

Edited by Nick Bentley,

Beth Johnson and Andrzej Zieleniec



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THE  
HISTORY OF SUBCULTURES  
AND POPULAR MUSIC

Youth Subcultures in  
Fiction, Film and  
Other Media  
Teenage Dreams



Palgrave Studies in the History of Subcultures and  
Popular Music

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Nick Bentley • Beth Johnson  
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Editors

# Youth Subcultures in Fiction, Film and Other Media

Teenage Dreams

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*To all our friends, family and colleagues—you know who you are.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The origins and inspiration for this edited collection was the staging of a conference held at Keele University in July 2013. The aim of the conference was to provide an interdisciplinary open forum to present, discuss and analyse a broad range of texts, contexts, perspectives and approaches extant in the field of contemporary subcultural studies. The conference was an attempt to bring together a variety of perspectives and approaches to readdress both contemporary and historical examples, representations, realities, constructions and case studies of subcultures. It included contributions from researchers and academics working on subcultures from cultural studies, criminology, geography, literary studies, screen studies and sociology, as well as film-makers, novelists and visual artists. The chapters in this collection stem both from papers given at the conference itself and others specially commissioned. The process underlying both the conference and this edition was based on a collective and collegiate endeavour. The aims were to allow and encourage not only a snapshot of current research but an example of social and critical solidarity in which, we hope, the sum is greater than the parts, and the many voices reflect the non-hierarchical and progressive spirit of supportive scholarship in the field.

While there has been a long tradition of analysing youth subcultures in various disciplines, there has been no book-length study of how youth subcultures have been portrayed in fiction, on screen and other media. This edited collection provides a critical discussion and analysis of the representation, articulation and construction of youth subcultures that contributes to filling a gap in the current research into their literary, filmic and visual depictions. The collection brings together scholars working in



literary studies, film studies, social and cultural studies whose research interests lie in the aesthetics and cultural politics of youth cultures. The book also contributes to, and enhances, theoretical perspectives and approaches on the ways in which subcultures are (and have been historically) understood in the public consciousness as well as in academic discourse. It addresses examples that perhaps have been less widely covered in research and literature and, where they have, offers new insights and approaches. One of the intentions of the book is to stress that the powerful narrative construction of individual subcultures, and subcultural affiliation more broadly, is in part an imaginative and fictive construction. The study of how fiction, film, TV and other cultural media have contributed to this construction is therefore an important and timely intervention in subcultural studies.

In bringing together these different and sometimes disparate critical voices we have not attempted to impose a universal narrative or suppress diverse voices and perspectives. Our text deliberately aims to bring out the contemporary multiplicity of research in youth subcultures in fiction, film and other media. Subcultures is an amorphous term and notoriously difficult to define, and the contributors to this collection draw on a range of theoretical perspectives that reflect the ways that subcultural analysis has evolved since its inception in the Chicago School and the CCCS (Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies) at Birmingham, to current manifestations that include post-subcultural theory. However, there is a clear sense in this collection of the continuing importance of identity formation, representation and affirmation. Therefore the changing landscape of subcultural analysis and theoretical approaches in this collection is reflected in the individual chapters that convey and cover a range not only of subjects and fields from a multiplicity of perspectives and analyses of various genres and narrative texts, but also critically address the contributions of seminal subcultural scholars and theorists. The collection identifies developments and differences in the ways in which subcultural studies has evolved and expanded the range of topics, groups, scenes, genres and media. One area for future exploration is perhaps the role of digital and virtual-world experiences. The use and misuse of online existence can be a means to foster and promulgate (un)healthy subcultural allegiances and identities. This seems clear in the worlds of contemporary political processes. However, this is beyond the scope of this collection but is something that could and should be explored and analysed in future research.

