INTRODUCTION: 
SUBCULTURE AND 
STYLE

I managed to get about twenty photographs, and with bits of chewed bread I pasted them on the back of the cardboard sheet of regulations that hangs on the wall. Some are pinned up with bits of brass wire which the foreman brings me and on which I have to string coloured glass beads. Using the same beads with which the prisoners next door make funeral wreaths, I have made star-shaped frames for the most purely criminal. In the evening, as you open your window to the street, I turn the back of the regulation sheet towards me. Smiles and sneers, alike inexorable, enter me by all the holes I offer. . . . They watch over my little routines. 

Genet, 1966a

In the opening pages of *The Thief's Journal*, Jean Genet describes how a tube of vaseline, found in his possession, is confiscated by the Spanish police during a raid. This ‘dirty, wretched object’, proclaiming his homosexuality to the world, becomes for Genet a kind of guarantee – ‘the sign of a secret grace which was soon to save me from contempt’. The discovery of the vaseline is greeted
with laughter in the record-office of the station, and the police
‘smealing of garlic, sweat and oil, but . . . strong in their moral
assurance’ subject Genet to a tirade of hostile innuendo. The
author joins in the laughter too (‘though painfully’) but later,
in his cell, ‘the image of the tube of vaseline never left me’.

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. (Genet, 1967)

I have chosen to begin with these extracts from Genet
because he more than most has explored in both his life
and his art the subversive implications of style. I shall be
returning again and again to Genet’s major themes: the
status and meaning of revolt, the idea of style as a form of
Refusal, the elevation of crime into art (even though, in
our case, the ‘crimes’ are only broken codes). Like Genet,
we are interested in subculture – in the expressive forms
and rituals of those subordinate groups – the teddy boys
and mods and rockers, the skinheads and the punks – who
are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized;
treated at different times as threats to public order and as
harmless buffoons. Like Genet also, we are intrigued by
the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a
motor cycle – which, none the less, like the tube of
vaseline, take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form
of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile. Finally, like
Genet, we must seek to recreate the dialectic between
action and reaction which renders these objects
meaningful. For, just as the conflict between Genet’s
‘unnatural’ sexuality and the policemen’s ‘legitimate’
outrage can be encapsulated in a single object, so the
tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can
be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture – in the
styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning. On the one hand, they warn the ‘straight’ world in advance of a sinister presence – the presence of difference – and draw down upon themselves vague suspicions, uneasy laughter, ‘white and dumb rages’. On the other hand, for those who erect them into icons, who use them as words or as curses, these objects become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value. Recalling his humiliation at the hands of the police, Genet finds consolation in the tube of vaseline. It becomes a symbol of his ‘triumph’ – ‘I would indeed rather have shed blood than repudiate that silly object’ (Genet, 1967).

The meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force. 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.

Even so, graffiti can make fascinating reading. They draw attention to themselves. They are an expression both of impotence and a kind of power – the power to disfigure (Norman Mailer calls graffiti – ‘Your presence on their Presence . . . hanging your alias on their scene’ (Mailer, 1974)). In this book I shall attempt to decipher the graffiti,
to tease out the meanings embedded in the various post-war youth styles. But before we can proceed to individual subcultures, we must first define the basic terms. The word ‘subculture’ is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld. It also invokes the larger and no less difficult concept ‘culture’. So it is with the idea of culture that we should begin.
ONE

From culture to hegemony

Culture

Culture: cultivation, tending, in Christian authors, worship; the action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage, husbandry; the cultivation or rearing of certain animals (e.g. fish); the artificial development of microscopic organisms, organisms so produced; the cultivating or development (of the mind, faculties, manners), improvement or refinement by education and training; the condition of being trained or refined; the intellectual side of civilization; the prosecution or special attention or study of any subject or pursuit. (Oxford English Dictionary)

CULTURE is a notoriously ambiguous concept as the above definition demonstrates. Refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings. Even as a scientific term, it refers both to a process (artificial development of microscopic organisms) and a product (organisms so produced). More
specifically, since the end of the eighteenth century, it has been used by English intellectuals and literary figures to focus critical attention on a whole range of controversial issues. The ‘quality of life’, the effects in human terms of mechanization, the division of labour and the creation of a mass society have all been discussed within the larger confines of what Raymond Williams has called the ‘Culture and Society’ debate (Williams, 1961). It was through this tradition of dissent and criticism that the dream of the ‘organic society’ – of society as an integrated, meaningful whole – was largely kept alive. The dream had two basic trajectories. One led back to the past and to the feudal ideal of a hierarchically ordered community. Here, culture assumed an almost sacred function. Its ‘harmonious perfection’ (Arnold, 1868) was posited against the Wasteland of contemporary life.

The other trajectory, less heavily supported, led towards the future, to a socialist Utopia where the distinction between labour and leisure was to be annulled. Two basic definitions of culture emerged from this tradition, though these were by no means necessarily congruent with the two trajectories outlined above. The first – the one which is probably most familiar to the reader – was essentially classical and conservative. It represented culture as a standard of aesthetic excellence: ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ (Arnold, 1868), and it derived from an appreciation of ‘classic’ aesthetic form (opera, ballet, drama, literature, art). The second, traced back by Williams to Herder and the eighteenth century (Williams, 1976), was rooted in anthropology. Here the term ‘culture’ referred to a

\[ \ldots \] 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)
This definition obviously had a much broader range. It encompassed, in T. S. Eliot’s words,

... 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)

As Williams noted, such a definition could only be supported if a new theoretical initiative was taken. The theory of culture now involved the ‘study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life’ (Williams, 1965). The emphasis shifted from immutable to historical criteria, from fixity to transformation:

... an emphasis [which] from studying particular meanings and values seeks not so much to compare these, as a way of establishing a scale, but by studying their modes of change to discover certain general causes or ‘trends’ by which social and cultural developments as a whole can be better understood. (Williams, 1965)

Williams was, then, proposing an altogether broader formulation of the relationships between culture and society, one which through the analysis of ‘particular meanings and values’ sought to uncover the concealed fundamentals of history; the ‘general causes’ and broad social ‘trends’ which lie behind the manifest appearances of an ‘everyday life’.

In the early years, when it was being established in the Universities, Cultural Studies sat rather uncomfortably on the fence between these two conflicting definitions – culture as a standard of excellence, culture as a ‘whole way of life’ – unable to determine which represented the most fruitful line of enquiry. Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams
portrayed working-class culture sympathetically in wistful accounts of pre-scholarship boyhoods (Leeds for Hoggart (1958), a Welsh mining village for Williams (1960)) but their work displayed a strong bias towards literature and literacy and an equally strong moral tone. Hoggart deplored the way in which the traditional working-class community – a community of tried and tested values despite the dour landscape in which it had been set – was being undermined and replaced by a ‘Candy Floss World’ of thrills and cheap fiction which was somehow bland and sleazy. Williams tentatively endorsed the new mass communications but was concerned to establish aesthetic and moral criteria for distinguishing the worthwhile products from the ‘trash’; the jazz – ‘a real musical form’ – and the football – ‘a wonderful game’ – from the ‘rape novel, the Sunday strip paper and the latest Tin Pan drool’ (Williams, 1965). In 1966 Hoggart laid down the basic premises upon which Cultural Studies were based:

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)

The implicit assumption that it still required a literary sensibility to ‘read’ society with the requisite subtlety, and that the two ideas of culture could be ultimately reconciled was also, paradoxically, to inform the early work of the French writer, Roland Barthes, though here it found validation in a method – semiotics – a way of reading signs (Hawkes, 1977).

