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# SUBCULTURE

THE MEANING OF STYLE



ROUTLEDGE

LONDON AND NEW YORK

1979

**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)

**S**UBCULTURES 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,



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 con-

sumption. 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'<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 counter-balanced 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.<sup>8</sup> 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'<sup>9</sup> for an art form 'within the compass of every consciousness',<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup>



# SEVEN

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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



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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'.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

... 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)

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' mini-skirts) 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 brim-nylon 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

what  
punk  
not  
wear

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.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, overt displays of heterosexual interest were generally regarded with contempt and suspicion (who let the BOF/wimp<sup>5</sup> 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 cliché fashion pose while the other would fall into a classic ‘Bailey’ crouch to snap an imaginary picture. The pogo forbade 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,<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 <sup>into</sup> ~~edited by~~ <sup>upla</sup> an individual or a group, <sup>for</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup>

## EIGHT

### Style as homology

THE punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole. We can now attempt to solve this paradox by referring to another concept originally employed by Levi-Strauss: homology.

Paul Willis (1978) first applied the term 'homology' to subculture in his study of hippies and motor-bike boys using it to describe the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns. In *Profane Culture*, Willis shows how, contrary to the popular myth which presents subcultures as lawless forms, the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness: each part is organically related to other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world. For instance, it was the homology between an alternative value system ('Tune in, turn on, drop out'), hallucogenic drugs and acid rock which made the hippy culture cohere as a 'whole way of life' for individual hippies. In *Resistance Through Rituals*,



Hall *et al.* crossed the concepts of homology and *bricolage* to provide a systematic explanation of why a particular sub-cultural style should appeal to a particular group of people. The authors asked the question: 'What specifically does a subcultural style signify to the members of the subculture themselves?'

The answer was that the appropriated objects reassembled in the distinctive subcultural ensembles were 'made to reflect, express and resonate . . . aspects of group life' (Hall *et al.*, 1976b). The objects chosen were, either intrinsically or in their adapted forms, homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image of the subculture. They were 'objects in which (the subcultural members) could see their central values held and reflected' (Hall *et al.*, 1976b).

The skinheads were cited to exemplify this principle. The boots, braces and cropped hair were only considered appropriate and hence meaningful because they communicated the desired qualities: 'hardness, masculinity and working-classness'. In this way 'The symbolic objects – dress, appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music – were made to form a *unity* with the group's relations, situation, experience' (Hall *et al.*, 1976b).

The punks would certainly seem to bear out this thesis. The subculture was nothing if not consistent. There was a homological relation between the trashy cut-up clothes and spiky hair, the pogo and amphetamines, the spitting, the vomiting, the format of the fanzines, the insurrectionary poses and the 'soulless', frantically driven music. The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed – with calculated effect, lacing obscenities into record notes and publicity releases, interviews and love songs. Clothed in chaos, they produced Noise in the calmly orchestrated Crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s – a noise which made (no)sense in exactly the same way and to exactly the same extent as a

piece of *avant-garde* music. If we were to write an epitaph for the punk subculture, we could do no better than repeat Poly Styrene's famous dictum: 'Oh Bondage, Up Yours!', or somewhat more concisely: the forbidden is permitted, but by the same token, nothing, not even these forbidden signifiers (bondage, safety pins, chains, hair-dye, etc.) is sacred and fixed.

This absence of permanently sacred signifiers (icons) creates problems for the semiotician. How can we discern any positive values reflected in objects which were chosen only to be discarded? For instance, we can say that the early punk ensembles gestured towards the signified's 'modernity' and 'working-classness'. The safety pins and bin liners signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced and exaggerated or sympathetically assumed, and which in turn was made to stand for the spiritual paucity of everyday life. In other words, the safety pins, etc. 'enacted' that transition from real to symbolic scarcity which Paul Piccone (1969) has described as the movement from 'empty stomachs' to 'empty spirits – and therefore an empty life notwithstanding [the] chrome and the plastic . . . of the life style of bourgeois society'.

We could go further and say that even if the poverty was being parodied, the wit was undeniably barbed; that beneath the clownish make-up there lurked the unaccepted and disfigured face of capitalism; that beyond the horror circus antics a divided and unequal society was being eloquently condemned. However, if we were to go further still and describe punk music as the 'sound of the Westway', or the pogo as the 'high-rise leap', or to talk of bondage as reflecting the narrow options of working-class youth, we would be treading on less certain ground. Such readings are both too literal and too conjectural. They are extrapolations from the subculture's own prodigious rhetoric, and rhetoric is not self-explanatory: it may say what it means but it does not necessarily 'mean' what it 'says'. In other words, it is

opaque: its categories are part of its publicity. To return once more to Mephram (1974), 'The true text is reconstructed not by a process of piecemeal decoding, but by the identification of the generative sets of ideological categories and its replacement by a different set.'