The book is divided into three parts with sections on fiction, film and finally new theoretical ideas and perspectives through reference to ‘other media’—creative representations, fictional and/or filmic examples and the creative representation of identity. However, whilst the sections are organised as discreet delineations, a clear crossover and connection between chapters is to be found in each section. We anticipate that the reader will find the individual chapters of interest in and of themselves but will enjoy the discovery of similarities and differences in approaches, genres, examples and illustrations between contributions as well as across sections. We hope this contribution to the field explores and expands the work already published in the series *Palgrave’s Studies in the History of Subcultures and Popular Music*.

## SECTION I: SUBCULTURAL FICTIONS

The first section of the book examines the ways in which youth subcultures have been represented, constructed and articulated in literary fiction. It follows a broadly chronological approach and begins with Bill Osgerby’s analysis of the subgenre of ‘bad girl’ fiction in 1950s America. Osgerby discusses the way in which these texts contributed to popular anxieties about youth delinquency, crime and gang violence, and identifies how this moral panic was exploited by writers and publishers. The chapter goes on to identify the way in which the success of bad girl fiction can be attributed to wider shifts in the fields of production, demand, reception and regulation.

In the second chapter, Lucy Robinson and Ben Jones also take us back to the 1950s by identifying Colin MacInnes as a key player in the development of subcultural fiction. They begin by identifying MacInnes’s 1959 novel *Absolute Beginners* as crucial in establishing the iconic figure of the teenager as slick, cool and creative. They argue that ‘the Boy’ identity he establishes in that novel is far more than simply a desire for perpetual youth and becomes an autonomous, queer political agent that reoccurs across MacInnes’s fiction and non-fiction. The chapter also identifies the inspiration for ‘the Boy’ as the real life Ray Gosling, and the chapter goes on to discuss Gosling’s negotiation of class differences and changing discourses of sexuality in post-war Britain. By analysing Gosling’s journalism and unpublished work, Robinson and Jones show how class and sexuality intersected to shape Gosling’s activism and his historical construction of selfhood as the political optimism of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to the

gloom of AIDS in the 1980s. The chapter argues that the figure of the teenager has always been inflected through queer masculinity and that, in turn, experiences and stories of post-war social mobility impacted the gay activism that followed.

The third chapter in this section moves to the 1970s as Nick Bentley discusses the representation and construction of punk in literary fiction. This chapter pursues two main themes: firstly, it analyses how literary techniques are used in fiction and writing about punk to reflect similar styles, approaches and practices in other cultural manifestations such as in music and fashion. Secondly, it examines the way in which the emergence of punk has been used in selected fiction to indicate a transition or rupture in social, political and cultural discourses in Britain in the 1970s, especially the move in politics from consensus to confrontation. It discusses novels by several writers, including Richard Allen's *Punk Rock* (1977), Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* (2002), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1991) and Gideon Sams's *The Punk* (1977).

In the final chapter in this section Dave Ellis analyses fiction by Courtia Newland and Alex Wheatle in order to explore the links between identity and postcode boundaries in the depiction of black British youth subcultures. Ellis develops Homi Bhabha's concept of New Cosmopolitanism identifying what he posits as a 'new parochialism' being represented in Newland and Wheatle's fiction. This way of looking at these works suggests that established codes of affiliation based on cultural styles and formal and family histories are supplemented (rather than replaced) by new, local histories. Ellis makes the point that if social identities are being reconfigured in this new parochialism then social signifiers of style and affiliation remain strong and can potentially result in violence. Several novels are discussed including Newland's *A Book of Blues* (2011), and Wheatle's *Brixton Rock* (1999), *East of Acre Lane* (2006), *The Dirty South* (2008) and *Brenton Brown* (2011).

## SECTION 2: SUBCULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS ON SCREEN

Our second section is concerned with subcultural representations on screen, more specifically, on film. Stephen Glynn's chapter opens with an investigation of the representation of the Mod subculture on film, providing a contextual summary of the development of this essentially British youth movement. His analysis focuses largely on a case study of the 'ace face' of 'Mod at the Movies', Franc Roddam's *Quadrophenia* (1979).