*Barthes: Myths and signs*

Using models derived from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure Barthes sought to expose the
arbitrary nature of cultural phenomena, to uncover the latent meanings of an everyday life which, to all intents and purposes, was 'perfectly natural'. Unlike Hoggart, Barthes was not concerned with distinguishing the good from the bad in modern mass culture, but rather with showing how all the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary bourgeois societies are subject to a systematic distortion, liable at any moment to be dehistoricized, 'naturalized', converted into myth:

The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between men and the world. (Barthes, 1972)

Like Eliot, Barthes' notion of culture extends beyond the library, the opera-house and the theatre to encompass the whole of everyday life. But this everyday life is for Barthes overlaid with a significance which is at once more insidious and more systematically organized. Starting from the premise that 'myth is a type of speech', Barthes set out in Mythologies to examine the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and 'given' for the whole of society. He found in phenomena as disparate as a wrestling match, a writer on holiday, a tourist-guide book, the same artificial nature, the same ideological core. Each had been exposed to the same prevailing rhetoric (the rhetoric of common sense) and turned into myth, into a mere element in a 'second-order semiological system' (Barthes, 1972). (Barthes uses the
example of a photograph in *Paris-Match* of a Negro soldier saluting the French flag, which has a first and second order connotation: (1) a gesture of loyalty, but also (2) ‘France is a great empire, and all her sons, without colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag’.)

Barthes’ application of a method rooted in linguistics to other systems of discourse outside language (fashion, film, food, etc.) opened up completely new possibilities for contemporary cultural studies. It was hoped that the invisible seam between language, experience and reality could be located and prised open through a semiotic analysis of this kind: that the gulf between the alienated intellectual and the ‘real’ world could be rendered meaningful and, miraculously, at the same time, be made to disappear. Moreover, under Barthes’ direction, semiotics promised nothing less than the reconciliation of the two conflicting definitions of culture upon which Cultural Studies was so ambiguously posited – a marriage of moral conviction (in this case, Barthes’ Marxist beliefs) and popular themes: the study of a society’s total way of life.

This is not to say that semiotics was easily assimilable within the Cultural Studies project. Though Barthes shared the literary preoccupations of Hoggart and Williams, his work introduced a new Marxist ‘problematic’ which was alien to the British tradition of concerned and largely untheorized ‘social commentary’. As a result, the old debate seemed suddenly limited. In E. P. Thompson’s words it appeared to reflect the parochial concerns of a group of ‘gentlemen amateurs’. Thompson sought to replace Williams’ definition of the theory of culture as ‘a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life’ with his own more rigorously Marxist formulation: ‘the study of relationships in a whole way of conflict’. A more analytical framework was required; a new vocabulary had to be learned. As part of this process of theorization, the word ‘ideology’ came to acquire a much wider range of meanings than had previously been the
case. We have seen how Barthes found an ‘anonymous ideology’ penetrating every possible level of social life, inscribed in the most mundane of rituals, framing the most casual social encounters. But how can ideology be ‘anonymous’, and how can it assume such a broad significance? Before we attempt any reading of subcultural style, we must first define the term ‘ideology’ more precisely.

*Ideology: A lived relation*

In the *German Ideology*, Marx shows how the basis of the capitalist economic structure (surplus value, neatly defined by Godelier as ‘Profit . . . is unpaid work’ (Godelier, 1970)) is hidden from the consciousness of the agents of production. The failure to see through appearances to the real relations which underlie them does not occur as the direct result of some kind of masking operation consciously carried out by individuals, social groups or institutions. On the contrary, 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. As Stuart Hall puts it:

> 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)
Since ideology saturates everyday discourse in the form of common sense, it cannot be bracketed off from everyday life as a self-contained set of 'political opinions' or 'biased views'. Neither can it be reduced to the abstract dimensions of a 'world view' or used in the crude Marxist sense to designate 'false consciousness'. Instead, as Louis Althusser has pointed out:

... 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)

Although Althusser is here referring to structures like the family, cultural and political institutions, etc., we can illustrate the point quite simply by taking as our example a physical structure. Most modern institutes of education, despite the apparent neutrality of the materials from which they are constructed (red brick, white tile, etc.) carry within themselves implicit ideological assumptions which are literally structured into the architecture itself. The categorization of knowledge into arts and sciences is reproduced in the faculty system which houses different disciplines in different buildings, and most colleges maintain the traditional divisions by devoting a separate floor to each subject. Moreover, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is inscribed in the very lay-out of the lecture theatre where the seating arrangements – benches rising in tiers before a raised lectern – dictate the flow of information and serve to 'naturalize' professorial authority. Thus, a whole range of decisions about what is and what is not
possible within education have been made, however unconsciously, before the content of individual courses is even decided.

These decisions help to set the limits not only on what is taught but on how it is taught. Here the buildings literally reproduce in concrete terms prevailing (ideological) notions about what education is and it is through this process that the educational structure, which can, of course, be altered, is placed beyond question and appears to us as a 'given' (i.e. as immutable). In this case, the frames of our thinking have been translated into actual bricks and mortar.

Social relations and processes are then appropriated by individuals only through the forms in which they are represented to those individuals. These forms are, as we have seen, by no means transparent. They are shrouded in a 'common sense' which simultaneously validates and mystifies them. It is precisely these 'perceived.accepted.-suffered cultural objects' which semiotics sets out to 'interrogate' and decipher. All aspects of culture possess a semiotic value, and the most taken-for-granted phenomena can function as signs: as elements in communication systems governed by semantic rules and codes which are not themselves directly apprehended in experience. These signs are, then, as opaque as the social relations which produce them and which they re-present. In other words, there is an ideological dimension to every signification:

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. (Volosinov, 1973)
To uncover the ideological dimension of signs we must first try to disentangle the codes through which meaning is organized. ‘Connotative’ codes are particularly important. As Stuart Hall has argued, they ‘cover the face of social life and render it classifiable, intelligible, meaningful’ (Hall, 1977). He goes on to describe these codes as ‘maps of meaning’ which are of necessity the product of selection. They cut across a range of potential meanings, making certain meanings available and ruling others out of court. We tend to live inside these maps as surely as we live in the ‘real’ world: they ‘think’ us as much as we ‘think’ them, and this in itself is quite ‘natural’. 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. This is what Althusser (1971) means when he says that ‘ideology has no history’ and that ideology in this general sense will always be an ‘essential element of every social formation’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1968).

However, in highly complex societies like ours, which function through a finely graded system of divided (i.e. specialized) labour, the crucial question has to do with which specific ideologies, representing the interests of which specific groups and classes will prevail at any given moment, in any given situation. To deal with this question, we must first consider how power is distributed in our society. That is, we must ask which groups and classes have how much say in defining, ordering and classifying out the social world. For instance, if we pause to reflect for a moment, it should be obvious that access to the means by which ideas are disseminated in our society (i.e. principally the mass media) is not the same for all classes. Some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world.
Thus, when we come to look beneath the level of 'ideology-in-general at the way in which specific ideologies work, how some gain dominance and others remain marginal, we can see that in advanced Western democracies the ideological field is by no means neutral. To return to the 'connotative' codes to which Stuart Hall refers we can see that these 'maps of meaning' are charged with a potentially explosive significance because they are traced and re-traced along the lines laid down by the dominant discourses about reality, the dominant ideologies. They thus tend to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of the dominant groups in society.