To reconstruct the true text of the punk subculture, to trace the source of its subversive practices, we must first isolate the 'generative set' responsible for the subculture's exotic displays. Certain semiotic facts are undeniable. The punk subculture, like every other youth culture, was constituted in a series of spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc. It was through these adapted forms that certain sections of predominantly working-class youth were able to restate their opposition to dominant values and institutions. However, when we attempt to close in on specific items, we immediately encounter problems. What, for instance, was the swastika being used to signify?

We can see how the symbol was made available to the punks (via Bowie and Lou Reed's 'Berlin' phase). Moreover, it clearly reflected the punks' interest in a decadent and evil Germany – a Germany which had 'no future'. It evoked a period redolent with a powerful mythology. Conventionally, as far as the British were concerned, the swastika signified 'enemy'. None the less, in punk usage, the symbol lost its 'natural' meaning – fascism. The punks were not generally sympathetic to the parties of the extreme right. On the contrary, as I have argued (see pp. 66–7) the conflict with the resurrected teddy boys and the widespread support for the anti-fascist movement (e.g. the Rock against Racism campaign) seem to indicate that the punk subculture grew up partly as an antithetical response to the re-emergence of racism in the mid-70s. We must resort, then, to the most obvious of explanations – that the swastika was worn because it was guaranteed to shock. (A punk asked by *Time Out* (17–23 December 1977) why she wore a swastika,

replied: 'Punks just like to be hated'.) This represented more than a simple inversion or inflection of the ordinary meanings attached to an object. The signifier (swastika) had been wilfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally signified, and although it had been re-positioned (as 'Berlin') within an alternative subcultural context, its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit. It was exploited as an empty effect. We are forced to the conclusion that the central value 'held and reflected' in the swastika was the communicated absence of any such identifiable values. Ultimately, the symbol was as 'dumb' as the rage it provoked. The key to punk style remains elusive. Instead of arriving at the point where we can begin to make sense of the style, we have reached the very place where meaning itself evaporates.

### Style as signifying practice

We are surrounded by emptiness but it is an emptiness filled with signs. (Lefebvre, 1971)

It would seem that those approaches to subculture based upon a traditional semiotics (a semiotics which begins with some notion of the 'message' – of a combination of elements referring unanimously to a fixed number of signifieds) fail to provide us with a 'way in' to the difficult and contradictory text of punk style. Any attempt at extracting a final set of meanings from the seemingly endless, often apparently random, play of signifiers in evidence here seems doomed to failure.

And yet, over the years, a branch of semiotics has emerged which deals precisely with this problem. Here the simple notion of reading as the revelation of a fixed number of concealed meanings is discarded in favour of the idea of polysemy whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings. Attention is consequently directed



towards that point – or more precisely, that level – in any given text where the principle of meaning itself seems most in doubt. Such an approach lays less stress on the primacy of structure and system in language ('langue'), and more upon the *position* of the speaking subject in discourse ('parole'). It is concerned with the *process* of meaning-construction rather than with the final product.

Much of this work, principally associated with the *Tel Quel* group in France, has grown out of an engagement with literary and filmic texts. It involves an attempt to go beyond conventional theories of art (as mimesis, as representation, as a transparent reflection of reality, etc.) and to introduce instead 'the notion of art as "work", as "practice", as a particular *transformation* of reality, a version of reality, an account of reality'.<sup>1</sup>

One of the effects of this redefinition of interests has been to draw critical attention to the relationship between the means of representation and the object represented, between what in traditional aesthetics have been called respectively the 'form' and 'content' of a work of art. According to this approach, there can no longer be any absolute distinction between these two terms and the primary recognition that the *ways* in which things are said – the narrative structures employed – impose quite rigid limitations on *what* can be said is of course crucial. In particular, the notion that a detachable content can be inserted into a more or less neutral form – the assumption which seems to underpin the aesthetic of realism – is deemed illusory because such an aesthetic 'denies its own status as articulation. . . . [in this case] the real is not articulated, *it is*' (MacCabe, 1974)<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on an alternative theory of aesthetics, rooted in modernism and the *avant-garde* and taking as its model Brecht's idea of an 'epic theatre',<sup>3</sup> the *Tel Quel* group sets out to counter the prevailing notion of a transparent relation between sign and referent, signification and reality, through the concept of *signifying practice*. This phrase reflects exactly

