



HEBDIGE: SUBCULTURE THE MEANING OF STYLE



Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is a foundational text in subcultural studies that examines how youth subcultures use style—such as fashion, music, and language—to express resistance to dominant societal norms. Hebdige focuses on British subcultures like mods, punks, and skinheads, analysing how their distinctive styles carry symbolic meaning and challenge mainstream values. However, he also argues that these styles are often quickly commodified by capitalism, losing their rebellious edge.

METHODOLOGY

Hebdige's methodology relies heavily on semiotic analysis, the study of signs and symbols. This allowed Hebdige to decode subcultural styles as "texts" that convey deeper meanings. For example, the sharp suits of mods symbolised sophistication and upward mobility, while the punks' DIY clothing and use of safety pins reflected a rejection of both mainstream consumerism and societal norms.

CONTEXT

Hebdige situates his analysis within the cultural and economic context of post-war Britain, a time of significant economic hardship and social change for the working class. By linking subcultures to their historical moment, Hebdige shows how they respond to the anxieties and challenges faced by young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds.

BRICOLAGE

One of Hebdige's key contributions is his discussion of bricolage. This concept refers to the way subcultures repurpose ordinary objects, imbuing them with new meanings. For instance, punks transformed safety pins into provocative fashion statements, turning everyday items into symbols of defiance. This creativity reflects the resourcefulness of subcultures and their ability to reimagine mundane objects as tools of resistance.

COMMODIFICATION

However, Hebdige also highlights the process of commodification, where subcultural styles are co-opted by the fashion and music industries. Once these styles enter mainstream culture, they are stripped of their original rebellious intent and turned into marketable products. For example, punk fashion, once a raw and confrontational expression of discontent, became a popular trend sold in high-street shops. This commodification dilutes the subculture's power to resist and reduces its styles to mere aesthetics.

SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE

Hebdige is cautious in his interpretation of subcultural resistance, noting that it is largely symbolic rather than practical. While style can challenge societal norms and offer young people a sense of identity and belonging, it does not necessarily lead to structural change. Nonetheless, the symbolic power of subcultures lies in their ability to disrupt the expectations of mainstream culture, even if only temporarily.





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Bricolage Examples:



Album artwork and zines often featured collages, graffiti-style lettering, and provocative imagery, reflecting the bricolage principle of assembling disparate elements to create something new and subversive.

Punks famously transformed safety pins into statement pieces, wearing them as earrings, piercings, or as embellishments on clothing. This repurposing turned a mundane, utilitarian object into a symbol of defiance. DIY (do-it-yourself) clothing was a hallmark of punk style. Punks would rip, tear, and customise their clothing, often using household items like duct tape or chains to create unique, aggressive looks.



Discussion questions:

What does Hebdige mean by "style as resistance"? Can you think of any modern examples where young people use fashion or music to challenge societal norms?

Hebdige discusses how subcultures repurpose ordinary objects to create unique styles. How might social media influence bricolage in contemporary subcultures?

Why does Hebdige argue that subcultural styles lose their rebellious meaning when they are commodified? Can you identify examples of this process in today's youth cultures?

What methodological issues might sociologists suggest about Hebdige's work considering the use of fashion, art and music as symbols?