To understand this point we should refer to Marx:

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)

This is the basis of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony which provides the most adequate account of how dominance is sustained in advanced capitalist societies.

*Hegemony: The moving equilibrium*

‘Society cannot share a common communication system so long as it is split into warring classes’ (Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*).
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 (see Social Trends, no. 6, 1975).

This is how, according to Barthes, ‘mythology’ performs its vital function of naturalization and normalization and it is in his book Mythologies that Barthes demonstrates most forcefully the full extension of these normalized forms and meanings. However, Gramsci adds the important proviso that hegemonic power, precisely because it requires the consent of the dominated majority, can never be permanently exercised by the same alliance of ‘class fractions’. As has been pointed out, ‘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’ (Hall et al., 1976a).

In the same way, forms cannot be permanently normalized. They can always be deconstructed, demystified, by a ‘mythologist’ like Barthes. Moreover commodities can be symbolically ‘repossessed’ in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them. The symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is then neither fixed nor guaranteed. It can be prised open. The
consensus can be fractured, challenged, overruled, and resistance to the groups in dominance cannot always be lightly dismissed or automatically incorporated. Although, as Lefebvre has written, we live in a society where '... objects in practice become signs and signs objects and a second nature takes the place of the first – the initial layer of perceptible reality' (Lefebvre, 1971), there are, as he goes on to affirm, always 'objections and contradictions which hinder the closing of the circuit' between sign and object, production and reproduction.

We can now return to the meaning of youth subcultures, for the emergence of such groups has signalled in a spectacular fashion the breakdown of consensus in the post-war period. In the following chapters we shall see that it is precisely objections and contradictions of the kind which Lefebvre has described that find expression in subculture. 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 (and, as we shall see, ‘magically resolved’) at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs. For the sign-community, the community of myth-consumers, is not a uniform body. As Volosinov has written, it is cut through by class:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the totality of users of the same set of signs of ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle. (Volosinov, 1973)

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane
areas of everyday life. To turn once more to the examples used in the Introduction, to the safety pins and tubes of vaseline, we can see that such commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to 'illegitimate' as well as 'legitimate' uses. These 'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination.

Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority”, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. Our task becomes, like Barthes’, to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning' which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal.

Academics who adopt a semiotic approach are not alone in reading significance into the loaded surfaces of life. The existence of spectacular subcultures continually opens up those surfaces to other potentially subversive readings. Jean Genet, the archetype of the ‘unnatural’ deviant, again exemplifies the practice of resistance through style. He is as convinced in his own way as is Roland Barthes of the ideological character of cultural signs. He is equally oppressed by the seamless web of forms and meanings which encloses and yet excludes him. His reading is equally partial. He makes his own list and draws his own conclusions:

1 was astounded by so rigorous an edifice whose details were united against me. Nothing in the world is irrelevant: the stars on a general’s sleeve, the stock-market quotations, the olive harvest, the style of the
judiciary, the wheat exchange, the flower-beds, . . . Nothing. This order. . . had a meaning – my exile. (Genet, 1967)

It is this alienation from the deceptive ‘innocence’ of appearances which gives the teds, the mods, the punks and no doubt future groups of as yet unimaginable ‘deviants’ the impetus to move from man’s second ‘false nature’ (Barthes, 1972) to a genuinely expressive artifice; a truly subterranean style. As a symbolic violation of the social order, such a movement attracts and will continue to attract attention, to provoke censure and to act, as we shall see, as the fundamental bearer of significance in subculture.

No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval. We shall begin therefore with the moment of punk and we shall return to that moment throughout the course of this book. It is perhaps appropriate that the punks, who have made such large claims for illiteracy, who have pushed profanity to such startling extremes, should be used to test some of the methods for ‘reading’ signs evolved in the centuries-old debate on the sanctity of culture.
TWO

April 3, 1989, Marrakech
The chic thing is to dress in expensive tailor-made rags and all the queens are camping about in wild-boy drag. There are Bowery suits that appear to be stained with urine and vomit which on closer inspection turn out to be intricate embroideries of fine gold thread. There are clochard suits of the finest linen, shabby gentility suits . . . felt hats seasoned by old junkies . . . loud cheap pimp suits that turn out to be not so cheap the loudness is a subtle harmony of colours only the very best Poor Boy shops can turn out. . . . It is the double take and many carry it much further to as many as six takes (William Burroughs, 1969)

Holiday in the sun: Mister Rotten makes the grade

The British summer of 1976 was extraordinarily hot and dry: there were no recorded precedents. From May through to August, London parched and sweltered under luminous skies and the inevitable fog of exhaust fumes. Initially hailed as a Godsend, and a national ‘tonic’ in the press and television (was Britain’s ‘curse’ finally broken?) the sun provided seasonal relief
from the dreary cycle of doom-laden headlines which had dominated the front pages of the tabloids throughout the winter. Nature performed its statutory ideological function and 'stood in' for all the other 'bad news', provided tangible proof of 'improvement' and pushed aside the strikes and the dissension. With predictable regularity, 'bright young things' were shown flouncing along Oxford Street in harem bags and beach shorts, bikini tops and polaroids in that last uplifting item for the News at Ten. The sun served as a 'cheeky' postscript to the crisis: a lighthearted addendum filled with tropical promise. The crisis, too, could have its holiday. But as the weeks and months passed and the heatwave continued, the old mythology of doom and disaster was reasserted with a vengeance. The 'miracle' rapidly became a commonplace, an everyday affair, until one morning in mid-July it was suddenly re-christened a 'freak disorder': a dreadful, last, unlooked-for factor in Britain's decline.

The heatwave was officially declared a drought in August, water was rationed, crops were failing, and Hyde Park's grass burned into a delicate shade of raw sienna. The end was at hand and Last Days imagery began to figure once more in the press. Economic categories, cultural and natural phenomena were confounded with more than customary abandon until the drought took on an almost metaphysical significance. A Minister for Drought was appointed, Nature had now been officially declared 'unnatural', and all the age-old inferences were drawn with an obligatory modicum of irony to keep within the bounds of common sense. In late August, two events of completely different mythical stature coincided to confirm the worst forebodings: it was demonstrated that the excessive heat was threatening the very structure of the nation's houses (cracking the foundations) and the Notting Hill Carnival, traditionally a paradigm of racial harmony, exploded into violence.
The Caribbean festival, with all its Cook's Tours connotations of happy, dancing coloured folk, of jaunty bright calypsos and exotic costumes, was suddenly, unaccountably, transformed into a menacing congregation of angry black youths and embattled police. Hordes of young black Britons did the Soweto dash across the nation's television screens and conjured up fearful images of other Negroes, other confrontations, other 'long, hot summers'. The humble dustbin lid, the staple of every steel band, the symbol of the 'carnival spirit', of Negro ingenuity and the resilience of ghetto culture, took on an altogether more ominous significance when used by white-faced policemen as a desperate shield against an angry rain of bricks.