the group's central concerns with the ideological implications of form, with the idea of a positive construction and deconstruction of meaning, and with what has come to be called the 'productivity' of language. This approach sees language as an active, transitive force which shapes and positions the 'subject' (as speaker, writer, reader) while always itself remaining 'in process' capable of infinite adaptation. This emphasis on signifying practice is accompanied by a polemical insistence that art represents the triumph of process over fixity, disruption over unity, 'collision' over 'linkage'<sup>4</sup> – the triumph, that is, of the signifier over the signified. It should be seen as part of the group's attempt to substitute the values of 'fissure' and contradiction for the preoccupation with 'wholeness' (i.e. the text 'conceived as a closed structure' (Lackner and Matias, 1972)) which is said to characterize classic literary criticism.

Although much of this work is still at a tentative stage, it does offer a radically different perspective on style in subculture – one which assigns a central place to the problems of reading which we have encountered in our analysis of punk. Julia Kristeva's work on signification seems particularly useful. In *La Revolution du Langage Poetique* she explores the subversive possibilities within language through a study of French symbolist poetry, and points to 'poetic language' as the 'place where the social code is destroyed and renewed' (Kristeva, 1975). She counts as 'radical' those signifying practices which negate and disturb syntax – 'the condition of coherence and rationality' (White, 1977) – and which therefore serve to erode the concept of 'actantial position' upon which the whole 'Symbolic Order',<sup>5</sup> is seen to rest.

\* The 'symbolic order' to which I have referred throughout should not be confused with Kristeva's 'Symbolic Order' which is used in a sense derived specifically from Lacanian psychoanalysis. I use the term merely to designate the apparent unity of the dominant ideological discourses in play at any one time.

Two of Kristeva's interests seem to coincide with our own: the creation of subordinate groups through *positioning in language* (Kristeva is specifically interested in women), and the disruption of the process through which such positioning is habitually achieved. In addition, the general idea of signifying practice (which she defines as 'the setting in place and cutting through or traversing of a system of signs'<sup>6</sup>) can help us to rethink in a more subtle and complex way the relations not only between marginal and mainstream cultural formations but between the various subcultural styles themselves. For instance, we have seen how all subcultural style is based on a practice which has much in common with the 'radical' collage aesthetic of surrealism and we shall be seeing how different styles represent different signifying practices. Beyond this I shall be arguing that the signifying practices embodied in punk were 'radical' in Kristeva's sense: that they gestured towards a 'nowhere' and actively *sought* to remain silent, illegible.

We can now look more closely at the relationship between experience, expression and signification in subculture; at the whole question of style and our reading of style. To return to our example, we have seen how the punk style fitted together homologically precisely through its lack of fit (hole: tee-shirt::spitting: applause::bin-liner: garment::anarchy: order) – by its refusal to cohere around a readily identifiable set of central values. It cohered, instead, *elliptically* through a chain of conspicuous absences. It was characterized by its unlocatedness – its blankness – and in this it can be contrasted with the skinhead style.

Whereas the skinheads theorized and fetishized their class position, in order to effect a 'magical' return to an imagined past, the punks dislocated themselves from the parent culture and were positioned instead on the outside: beyond the comprehension of the average (wo)man in the street in a science fiction future. They played up their Otherness, 'happening'

on the world as aliens, inscrutables. Though punk rituals, accents and objects were deliberately used to signify working-classness, the exact origins of individual punks were disguised or symbolically disfigured by the make-up, masks and aliases which seem to have been used, like Breton's art, as ploys 'to escape the principle of identity'.<sup>7</sup>

This workingclassness therefore tended to retain, *even in practice, even in its concretized forms*, the dimensions of an idea. It was abstract, disembodied, decontextualized. Bereft of the necessary details – a name, a home, a history – it refused to make sense, to be grounded, 'read back' to its origins. It stood in violent contradiction to that other great punk signifier – sexual 'kinkiness'. The two forms of deviance – social and sexual – were juxtaposed to give an impression of multiple warping which was guaranteed to disconcert the most liberal of observers, to challenge the glib assertions of sociologists no matter how radical. In this way, although the punks referred continually to the realities of school, work, family and class, these references only made sense at one remove: they were passed through the fractured circuitry of punk style and re-presented as 'noise', disturbance, entropy.