Noting how subcultural leaders are inevitably challenged, a comparative reading is made with Rowan Joffe's younger rival *Brighton Rock* (2010), a bold relocation to 1964 of Graham Greene's catholic noir. Matthew Cheeseman and David Forrest's chapter uses the 1960s as a starting point to analyse representations of nightclub dance floors in British cinema. Focusing on club culture films, including *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan, 1999), *Sorted* (Alexander Jovy, 2000), *Soul Boy* (Shimmy Marcus, 2010), *Everywhere and Nowhere* (Menhaj Huda, 2011), *Northern Soul* (Elaine Constantine, 2014), and a contrasting French example, *Eden* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2015), Cheeseman and Forrest propose that British film tends to use the dance floor as a narrative device that occludes or disturbs notions of youth culture, turning it into a problem to be solved. The notion of the problem of/in subculture and its mediation also occupies the work of Adam R. Brown whose chapter on heavy metal subcultural tropes, from *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) to *Wayne's World* (1992), explores the contradiction that a youth subculture at the centre of a mass-mediated moral panic was also the inspiration for a string of Hollywood movies. Noting the significance of the male-teen-buddy 'metalhead' experience at the centre of the narrative, Brown looks to issues of genre, in particular the comedy labelling of these texts, to consider the ways in which they both soften heavy metal tropes and, simultaneously, articulate a form of 'protest masculinity' that subverts both plot and narrative. Authored by Beth Johnson, the last chapter in this section provides an analysis of two recent rockumentary texts—*The Stone Roses: Made of Stone* (2013), directed by Shane Meadows, and *Oasis: Supersonic* (2016), directed by Mat Whitecross. Thinking through both the form and structure of their visual and sonic compositions, as well as the content, Johnson's chapter considers the ways in which both texts use the revival culture of the present to look back at the past (1980s and 1990s), and situate the bands at their heart as authentic, Mancunian creatives. Addressing issues of subcultural and generic labelling, Johnson also considers the female-centred stories, the socio-cultural alignments between the bands and the directors, and the significance of place—Manchester—in order to more accurately key out the cultural and identity work of these documentary texts, and consider their contemporary relevance.

### SECTION 3: CRITICAL THEORY AND SUBCULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN OTHER MEDIA

The chapters in this final section provide an exploration and analysis of a variety of critical offerings that reflect the interconnection between identity and their representation in a variety of other media, as symbol and artefact as well as practice. The scope of these essays demonstrates a vibrant engagement with a range of material, examples and genres. The approaches and perspectives applied in this section reflect the diversity of contemporary subcultural research and analysis. They include a philosophical and historical exegesis of a musical genre underrepresented in subcultural studies, followed by a comparative analysis of how it is represented in film. The following chapter considers the role and significance of film in the depiction of the pop music industry. A photoessay on graffiti and street art argues for and illustrates the use of the urban landscape as a canvas for the self-representation and practices of an activity that is increasingly universal in the urban landscape. The link between public and private space is discussed and addressed in the subsequent essay linking youthful practices in the street with dreams, desires and hopes manifest in the private experience of the home and bedroom. The final chapter seeks to address the similarities and differences in two film representations of youth, bringing a contemporary and critical analysis of the social and cultural context of their production and reception.

In the first chapter of this section, 'Figures in black: Metal and the void of working-class culture', Scott Wilson looks at the subculture of heavy metal. It notes metal's longstanding lack of academic attention, particularly from cultural studies. This is ironic given cultural studies' association with Birmingham, UK, the birthplace of metal in the late 1960s. The chapter argues that Black Sabbath's initial template for heavy metal offers the form and structure for a work of mourning for the deindustrialisation and destruction of traditional working-class culture in the UK. Looking initially at Sabbath, then at Bolt Thrower, the essay suggests that metal's work of mourning introduces a process of subcultural identification, supplanted through states of sonic ecstasy, that allows something to be made out of 'an inferred experience of loss', to create 'out of chaos and destruction.'