It was during this strange apocalyptic summer that punk made its sensational debut in the music press. In London, especially in the south west and more specifically in the vicinity of the King's Road, a new style was being generated combining elements drawn from a whole range of heterogeneous youth styles. In fact punk claimed a dubious parentage. Strands from David Bowie and glitter-rock were woven together with elements from American proto-punk (the Ramones, the Heartbreakers, Iggy Pop, Richard Hell), from that faction within London pub-rock (the 101-ers, the Gorillas, etc.) inspired by the mod subculture of the 60s, from the Canvey Island 40s revival and the Southend r & b bands (Dr Feelgood, Lew Lewis, etc.), from northern soul and from reggae.

Not surprisingly, the resulting mix was somewhat unstable: all these elements constantly threatened to separate and return to their original sources. Glam rock contributed narcissism, nihilism and gender confusion. American punk offered a minimalist aesthetic (e.g. the Ramones' 'Pinhead' or Crime's 'I Stupid'), the cult of the Street and a penchant for self-laceration. Northern Soul (a genuinely secret subculture of working-class youngsters
dedicated to acrobatic dancing and fast American soul of the 60s, which centres on clubs like the Wigan Casino) brought its subterranean tradition of fast, jerky rhythms, solo dance styles and amphetamines; reggae its exotic and dangerous aura of forbidden identity, its conscience, its dread and its cool. Native rhythm ‘n blues reinforced the brashness and the speed of Northern Soul, took rock back to the basics and contributed a highly developed iconoclasm, a thoroughly British persona and an extremely selective appropriation of the rock ‘n roll heritage.

This unlikely alliance of diverse and superficially incompatible musical traditions, mysteriously accomplished under punk, found ratification in an equally eclectic clothing style which reproduced the same kind of cacophony on the visual level. The whole ensemble, literally safety-pinned together, became the celebrated and highly photogenic phenomenon known as punk which throughout 1977 provided the tabloids with a fund of predictably sensational copy and the quality press with a welcome catalogue of beautifully broken codes. Punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in ‘cut up’ form, combining elements which had originally belonged to completely different epochs. There was a chaos of quiffs and leather jackets, brothel creepers and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid socks, bum freezers and bovver boots – all kept ‘in place’ and ‘out of time’ by the spectacular adhesives: the safety pins and plastic clothes pegs, the bondage straps and bits of string which attracted so much horrified and fascinated attention. Punk is therefore a singularly appropriate point of departure for a study of this kind because punk style contained distorted reflections of all the major post-war subcultures. But before we can interpret the significance of these subcultures, we must first unscramble the sequence in which they occurred.
Boredom in Babylon

Ordinary life is so dull that I get out of it as much as possible. (Steve Jones, a Sex Pistol, quoted in *Melody Maker*)

It seems entirely appropriate that punk’s ‘unnatural’ synthesis should have hit the London streets during that bizarre summer. Apocalypse was in the air and the rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change. Indeed, even punk’s epiphanies were hybrid affairs, representing the awkward and unsteady confluence of the two radically dissimilar languages of *reggae* and *rock*. As the shock-haired punks began to gather in a shop called Sex on a corner of the King’s Road, aptly named the Worlds End, David Bowie’s day of the *Diamond Dogs* (R.C.A. Victor, 1974) and the triumph of the ‘super-alienated humanoid’ was somehow made to coincide with reggae’s Day of Judgement, with the overthrow of Babylon and the end of alienation altogether.

It is here that we encounter the first of punk’s endemic contradictions, for the visions of apocalypse superficially fused in punk came from essentially antagonistic sources. David Bowie and the New York punk bands had pieced together from a variety of acknowledged ‘artistic’ sources – from the literary *avant-garde* and the underground cinema – a self-consciously profane and terminal aesthetic. Patti Smith, an American punk and ex-art student, claimed to have invented a new form, ‘rock poetry’, and incorporated readings from Rimbaud and William Burroughs into her act. Bowie, too, cited Burroughs as an influence and used his famous cut-up technique of random juxtapositions to ‘compose’ lyrics. Richard Hell drew on the writings of Lautréamont and Huysmans. British punk bands, generally younger and more self-consciously proletarian, remained largely innocent of literature. However, for better or worse,
the literary sources turned out to be firmly although implicitly inscribed in the aesthetics of British punk too. Similarly, there were connections (via Warhol and Wayne County in America, via the art school bands like the Who and the Clash in Britain) with underground cinema and avant-garde art.

By the early 70s, these tendencies had begun to cohere into a fully fledged nihilist aesthetic and the emergence of this aesthetic together with its characteristic focal concerns (polymorphous, often wilfully perverse sexuality, obsessive individualism, fragmented sense of self, etc.) generated a good deal of controversy amongst those interested in rock culture (see Melly, 1972; Taylor and Wall, 1976). From Jagger in Performance (Warner Bros, 1969) to Bowie as the ‘thin white duke’, the spectre of the dandy ‘drowning in his own opera’ (Sartre, 1968) has haunted rock from the wings as it were, and in the words of Ian Taylor and Dave Wall ‘plays back the alienation of youth onto itself (1976). Punk represents the most recent phase in this process. In punk, alienation assumed an almost tangible quality. It could almost be grasped. It gave itself up to the cameras in ‘blankness’, the removal of expression (see any photograph of any punk group), the refusal to speak and be positioned. This trajectory – the solipsism, the neurosis, the cosmetic rage – had its origins in rock.

But at almost every turn the dictates of this profane aesthetic were countermanded by the righteous imperatives of another musical form: reggae. Reggae occupies the other end of that wide spectrum of influences which bore upon punk. As early as May 1977 Jordan, the famous punk shop assistant of Sex and Seditionaries was expressing a preference for reggae over ‘new wave’ on the pages of the New Musical Express (7 May 1977). ’It’s the only music we [i.e. Jordan and J. Rotten] dance to’. Although Rotten himself insisted on the relative autonomy of punk and reggae, he displayed a detailed knowledge of the more
esoteric reggae numbers in a series of interviews throughout 1977. Most conspicuously amongst punk groups, the Clash were heavily influenced not only by the music, but also by the visual iconography of black Jamaican street style. Khaki battle dress stencilled with the Caribbean legends DUB and HEAVY MANNERS, narrow ‘sta-prest’ trousers, black brogues and slip ons, even the pork pie hat, were all adopted at different times by various members of the group. In addition, the group played ‘White Riot’, a song inspired directly by the ’76 Carnival, against a screen-printed backdrop of the Notting Hill disturbances, and they toured with a reggae discotheque presided over by Don Letts, the black Rastafarian d-j who shot the documentary film Punk while working at the Roxy Club in Covent Garden.

As we shall see, although apparently separate and autonomous, punk and the black British subcultures with which reggae is associated were connected at a deep structural level. But the dialogue between the two forms cannot properly be decoded until the internal composition and significance of both reggae and the British working-class youth cultures which preceded punk are fully understood. This involves two major tasks. First reggae must be traced back to its roots in the West Indies, and second the history of post-war British youth culture must be reinterpreted as a succession of differential responses to the black immigrant presence in Britain from the 1950s onwards. Such a reassessment demands a shift of emphasis away from the normal areas of interest – the school, police, media and parent culture (which have anyway been fairly exhaustively treated by other writers, see, e.g. Hall et al., 1976) – to what I feel to be the largely neglected dimension of race and race relations.
Subculture: The unnatural break

‘I felt unclean for about 48 hours.’ (G.L.C. councillor after seeing a concert by the Sex Pistols (reported *New Musical Express*, 18 July 1977))

[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)

SUBCULTURES represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media. We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy ‘out there’ but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation. As John Mepham (1972) has written:

Distinctions and identities may be so deeply embedded in our discourse and thought about the world whether this be because of their role in our practical lives, or
because they are cognitively powerful and are an important aspect of the way in which we appear to make sense of our experience, that the theoretical challenge to them can be quite startling.