In other words, although the punks self-consciously mirrored what Paul Piccone (1969) calls the 'pre-categorical realities' of bourgeois society – inequality, powerlessness, alienation – this was only possible because punk style had made a decisive break not only with the parent culture but with its own *location in experience*. This break was both inscribed and re-enacted in the signifying practices embodied in punk style. The punk ensembles, for instance, did not so much magically resolve experienced contradictions as *re-present* the experience of contradiction itself in the form of visual puns (bondage, the ripped tee-shirt, etc.). Thus while it is true that the symbolic objects in punk style (the safety pins, the pogo, the ECT hairstyles) were 'made to form a "unity"'



with the group's relations, situations, experience' (Hall *et al.*, 1976b), this unity was at once 'ruptural' and 'expressive', or more precisely it expressed itself through rupture.

This is not to say, of course, that all punks were equally aware of the disjunction between experience and signification upon which the whole style was ultimately based. The style no doubt made sense for the first wave of self-conscious innovators at a level which remained inaccessible to those who became punks after the subculture had surfaced and been publicized. Punk is not unique in this: the distinction between originals and hangers-on is always a significant one in subculture. Indeed, it is frequently verbalized (plastic punks or safety-pin people, burrhead rastas or rasta bandwagon, weekend hippies, etc. versus the 'authentic' people). For instance, the mods had an intricate system of classification whereby the 'faces' and 'stylists' who made up the original coterie were defined against the unimaginative majority – the pedestrian 'kids' and 'scooter boys' who were accused of trivializing and coarsening the precious mod style. What is more, different youths bring different degrees of commitment to a subculture. It can represent a major dimension in people's lives – an axis erected in the face of the family around which a secret and immaculate identity can be made to cohere – or it can be a slight distraction, a bit of light relief from the monotonous but none the less paramount realities of school, home and work. It can be used as a means of escape, of total detachment from the surrounding terrain, or as a way of fitting back in to it and settling down after a week-end or evening spent letting off steam. In most cases it is used, as Phil Cohen suggests, magically to achieve both ends. However, despite these individual differences, the members of a subculture must share a common language. And if a style is really to catch on, if it is to become genuinely popular, it must say the right things in the right way at the right time. It must anticipate or encapsulate a mood, a moment. It must embody a sensibility, and the sensibility

which punk style embodied was essentially dislocated, ironic and self-aware.

Just as individual members of the same subculture can be more or less conscious of what they are saying in style and in what ways they are saying it, so different subcultural styles exhibit different degrees of rupture. The conspicuously scruffy, 'unwholesome' punks obtruded from the familiar landscape of normalized forms in a more startling fashion than the mods, tellingly described in a newspaper of the time as '... pin-neat, lively and clean', although the two groups had none the less engaged in the same signifying practice (i.e. self-consciously subversive *bricolage*).

This partly explains or at least underpins internal subcultural hostilities. For example, the antagonism between the teddy boy revivalists and the punk rockers went beyond any simple incompatibility at the level of 'content' – different music, dress, etc. – beyond even the different political and racial affiliations of the two groups (see p. 67), the different relationships with the parent community, etc. (see pp. 81–4) and was inscribed in the very way in which the two styles were constructed: the way in which they communicated (or refused to communicate) meaning. Teddy boys interviewed in the press regularly objected to the punks' symbolic 'plundering' of the precious 50s wardrobe (the drains, the winklepickers, quiffs, etc.) and to the ironic and impious uses to which these 'sacred' artefacts were put when 'cut up' and reworked into punk style where presumably they were contaminated by association (placed next to 'bovver boots' and latex bondage-wear!).<sup>8</sup> Behind punk's favoured 'cut ups' lay hints of disorder, of breakdown and category confusion: a desire not only to erode racial and gender boundaries but also to confuse chronological sequence by mixing up details from different periods.

As such, punk style was perhaps interpreted by the teddy boys as an affront to the traditional working-class values of forthrightness, plain speech and sexual puritanism which

they had endorsed and revived. Like the reaction of the rockers to the mods and the skinheads to the hippies, the teddy boy revival seems to have represented an 'authentic' working-class backlash to the proletarian posturings of the new wave. *The way in which it signified*, via a magical return to the past, to the narrow confines of the community and the parent culture, to the familiar and the legible, was perfectly in tune with its inherent conservatism.<sup>9</sup> Not only did the teds react aggressively to punk objects and 'meanings', they also reacted to the way in which those objects were presented, those meanings constructed and dismantled. They did so by resorting to an altogether more primitive 'language': by turning back, in George Melly's words (1972), to a '“then” which was superior to “now”' which, as Melly goes on to say, is 'a very anti-pop concept'.