Nedim Hassan in the chapter 'Shock Rock Horror! The representation and reception of heavy metal horror films in the 1980s' argues that though existing academic work has examined moral panics surrounding heavy

metal music in the USA during the mid-to-late 1980s, previous studies have not assessed the impact they have had on popular film. Hassan's chapter focuses upon horror films released in this period that directly engage with and satirise debates about metal music's alleged corrupting influence. Drawing upon genre analysis and assessing the audience reception of *Trick or Treat* (1986) in particular, the chapter contends that these films articulated anxieties about the social control of youth during this crucial period. Hassan argues that the films addressed youth audiences in ways that fostered potential opportunities to reflect upon their experiences of metal music culture and to counteract wider media discourses that constructed such culture as deviant.

Rehan Hyder in his chapter 'Youth, hysteria and control in Peter Watkins' *Privilege*' explores how the ideas of standardisation and conformity are reflected in the near-future narrative of Peter Watkins' 1967 feature film *Privilege*, and considers how such concepts have informed the post-war tradition of British cinema focusing on the machinations of the music industry. Watkins' explicit linking of the popular music industry with the dominant ideologies of the state (including politics, consumer culture and religion) draws on the ideas of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno's work on popular music and conformity. The chapter will consider how this critique of the music industry focused around the manipulation of the pop superstar is informed by more recent debates about cultural agency and fandom.

In 'Representing subcultural identity: A photoessay of Spanish graffiti and street art', Andrzej Zieleniec presents graffiti as a universal and ubiquitous feature of the modern urban experience, both signifier and material object of a creative street culture. The chapter, using the author's own photographs from visual ethnographic research, explores and analyses the ways in which graffiti writers and street artists represent themselves and their identities, the methods and practices they use, the meanings and values associated with their sense of belonging to a subcultural community of shared interests and experiences. These are both individual and collective responses to and engagement with the urban as a lived experience and practice that reflects a commitment to know, colonise, decorate and adorn the public arena of cities' streets, places and spaces with an alternative urban aesthetic.

Jo Croft's chapter, "Destruction after all is a form of creation": Donnie Darko, and the spatial dynamics of the teenage dreamer", explores the teenage dreamer's liminal terrain, focusing upon states of borderline

consciousness rather than upon more familiar aspects of subcultural identity. Beginning with the premise that ‘youth’, ‘teenage’ and ‘adolescence’ have distinct but overlapping discursive resonances, Croft argues that teenage dreamers occupy a uniquely borderline position: caught between bedroom and street, they straddle the divide between (threatening) public space and (introspective) private space. The chapter traces continuities between different inscriptions of liminal subcultural identity, from August Aichhorn’s ‘wayward youths’ and ‘juvenile delinquents’, to Frederick Thrasher’s ‘susceptible gang-boys’ and Ian Hacking’s ‘fugueurs’. Highlighting the relationship between borderline spatiality and ambivalent mobility, Croft concludes with an intertextual reading of Graham Greene’s *The Destroyers* and Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko*, foregrounding the teenage dreamer’s ambiguous creative potential.

The final chapter by Keely Hughes, ‘From exaltation to abjection: Positive and negative subcultures in *Quadrophenia* and *Ill Manors*’, explores the veracity and accuracy of defining and describing subculture in contemporary society. Using an analysis of the films *Quadrophenia* (1979) by Franc Roddam and *Ill Manors* (2012) by Ben Drew, the chapter provides a critical discussion of the constructions of subcultural affiliations in light of the role and representation of class relations and ‘symbolic styles’ (Hebdige 1979). She argues that there has been a shift in the construction of subcultural movements and affiliations from a form of self-othering in *Quadrophenia* to external-othering in *Ill Manors* which is largely connected to changes within the capitalist system and the increasing desperation of the working classes to survive as an entity under contemporary neoliberal policies.