Any elision, truncation or convergence of prevailing linguistic and ideological categories can have profoundly disorienting effects. These deviations briefly expose the arbitrary nature of the codes which underlie and shape all forms of discourse. As Stuart Hall (1974) has written (here in the context of explicitly political deviance):

New . . . developments which are both dramatic and 'meaningless' within the consensually validated norms, pose a challenge to the normative world. They render problematic not only how the . . . world is defined, but how it ought to be. They 'breach our expectancies'. . . .

Notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with ideas of social order. The limits of acceptable linguistic expression are prescribed by a number of apparently universal taboos. These taboos guarantee the continuing 'transparency' (the taken-for-grantedness) of meaning.

Predictably then, violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb. They are generally condemned, in Mary Douglas' words (1967), as 'contrary to holiness' and Levi-Strauss has noted how, in certain primitive myths, the mispronunciation of words and the misuse of language are classified along with incest as horrendous aberrations capable of 'unleashing storm and tempest' (Levi-Strauss, 1969). Similarly, spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial
and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.). They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as 'unnatural'. The terms used in the tabloid press to describe those youngsters who, in their conduct or clothing, proclaim subcultural membership ('freaks', 'animals . . . who find courage, like rats, in hunting in packs') would seem to suggest that the most primitive anxieties concerning the sacred distinction between nature and culture can be summoned up by the emergence of such a group. No doubt, the breaking of rules is confused with the 'absence of rules' which, according to Levi-Strauss (1969), 'seems to provide the surest criteria for distinguishing a natural from a cultural process'. Certainly, the official reaction to the punk subculture, particularly to the Sex Pistols' use of 'foul language' on television and record, and to the vomiting and spitting incidents at Heathrow Airport would seem to indicate that these basic taboos are no less deeply sedimented in contemporary British society.

Two forms of incorporation

Has not this society, glutted with aestheticism, already integrated former romanticisms, surrealism, existentialism and even Marxism to a point? It has, indeed, through trade, in the form of commodities. That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods, consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction. (Lefebvre, 1971)

We have seen how subcultures 'breach our expectancies', how they represent symbolic challenges to a symbolic order. But can subcultures always be effectively incorporated and if so, how? The emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press. This hysteria is typically ambivalent: it fluctuates between
dread and fascination, outrage and amusement. Shock and horror headlines dominate the front page (e.g. ‘Rotten Razored’, *Daily Mirror*, 28 June 1977) while, inside, the editorials positively bristle with ‘serious’ commentary and the centrespreads or supplements contain delirious accounts of the latest fads and rituals (see, for example, *Observer* colour supplements 30 January, 10 July 1977, 12 February 1978). Style in particular provokes a double response: it is alternately celebrated (in the fashion page) and ridiculed or reviled (in those articles which define subcultures as social problems).

In most cases, it is the subculture’s stylistic innovations which first attract the media’s attention. Subsequently deviant or ‘anti-social’ acts – vandalism, swearing, fighting, ‘animal behaviour’ – are ‘discovered’ by the police, the judiciary, the press; and these acts are used to ‘explain’ the subculture’s original transgression of sartorial codes. In fact, either deviant behaviour or the identification of a distinctive uniform (or more typically a combination of the two) can provide the catalyst for a moral panic. In the case of the punks, the media’s sighting of punk style virtually coincided with the discovery or invention of punk deviance. The *Daily Mirror* ran its first series of alarmist centrespreads on the subculture, concentrating on the bizarre clothing and jewellery during the week (29 Nov–3 Dec 1977) in which the Sex Pistols exploded into the public eye on the Thames *Today* programme. On the other hand, the mods, perhaps because of the muted character of their style, were not identified as a group until the Bank Holiday clashes of 1964, although the subculture was, by then, fully developed, at least in London. Whichever item opens the amplifying sequence, it invariably ends with the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the subcultural style.

As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the
referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent. Eventually, the mods, the punks, the glitter rockers can be incorporated, brought back into line, located on the preferred ‘map of problematic social reality’ (Geertz, 1964) at the point where boys in lipstick are ‘just kids dressing up’, where girls in rubber dresses are ‘daughters just like yours’ (see pp. 98–9; 158–9, n. 8). The media, as Stuart Hall (1977) has argued, not only record resistance, they ‘situate it within the dominant framework of meanings’ and those young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are simultaneously returned, as they are represented on T.V. and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit (as ‘animals’ certainly, but also ‘in the family’, ‘out of work’, ‘up to date’, etc.). It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as ‘folk devil’, as Other, as Enemy. The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms:

1. the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);
2. the ‘labelling’ and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form).

The commodity form

The first has been comprehensively handled by both journalists and academics. The relationship between the spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit it is notoriously ambiguous. After all, such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere
(‘I wouldn’t wear my punk outfit for work – there’s a time and a place for everything’ (see note 8)). It communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult in this case to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures. Indeed, the creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion of the subculture’s subversive power – both mod and punk innovations fed back directly into high fashion and mainstream fashion. Each new subculture establishes new trends, generates new looks and sounds which feed back into the appropriate industries. As John Clarke 1976b has observed:

The diffusion of youth styles from the subcultures to the fashion market is not simply a ‘cultural process’, but a real network or infrastructure of new kinds of commercial and economic institutions. The small-scale record shops, recording companies, the boutiques and one- or two-woman manufacturing companies – these versions of artisan capitalism, rather than more generalised and unspecific phenomena, situate the dialectic of commercial ‘manipulation’.

However, it would be mistaken to insist on the absolute autonomy of ‘cultural’ and commercial processes. As Lefebvre (1971) puts it: ‘Trade is . . . both a social and an intellectual phenomenon’, and commodities arrive at the market-place already laden with significance. They are, in Marx’s words (1970), ‘social hieroglyphs’ and their meanings are inflected by conventional usage.
Thus, as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. In this way, the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones (think of the boost punk must have given haberdashery!). This occurs irrespective of the subculture’s political orientation: the macrobiotic restaurants, craft shops and ‘antique markets’ of the hippie era were easily converted into punk boutiques and record shops. It also happens irrespective of the startling content of the style: punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year *Cosmopolitan* ran a review of Zandra Rhodes’ latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme. Models smouldered beneath mountains of safety pins and plastic (the pins were jewelled, the ‘plastic’ wet-look satin) and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism – ‘To shock is chic’ – which presaged the subculture’s imminent demise.