We can express the difference between the two practices in the following formula: one (i.e. the punks') is kinetic, transitive and concentrates attention on *the act of transformation* performed upon the object: the other (i.e. the teds') is static, expressive, and concentrates attention on the *objects-in-themselves*. We can perhaps grasp the nature of this distinction more clearly if we resort to another of Kristeva's categories – 'signifiante'. She has introduced this term to describe the work of the signifier in the text in contrast to signification which refers to the work of the signified. Roland Barthes defines the difference between the two operations thus:

Signifiante is a *process* in the course of which the 'subject' of the text, escaping (conventional logic) and engaging in other logics (of the signifier, of contradiction) struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ('lost'); signifiante – and this is what immediately distinguishes it from signification – is thus precisely a work; not the work by which the (intact and exterior) subject might try to master the

language . . . but that radical work (leaving nothing intact) through which the subject explores – entering not observing – how the language works and undoes him or her. . . . Contrary to signification, signifiante cannot be reduced therefore, to communication, representation, expression: it places the subject (of writer, reader) in the text not as a projection . . . but as a 'loss', a 'disappearance'. (see Heath, 1977)

Elsewhere, in an attempt to specify the various kinds of meaning present in film, Barthes refers to the 'moving play' of signifiers as the 'third (obscure) meaning' (the other two meanings being the 'informational' and the 'symbolic' which, as they are 'closed' and 'obvious' are normally the only ones which concern the semiotician). The third meaning works against ('exceeds') the other two by 'blunting' them – rounding off the 'obvious signified' and thus causing 'the reading to slip'. Barthes uses as an example a still from Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* which shows an old woman, a headscarf pulled low over her forehead, caught in a classical, grief-stricken posture. At one level, the level of the obvious meaning, she seems to typify 'noble grief' but, as Barthes observes, her strange headdress, and rather 'stupid' fish-like eyes cut across this typification in such a way that 'there is no guarantee of intentionality' (Barthes, 1977a). This, the third meaning, flows upstream as it were, against the supposed current of the text, preventing the text from reaching its destination: a full and final closure. Barthes thus describes the third meaning as 'a gash rased [sic] of meaning (of the desire for meaning) . . . it outplays meaning – subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning'.

The ideas of 'signifiante' and 'obscure meaning' suggest the presence in the text of an intrinsically subversive component. Our recognition of the operations performed within the text at the level of the signifier can help us to understand the way in which certain subcultural styles seem to work



against the reader and to resist any authoritative interpretation. If we consider for a moment it becomes clear that not all subcultural styles 'play' with language to the same extent: some are more 'straightforward' than others and place a higher priority on the construction and projection of a firm and coherent identity. For instance, if we return to our earlier example, we could say that whereas the teddy boy style says its piece in a relatively direct and obvious way, and remains resolutely committed to a 'finished' meaning, to the signified, to what Kristeva calls 'signification', punk style is in a constant state of assemblage, of flux. It introduces a heterogeneous set of signifiers which are liable to be superseded at any moment by others no less productive. It invites the reader to 'slip into' 'signifiante' to lose the sense of direction, the direction of sense. Cut adrift from meaning, the punk style thus comes to approximate the state which Barthes has described as 'a *floating* (the very form of the signifier); a floating which would not destroy anything but would be content simply to disorientate the Law' (Barthes, 1977b).

The two styles, then, represent different signifying practices which confront the reader with quite different problems. We can gauge the extent of this difference (which is basically a difference in the degree of *closure*) by means of an analogy. In *The Thief's Journal*, Genet contrasts his relationship to the elusive Armand with his infatuation with the more transparent Stilittano in terms which underline the distinction between the two practices: 'I compare Armand to the expanding universe. . . . Instead of being defined and reduced to observable limits, Armand constantly changes as I pursue him. On the other hand, Stilittano is already encircled' (Genet, 1967).

The relationship between experience, expression and signification is therefore not a constant in subculture. It can form a unity which is either more or less organic, striving towards some ideal coherence, or more or less ruptural,

reflecting the experience of breaks and contradictions. Moreover, individual subcultures can be more or less 'conservative' or 'progressive', integrated *into* the community, continuous with the values of that community, or extrapolated *from* it, defining themselves *against* the parent culture. Finally, these differences are reflected not only in the objects of subcultural style, but in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful.