ad hoc responses to an environment, then serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily ‘explain’ the world and make it able to be lived in. (Hawkes, 1977)

- Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed. (Clarke, 1976)

- . . . a total revolution of the object: acting to divert the object from its ends by coupling it to a new name and signing it. . . . Perturbation and deformation are in demand here for their own sakes. . . . Objects thus reassembled have in common the fact that they derive from and yet succeed in differing from the objects which surround us, by simple change of role. (Breton, 1936).

- Nothing was holy to us. Our movement was neither mystical, communistic nor anarchistic. All of these movements had some sort of programme, but ours was completely nihilistic. We spat on everything, including ourselves. Our symbol was nothingness, a vacuum, a void. (George Grosz on Dada)
Jubilee (1978) dir. Derek Jarman
London Punk & Dystopia
Teddy Boys

SUBCULTURE
Mods, Skinheads, Glam Rockers

• The “mod” (a diminutive of modernist) style of the 1960s.

• Early mods of the late 1950s were inspired by continental cool in the form of coffee bars, French New Wave cinema, and Italianate style, along with U.S. modern jazz and an Ivy League combo of dark glasses, box jackets, and button-down-collar shirts.

• In their two-tone mohair suits; ties; and short, half-parted, back-combed hair, the 1960s British mods were sharp, neat, and marked by a narcissistic obsession with such specific sartorial detail as optimum cuff length, variation in the size and number of vents, and the requisite amount of covered or undone buttons.
Skinheads

Reading the gesture
A Punk Polysemy:

A boy or young man kept by an older man as a (typically passive) sexual partner, a catamite (obs.). Later: a man who is made use of as a sexual partner by another man, esp. by force or coercion. Now chiefly Prison slang.

- 1698, Womens Complaint to Venus, The Beaus: “At night make a Punk of him that's first drunk.”
- 1761, Genuine Mem. Late Celebrated Jane D****s: “Augustus Cæsar owed his first prefirment to having been p—k to Hirtius in his youth.”
How do we read these signs? What do they communicate?
The Sex Pistols

Distribution and the role of media
Jubilee (1978) dir. Derek Jarman
Rule Britania!
From style to politics?
You're gonna wake up one morning and know what side of the bed you've been lying on!

(Hatred) Television (not the group)/Mick Jagger/
The Liberal Party/John Biffen/Yel/George Melly/Kenny & Cash/Michael Caine/Charles Forte/Sat nights in Oxford Street/SECR/ICOR impotence or complacency (slogan & Robert Carr)/Parking tickets/19, Honey, Harpers, Vogue in fact all magazines that treat their readers as idiots/Bryan Ferry/Salvador Dali/A Touch of Class/ERUT for - who cares?/The Presidents Men/Lord Carrington/The Playboy Club/Alan Brien, Anthony Haden-Guest, Vic Lownes, to be avoided first thing in the morning/ANTIQUARIUS end all it stands for/Michael Roberts/POP STARS who are thick and useless/YES/Lec Sayer/Devid Essex/Tcp Of The Pops/Rod Stewart oh for money and an audience/Elton John - quote in NME 25 Sept re birthday spending/West End shopping/Stirling Cooper, Jean Junctonn, BROWNS, Take Six, C&A/Mars bars/Good Fun Entertainment when it's really not good or not funny Bernard Defont/a passive audience/erotic/Elvis/John Osborne/Harry Frinton Max Bygraves Melvyn Bragg/Phillip Jenkinson the ICA and its symposiums John Schlesinger Andé Pevin/Devid Frost/Peter Bogdenovich/Capital Radio/The Village Trucershop (sorry bookshop)/The narrow monopoly of media causing harmless creativity to appear subversive/ THE ARTS COUNCIL/Head of the Metropolitan Police/Syntheticon/Tate & Lyle/Corrupt councillors/G.K.N./Grey skies/Dirty books that aren't all that dirty/Andy Warhol/Nigel Waymouth/David Hockney & Victorianism/The Stock Exchange/Cecile Clark/The Rag Trade/E.L.P./Antiques of any sort/Housing Trusts who profit by bad housing/Bea & Jagger/Fellini/John Dunbar/J. Arthur's/Tramps/Dingwalls without H/deby Berkeley MOVIES/Sir Keith Joseph and his sensational speeches/National Front/W.H. Smith/Censorship/Chris Welch and his lost Melody Makers/Clockwork soul routines/ Bob Harris (or the Sniffing Whistle as we know him)/The job you hate but are too scared to pack in/Interview magazine - Peter Lester/rich boys dressed as poor boys/Charis Secunda, Nicky Waymouth, June Bolan, Pauline Fordham ha'penny/Rosie & Anne Lambrian Chintless people/ Anto & Frazar/Derek Maricw/Anne Scott-James/Sydney Edwards/Christopher Logue/Osbert Lancaster/Shaw Taylor - whispering grass/The Archers/BIBAS/Old clothes old ideas and all this resting in the country business/The suburbs/The Divine Light Mission/All those fucking saints.
Sex Pistols in Huddersfield

Anarchy in the UK Christmas Day

They are Diderotian-likeurchins who
with ragged clothes andpockmarked
faces roam the streets of foggy
gas-litLondon, philandering
and
setting fire to buildings, beating up
out people with gold chains.

Fucking the rich up the arse,
causing havoc wherever they go. Some of
these ragamuffin guys jump on tables
amidst the undaunted.
THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE
BOW LIKE THIS WITH
THE BIG MONEY ALL CRUSHED INTO
Forms of resistance: Queer Sub/culture
Polari: Queer Subculture & Language
Subculture

• A subculture can be defined as a group with particular shared cultural features that distinguish it clearly from other subcultures and both the specific milieu (parent culture) and wider society (dominant culture) from which it emerges.

• A subculture can be seen as a distinctive subset or subsection of a wider culture.

• Subcultures can be organized around any number of shared features or focal concerns, and it is an empirical question as to what forms of social division—class, gender, ethnicity, age—mark out a particular subcultural membership.

• Whether apolitical, reactionary, or radical, subcultures of this type typically aim for exclusivity and distinction by defining themselves against the dominant or mainstream fashionable standards of the time. In prevailing against the current mode, their members may well eschew the terms fashion or dress, preferring to define their look in terms of antifashion or style.

• Homology not only gave a subculture its internal coherence; it enabled it to be differentiated from other such collective groupings, indeed, often demarcated in terms of mutual antagonism—mods versus rockers; skinheads versus hippies; teddy boy revivalists versus punks.
Subcultures Today?

Vivienne Westwood, HBA, Walter Van Beirendonck, Yang Li
Riot Girrrl (Pussy Riot, Bikini Kill, Le Tigre, The Gossip)
Afropunk
Afrofeminism
Cyberqueer
Normcore
Samizdat