The ideological form

The second form of incorporation – the ideological – has been most adequately treated by those sociologists who operate a transactional model of deviant behaviour. For example, Stan Cohen has described in detail how one particular moral panic (surrounding the mod-rocker
conflict of the mid-60s) was launched and sustained. Although this type of analysis can often provide an extremely sophisticated explanation of why spectacular subcultures consistently provoke such hysterical outbursts, it tends to overlook the subtler mechanisms through which potentially threatening phenomena are handled and contained. As the use of the term ‘folk devil’ suggests, rather too much weight tends to be given to the sensational excesses of the tabloid press at the expense of the ambiguous reactions which are, after all, more typical. As we have seen, the way in which subcultures are represented in the media makes them both more and less exotic than they actually are. They are seen to contain both dangerous aliens and boisterous kids, wild animals and wayward pets. Roland Barthes furnishes a key to this paradox in his description of ‘identification’ – one of the seven rhetorical figures which, according to Barthes, distinguish the meta-language of bourgeois mythology. He characterizes the petit-bourgeois as a person ‘... unable to imagine the Other ... the Other is a scandal which threatens his existence’ (Barthes, 1972).

Two basic strategies have been evolved for dealing with this threat. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown’ (Barthes, 1972). In this case, the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis. Spectacular subcultures are continually being defined in precisely these terms. Soccer hooligans, for example, are typically placed beyond ‘the bounds of common decency’ and are classified as ‘animals’. (‘These people aren’t human beings’, football club manager quoted on the News at Ten, Sunday, 12 March 1977.) (See Stuart Hall’s treatment of the press coverage of football hooligans in Football Hooliganism (edited by Roger Ingham, 1978).) On the other hand, the punks tended to be resituated by the press in the
family, perhaps because members of the subculture deliberately obscured their origins, refused the family and willingly played the part of folk devil, presenting themselves as pure objects, as villainous clowns. Certainly, like every other youth culture, punk was perceived as a threat to the family. Occasionally this threat was represented in literal terms. For example, the *Daily Mirror* (1 August 1977) carried a photograph of a child lying in the road after a punk-ted confrontation under the headline ‘VICTIM OF THE PUNK ROCK PUNCH-UP: THE BOY WHO FELL FOUL OF THE MOB’. In this case, punk’s threat to the family was made ‘real’ (that could be my child!) through the ideological framing of photographic evidence which is popularly regarded as unproblematic.

None the less, on other occasions, the opposite line was taken. For whatever reason, the inevitable glut of articles gleefully denouncing the latest punk outrage was counterbalanced by an equal number of items devoted to the small details of punk family life. For instance, the 15 October 1977 issue of *Woman’s Own* carried an article entitled ‘Punks and Mothers’ which stressed the classless, fancy dress aspects of punk. Photographs depicting punks with smiling mothers, reclining next to the family pool, playing with the family dog, were placed above a text which dwelt on the ordinariness of individual punks: ‘It’s not as rocky horror as it appears’ . . . ‘punk can be a family affair’ . . . ‘ punks as it happens are non-political’, and, most insidiously, albeit accurately, ‘Johnny Rotten is as big a household name as Hughie Green’. Throughout the summer of 1977, the *People* and the *News of the World* ran items on punk babies, punk brothers, and punk-ted weddings. 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.

Once again, we should avoid making any absolute distinction between the ideological and commercial ‘manipulations’ of subculture. The symbolic restoration of
daughters to the family, of deviants to the fold, was undertaken at a time when the widespread ‘capitulation’ of punk musicians to market forces was being used throughout the media to illustrate the fact that punks were ‘only human after all’. The music papers were filled with the familiar success stories describing the route from rags to rags and riches – of punk musicians flying to America, of bank clerks become magazine editors or record producers, of harrassed seamstresses turned overnight into successful business women. Of course, these success stories had ambiguous implications. As with every other ‘youth revolution’ (e.g. the beat boom, the mod explosion and the Swinging Sixties) the relative success of a few individuals created an impression of energy, expansion and limitless upward mobility. This ultimately reinforced the image of the open society which the very presence of the punk subculture – with its rhetorical emphasis on unemployment, high-rise living and narrow options – had originally contradicted. As Barthes (1972) has written: ‘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’⁹ for an art form ‘within the compass of every consciousness’,¹⁰ a ‘music’ to be judged, dismissed or marketed for ‘noise’ – a logically consistent, self-constituted chaos. It does so finally by replacing a subculture engendered by history, a product of real historical contradictions, with a handful of brilliant nonconformists, satanic geniuses who, to use the words of Sir John Read, Chairman of E.M.I, ‘become in the fullness of time, wholly acceptable and can contribute greatly to the development of modern music’.¹¹
Style as intentional communication

I speak through my clothes. (Eco, 1973)

The cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture. We have seen how the media and the market fit into this cycle. We must now turn to the subculture itself to consider exactly how and what subcultural style communicates. Two questions must be asked which together present us with something of a paradox: how does a subculture make sense to its members? How is it made to signify disorder? To answer these questions we must define the meaning of style more precisely.

In ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’, Roland Barthes contrasts the ‘intentional’ advertising image with the apparently ‘innocent’ news photograph. Both are complex articulations of specific codes and practices, but the news photo appears more ‘natural’ and transparent than the advertisement. He writes – ‘the signification of the image is certainly intentional . . . the advertising image is clear, or at least emphatic’. Barthes’
distinction can be used analogously to point up the difference between subcultural and 'normal' styles. The subcultural stylistic ensembles – those emphatic combinations of dress, dance, argot, music, etc. – bear approximately the same relation to the more conventional formulae ('normal' suits and ties, casual wear, twin-sets, etc.) that the advertising image bears to the less consciously constructed news photograph.

Of course, signification need not be intentional, as semioticians have repeatedly pointed out. Umberto Eco writes 'not only the expressly intended communicative object . . . but every object may be viewed . . . as a sign' (Eco, 1973). For instance, the conventional outfits worn by the average man and woman in the street are chosen within the constraints of finance, 'taste', preference, etc. and these choices are undoubtedly significant. Each ensemble has its place in an internal system of differences – the conventional modes of sartorial discourse – which fit a corresponding set of socially prescribed roles and options. These choices contain a whole range of messages which are transmitted through the finely graded distinctions of a number of interlocking sets – class and status, self-image and attractiveness, etc. Ultimately, if nothing else, they are expressive of 'normality' as opposed to 'deviance' (i.e. they are distinguished by their relative invisibility, their appropriateness, their 'naturalness'). However, the intentional communication is of a different order. It stands apart – a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read.

This is what distinguishes the visual ensembles of spectacular subcultures from those favoured in the surrounding culture (s). They are obviously fabricated (even the mods, precariously placed between the worlds of the straight and the deviant, finally declared themselves different when they gathered in groups outside dance halls and on sea fronts). They display their own codes (e.g. the punk's ripped T-shirt) or at least demonstrate that codes are there to be used and abused (e.g. they have been thought about rather than
thrown together). In this they go against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic, according to Barthes, is a tendency to masquerade as nature, to substitute 'normalized' for historical forms, to translate the reality of the world into an image of the world which in turn presents itself as if composed according to 'the evident laws of the natural order' (Barthes, 1972).

As we have seen, it is in this sense that subcultures can be said to transgress the laws of 'man’s second nature'. By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the 'false obviousness of everyday practice' (Althusser and Balibar, 1968), and opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings. The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the 'point' behind the style of all spectacular subcultures. It is the superordinate term under which all the other significations are marshalled, the message through which all the other messages speak. Once we have granted this initial difference a primary determination over the whole sequence of stylistic generation and diffusion, we can go back to examine the internal structure of individual subcultures. To return to our earlier analogy: if the spectacular subculture is an intentional communication, if it is, to borrow a term from linguistics, ‘motivated’, what precisely is being communicated and advertised?