PART I

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‘Subcultural Fictions’





# Girls on the Rampage: ‘Bad Girl’ Fiction in 1950s America

*Bill Osgerby*

## ‘BAD GIRL’ FICTION AND THE ‘CIRCUIT OF CULTURE’

Billed on its front cover as ‘a shocking novel of teen-age gang life in the slums of Manhattan’, *Tomboy* was a hit in 1950 for American author Hal Ellson. The previous year Ellson had scooped success with *Duke*, a hard-hitting bestseller depicting the lifestyle of New York’s violent, teenage gangs. And in *Tomboy* Ellson’s attention switched to the female of the species; with a narrative that focused on a teenage girl’s life in a street gang and her journey into a world of ruthless turf wars, audacious heists and torrid sleaze. The novel was another Ellson winner, earning plaudits from critics and quickly running to a succession of paperback editions. Other authors soon followed his lead, contributing to a prolific genre of ‘bad girl’ popular fiction that graced American bookstands throughout the 1950s. Albert Quandt’s *Zip-Gun Angels* (1952), for example, profiled the ‘leader of a new kind of street gang ... a gang of tough and beautiful girls’, while Wenzell Brown’s *Gang Girl* (1954) recounted the exploits of Rita, a fifteen-year-old hellion from New York’s Lower East Side who ‘knew

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how to fight with her knees, her elbows, her teeth, how to hold a blackjack, how to spot a cop, how to roll marijuana, how to lure a man into a dark hallway'.<sup>1</sup> And, in the same vein, Joseph Hilton's *Angels In The Gutter* (1955), Harry Whittington's *Halfway to Hell* (1959), Leo Margulies' short story collection *Bad Girls* (1958) and Wenzell Brown's 'gang girl' reprise, *Girls on the Rampage* (1961), all offered gritty tales of young vixens prowling the backstreets of 1950s America.

This 'bad girl' fiction was a subgenre in a broader flood of cheap and lurid 'juvenile delinquency' novels that traded on contemporary anxieties about youth crime and gang violence.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, 1950s teen crime was characterised as a male problem—the stock delinquent portrayed as a swaggering, leather-jacketed hoodlum with a duck-tail haircut and a bad attitude. But the belief that girls were becoming 'tougher', 'harder' and 'more vicious' was also widespread; and novels such as *Tomboy*, *Zip-Gun Angels* and *Gang Girl* rode the wave of these concerns. Successfully exploiting contemporary angst surrounding girls, morality and crime, 'bad girl' fiction took the febrile newspaper headlines and condensed them into potboilers of sensational sex and violence.

The rise of 'bad girl' literature, however, was not solely indebted to contemporary anxieties about miscreant femininity. Like any media configuration of youth subculture, 'bad girl' fiction of the 1950s was the product of a confluence of mutually constitutive processes—a 'circuit of culture'—in which social and cultural influences *were* important; but *also* decisive was the way these factors interacted with developments in other realms, especially the fields of production, demand, reception and regulation.

The concept of a 'circuit of culture' was originally developed in the mid-1980s by Richard Johnson. According to Johnson, to understand the way media forms develop, circulate and generate meaning, attention must be given to the way they move through a 'circuit' consisting of three main stages—production, textuality and reception. Each stage, he argued, was distinct and involved 'characteristic changes of form', but were linked together in processes of interdependence and interaction so that '[e]ach moment or aspect depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole' (Johnson 1997, 83). Analytic perspectives that failed to acknowledge each stage of the circuit and its relation to the others, Johnson contended, could not adequately account for the form and meaning of media texts. In these terms, then, approaches that dwelt exclusively on issues of (for example) authorial intent or textual character were insufficient. Instead, other aspects of the cultural circuit—for instance, the organisation

of production and the readings generated by audiences—also demanded attention, along with the dimensions of influence and interplay that invariably existed between the various points of the circuit.