**Style as bricolage**

It is conventional to call 'monster' any blending of dissonant elements. . . . I call 'monster' every original, inexhaustible beauty. (Alfred Jarry)

The subcultures with which we have been dealing share a common feature apart from the fact that they are all
predominantly working class. They are, as we have seen, cultures of conspicuous consumption – even when, as with the skinheads and the punks, certain types of consumption are conspicuously refused – and it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its ‘secret’ identity and communicates its forbidden meanings. It is basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations.

Discoveries made in the field of anthropology are helpful here. In particular, the concept of *bricolage* can be used to explain how subcultural styles are constructed. In *The Savage Mind* Levi-Strauss shows how the magical modes utilized by primitive peoples (superstition, sorcery, myth) can be seen as implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering, systems of connection between things which perfectly equip their users to ‘think’ their own world. These magical systems of connection have a common feature: they are capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them. *Bricolage* has thus been described as a ‘science of the concrete’ in a recent definition which clarifies the original anthropological meaning of the term:

[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)

The implications of the structured improvisations of *bricolage* for a theory of spectacular subculture as a system of communication have already been explored. For instance, John Clarke has stressed the way in which prominent forms of discourse (particularly fashion) are radically adapted, subverted and extended by the subcultural *bricoleur*:

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)

In this way the teddy boy’s theft and transformation of the Edwardian style revived in the early 1950s by Savile Row for wealthy young men about town can be construed as an act of *bricolage*. Similarly, the mods could be said to be functioning as *bricoleurs* when they appropriated another range of commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble which served to erase or subvert their original straight meanings. Thus pills medically prescribed for the treatment of neuroses were used as ends-in-themselves, and the motor scooter, originally an ultra-respectable means of transport, was turned into a menacing symbol of group solidarity. In the same improvisatory manner, metal combs, honed to a razor-like sharpness, turned narcissism into an offensive weapon. Union jacks were emblazoned on the backs of grubby parka anoraks or cut up and converted into smartly tailored jackets. More
subtly, the conventional insignia of the business world – the suit, collar and tie, short hair, etc. – were stripped of their original connotations – efficiency, ambition, compliance with authority – and transformed into ‘empty’ fetishes, objects to be desired, fondled and valued in their own right.

At the risk of sounding melodramatic, we could use Umberto Eco’s phrase ‘semiotic guerilla warfare’ (Eco, 1972) to describe these subversive practices. The war may be conducted at a level beneath the consciousness of the individual members of a spectacular subculture (though the subculture is still, at another level, an intentional communication (see pp. 100–2)) but with the emergence of such a group, ‘war – and it is Surrealism’s war – is declared on a world of surfaces’ (Annette Michelson, quoted Lippard, 1970).

The radical aesthetic practices of Dada and Surrealism – dream work, collage, ‘ready mades’, etc. – are certainly relevant here. They are the classic modes of ‘anarchic’ discourse. Breton’s manifestos (1924 and 1929) established the basic premise of surrealism: that a new ‘surreality’ would emerge through the subversion of common sense, the collapse of prevalent logical categories and oppositions (e.g. dream/reality, work/play) and the celebration of the abnormal and the forbidden. This was to be achieved principally through a ‘juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities’ (Reverdy, 1918) exemplified for Breton in Lautréamont’s bizarre phrase: ‘Beautiful like the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table’ Lautréamont, 1970). In The Crisis of the Object, Breton further theorized this ‘collage aesthetic’, arguing rather optimistically that an assault on the syntax of everyday life which dictates the ways in which the most mundane objects are used, would instigate

\[ \ldots \ \textit{a total revolution of the object}: \text{ acting to divert the object from its ends by coupling it to a new name and signing it.} \ldots \text{ Perturbation and deformation are in demand here for their own sakes.} \ldots \]  

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)

Max Ernst (1948) puts the same point more cryptically: ‘He who says collage says the irrational’.

Obviously, these practices have their corollary in bricolage. The subcultural bricoleur, like the ‘author’ of a surrealist collage, typically ‘juxtaposes two apparently incompatible realities (i.e. “flag”: “jacket”; “hole”: “teeshirt”; “comb: weapon”) on an apparently unsuitable scale . . . and . . . it is there that the explosive junction occurs’ (Ernst, 1948). Punk exemplifies most clearly the subcultural uses of these anarchic modes. It too attempted through ‘perturbation and deformation’ to disrupt and reorganize meaning. It, too, sought the ‘explosive junction’.

But what, if anything, were these subversive practices being used to signify? How do we ‘read’ them? By singling out punk for special attention, we can look more closely at some of the problems raised in a reading of style.

**Style in revolt: Revolting style**

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)

We’re so pretty, oh so pretty . . . vac-unt. (The Sex Pistols)

Although it was often directly offensive (T-shirts covered in swear words) and threatening (terrorist/guerilla outfits) punk style was defined principally through the violence of
its ‘cut ups’. Like Duchamp’s ‘ready mades’ – manufactured objects which qualified as art because he chose to call them such, the most unremarkable and inappropriate items – a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon – could be brought within the province of punk (un) fashion. Anything within or without reason could be turned into part of what Vivien Westwood called ‘confrontation dressing’ so long as the rupture between ‘natural’ and constructed context was clearly visible (i.e. the rule would seem to be: if the cap doesn’t fit, wear it).

Objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in the punks’ ensembles: lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests encased in plastic bin-liners. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic ‘utility’ context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip. ‘Cheap’ trashy fabrics (PVC, plastic, lurex, etc.) in vulgar designs (e.g. mock leopard skin) and ‘nasty’ colours, long discarded by the quality end of the fashion industry as obsolete kitsch, were salvaged by the punks and turned into garments (fly boy drainpipes, ‘common’ miniskirts) which offered self-conscious commentaries on the notions of modernity and taste. Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every woman’s magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen. Faces became abstract portraits: sharply observed and meticulously executed studies in alienation. Hair was obviously dyed (hay yellow, jet black, or bright orange with tufts of green or bleached in question marks), and T-shirts and trousers told the story of their own construction with multiple zips and outside seams clearly displayed. Similarly, fragments of school uniform (white brinylon shirts, school ties) were symbolically defiled (the shirts covered in graffiti, or fake blood; the ties left undone) and juxtaposed against leather drains or shocking pink mohair tops. The perverse and the abnormal were valued intrinsically. In particular, the illicit iconography of sexual fetishism was used to predictable effect. Rapist masks
and rubber wear, leather bodices and fishnet stockings, implausibly pointed stiletto heeled shoes, the whole paraphernalia of bondage – the belts, straps and chains – were exhumed from the boudoir, closet and the pornographic film and placed on the street where they retained their forbidden connotations. Some young punks even donned the dirty raincoat – that most prosaic symbol of sexual ‘kinkiness’ – and hence expressed their deviance in suitably proletarian terms.

Of course, punk did more than upset the wardrobe. It undermined every relevant discourse. Thus dancing, usually an involving and expressive medium in British rock and mainstream pop cultures, was turned into a dumbshow of blank robotics. Punk dances bore absolutely no relation to the desultory frugs and clinches which Geoff Mungham describes as intrinsic to the respectable working-class ritual of Saturday night at the Top Rank or Mecca. Indeed, overt displays of heterosexual interest were generally regarded with contempt and suspicion (who let the BOF/ wimp in?) and conventional courtship patterns found no place on the floor in dances like the pogo, the pose and the robot. Though the pose did allow for a minimum sociability (i.e. it could involve two people) the ‘couple’ were generally of the same sex and physical contact was ruled out of court as the relationship depicted in the dance was a ‘professional’ one. One participant would strike a suitable cliche fashion pose while the other would fall into a classic ‘Bailey’ crouch to snap an imaginary picture. The pogo forebade even this much interaction, though admittedly there was always a good deal of masculine jostling in front of the stage. In fact the pogo was a caricature – a reductio ad absurdum of all the solo dance styles associated with rock music. It resembled the ‘anti-dancing’ of the ‘Leapniks’ which Melly describes in connection with the trad boom (Melly, 1972). The same abbreviated gestures – leaping into the air, hands clenched to the sides, to head an imaginary ball – were repeated without variation in time to the strict mechanical
rhythms of the music. In contrast to the hippies’ languid, free-form dancing, and the ‘idiot dancing’ of the heavy metal rockers (see p. 155, n. 12), the pogo made improvisation redundant: the only variations were imposed by changes in the tempo of the music – fast numbers being ‘interpreted’ with manic abandon in the form of frantic on-the-spots, while the slower ones were pogoed with a detachment bordering on the catatonic.

The robot, a refinement witnessed only at the most exclusive punk gatherings, was both more ‘expressive’ and less spontaneous’ within the very narrow range such terms acquired in punk usage. It consisted of barely perceptible twitches of the head and hands or more extravagant lurches (Frankenstein’s first steps?) which were abruptly halted at random points. The resulting pose was held for several moments, even minutes, and the whole sequence was as suddenly, as unaccountably, resumed and re-enacted. Some zealous punks carried things one step further and choreographed whole evenings, turning themselves for a matter of hours, like Gilbert and George, into automata, living sculptures.

The music was similarly distinguished from mainstream rock and pop. It was uniformly basic and direct in its appeal, whether through intention or lack of expertise. If the latter, then the punks certainly made a virtue of necessity (‘We want to be amateurs’ – Johnny Rotten). Typically, a barrage of guitars with the volume and treble turned to maximum accompanied by the occasional saxophone would pursue relentless (un) melodic lines against a turbulent background of cacophonous drumming and screamed vocals. Johnny Rotten succinctly defined punk’s position on harmonics: ‘We’re into chaos not music’.

The names of the groups (the Unwanted, the Rejects, the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Worst, etc.) and the titles of the songs: ‘Belsen was a Gas’, ‘If You Don’t Want to Fuck Me, fuck off’, ‘I Wanna be Sick on You’, reflected the tendency
towards wilful desecration and the voluntary assumption of outcast status which characterized the whole punk movement. Such tactics were, to adapt Levi-Strauss’s famous phrase, ‘things to whiten mother’s hair with’. In the early days at least, these ‘garage bands’ could dispense with musical pretensions and substitute, in the traditional romantic terminology, ‘passion’ for ‘technique’, the language of the common man for the arcane posturings of the existing élite, the now familiar armoury of frontal attacks for the bourgeois notion of entertainment or the classical concept of ‘high art’.

It was in the performance arena that punk groups posed the clearest threat to law and order. Certainly, they succeeded in subverting the conventions of concert and nightclub entertainment. Most significantly, they attempted both physically and in terms of lyrics and life-style to move closer to their audiences. This in itself is by no means unique: the boundary between artist and audience has often stood as a metaphor in revolutionary aesthetics (Brecht, the surrealists, Dada, Marcuse, etc.) for that larger and more intransigent barrier which separates art and the dream from reality and life under capitalism. The stages of those venues secure enough to host ‘new wave’ acts were regularly invaded by hordes of punks, and if the management refused to tolerate such blatant disregard for ballroom etiquette, then the groups and their followers could be drawn closer together in a communion of spittle and mutual abuse. At the Rainbow Theatre in May 1977 as the Clash played ‘White Riot’, chairs were ripped out and thrown at the stage. Meanwhile, every performance, however apocalyptic, offered palpable evidence that things could change, indeed were changing: that performance itself was a possibility no authentic punk should discount. Examples abounded in the music press of ‘ordinary fans’ (Siouxsie of Siouxsie and the Banshees, Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols, Mark P of Sniffin’ Glue, Jordan of the Ants) who had made the symbolic
crossing from the dance floor to the stage. Even the humbler positions in the rock hierarchy could provide an attractive alternative to the drudgery of manual labour, office work or a youth on the dole. The Finchley Boys, for instance, were reputedly taken off the football terraces by the Stranglers and employed as roadies.

If these ‘success stories’ were, as we have seen, subject to a certain amount of ‘skewed’ interpretation in the press, then there were innovations in other areas which made opposition to dominant definitions possible. Most notably, there was an attempt, the first by a predominantly working-class youth culture, to provide an alternative critical space within the subculture itself to counteract the hostile or at least ideologically inflected coverage which punk was receiving in the media. The existence of an alternative punk press demonstrated that it was not only clothes or music that could be immediately and cheaply produced from the limited resources at hand. The fanzines (Sniffin Glue, Ripped and Torn, etc.) were journals edited by an individual or a group, consisting of reviews, editorials and interviews with prominent punks, produced on a small scale as cheaply as possible, stapled together and distributed through a small number of sympathetic retail outlets.

The language in which the various manifestoes were framed was determinedly ‘working class’ (i.e. it was liberally peppered with swear words) and typing errors and grammatical mistakes, misspellings and jumbled pagination were left uncorrected in the final proof. Those corrections and crossings out that were made before publication were left to be deciphered by the reader. The overwhelming impression was one of urgency and immediacy, of a paper produced in indecent haste, of memos from the front line.

This inevitably made for a strident buttonholing type of prose which, like the music it described, was difficult to ‘take in’ in any quantity. Occasionally a wittier, more
abstract item – what Harvey Garfinkel (the American ethnomethodologist) might call an ‘aid to sluggish imaginations’ – might creep in. For instance, *Sniffin Glue*, the first fanzine and the one which achieved the highest circulation, contained perhaps the single most inspired item of propaganda produced by the subculture – the definitive statement of punk’s do-it-yourself philosophy – a diagram showing three finger positions on the neck of a guitar over the caption: ‘Here’s one chord, here’s two more, now form your own band’.

Even the graphics and typography used on record covers and fanzines were homologous with punk’s subterranean and anarchic style. The two typographic models were graffiti which was translated into a flowing ‘spray can’ script, and the ransom note in which individual letters cut up from a variety of sources (newspapers, etc.) in different type faces were pasted together to form an anonymous message. The Sex Pistols’ ‘God Save the Queen’ sleeve (later turned into T-shirts, posters, etc.) for instance incorporated both styles: the roughly assembled legend was pasted across the Queen’s eyes and mouth which were further disfigured by those black bars used in pulp detective magazines to conceal identity (i.e. they connote crime or scandal). Finally, the process of ironic self-abasement which characterized the subculture was extended to the name ‘punk’ itself which, with its derisory connotations of ‘mean and petty villainy’, ‘rotten’, ‘worthless’, etc. was generally preferred by hardcore members of the subculture to the more neutral ‘new wave’.8