Since Johnson's original model, various configurations of the cultural circuit have featured in a diversity of studies. Versions of the cultural circuit have, for example, underpinned analyses of product design (Julier 2000) and the development of technologies such as the Sony Walkman (Du Gay et al. 1997) and mobile phones (Goggin 2006), as well as in case studies of textual forms such as the British 'lads' magazines of the 1990s (Jackson et al. 2001). And ideas of a cultural circuit can also be usefully applied to media forms associated with youth cultures and subcultures. American 'bad girl' fiction of the 1950s is exemplary. The rise of the genre can be seen as the outcome of an interlinked circuit of culture in which the social and cultural controversies of the period undoubtedly played an important role, but crucial was the way these influences interacted with other contemporary developments—most obviously the shifts in business organisation, markets and censorship that transformed US publishing after the Second World War.

### THE PAPERBACK BOOM AND A MARKET FOR THE 'THREE Ss'

Issues of production always play a key role in a circuit of culture, and they were fundamental to the rise of 'bad girl' fiction. The success of the 1950s 'bad girl' novels was indebted to the wider boom in paperback books. Of course, paperbound books were hardly new. The commercial possibilities of paperbacks had already been demonstrated in Germany during the 1930s, where Albatross Books had successfully produced a range of mass-market paperbacks whose innovations in size, typography and layout became the industry standard. And in Britain the Albatross format was imitated by Allen Lane's launch of Penguin Books in 1935, which revolutionised British publishing through the introduction of high quality, inexpensive paperbacks. But American talent was also quick to appreciate the paperback's potential.<sup>3</sup>

Leading the way, entrepreneur Robert de Graff joined forces with publishers Richard Simon and Max Schuster in 1939 to found Pocket Books, which soon became a market leader with its paperback reprints of classics, light novels and popular non-fiction. The company's success was partly indebted to its books' low price (25 cents) and attractive presentation, but it was also indebted to the firm's innovative distribution. Whereas hardback

sales traditionally relied on bookshops, de Graff (a seasoned pressman) saw how a much broader market could be reached via the distribution systems used for newspapers and magazines. Hence Pocket Books were racked-up on newsstands and in drugstores, a strategic masterstroke that, within a year, had clocked up sales of more than 1.5 million.

Following Pocket Books' success, rivals soon appeared. For instance, Avon Books (publisher of *Gang Girl* and *Halfway to Hell*) had started out as a magazine publisher—J.S. Ogilvie Publications—but was bought up by the newspaper distributor American News Company (ANC) and relaunched in 1941 as Avon, a paperback imprint that closely imitated Pocket Books. And more competition quickly followed. Dell was launched in 1942, then Popular Library in 1943; in 1945 Ian Ballantine (formerly director of Penguin's American operations) set up Bantam Books (publisher of the paperback edition of *Tomboy*), followed by Ballantine Books, launched in 1952. And in 1948 Kurt Enoch (who had fled Nazi Germany after launching Albatross Books) established New American Library, initially publishing paperback reprints of classics, then a few original mysteries, romances and adventure stories.

But the key pioneer in the production of paperback originals was Fawcett, a major magazine publisher and leading newsstand distributor. Handling the distribution of New American Library's Mentor and Signet imprints, Fawcett soon saw the potential of paperback sales, and in 1950 the firm launched the industry's first major line of original paperback novels—Gold Medal Books (publisher of *Angels in the Gutter* and *Girls on the Rampage*). Specialising in westerns, mysteries and thrillers, Gold Medal had churned out over nine million books by the end of 1951, with many novels quickly going to three or four editions. By 1953, then, the paperback trade was burgeoning and the business magazine *Fortune* could trumpet 'The Boom in Paper Bound Books', estimating that the previous year had seen national paperback sales of 243 million in a market worth over \$69 million (*Fortune*, September, 1953, 122).

The paperback bonanza, however, was itself indebted to another link in the 'cultural circuit'—the shifts in markets and consumer demand engendered by America's economic upturn. After the Second World War disposable incomes and living standards rose across the board, and publishers rode the tide of consumer affluence. But one market was especially attractive—teenagers and young adults. The post-war 'baby boom' ensured a 'bulge' in the US teenage population throughout the 1950s and 1960s; and this, combined with buoyant levels of youth employment and a growth