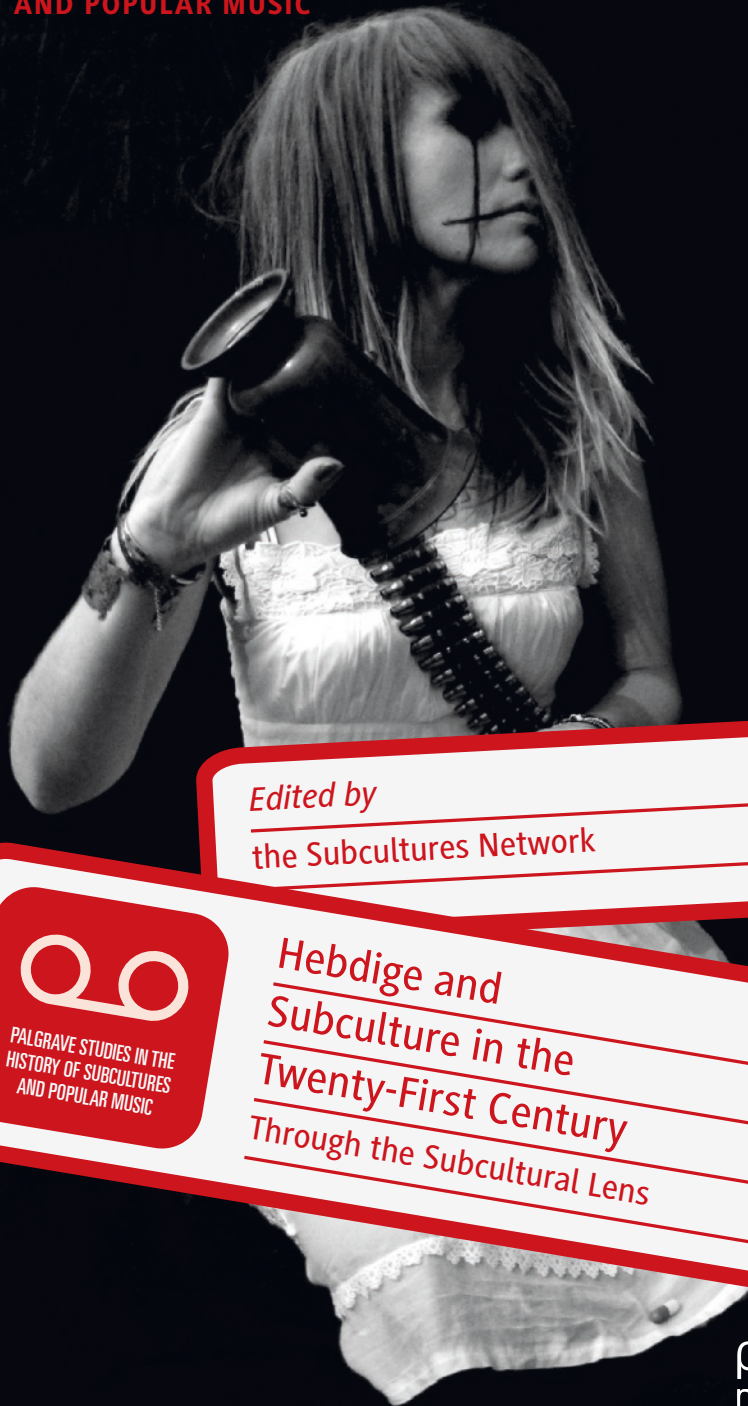




**PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
THE HISTORY OF SUBCULTURES
AND POPULAR MUSIC**



Edited by

the Subcultures Network



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HISTORY OF SUBCULTURES
AND POPULAR MUSIC**

**Hebdige and
Subculture in the
Twenty-First Century
Through the Subcultural Lens**

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Palgrave Studies in the History of Subcultures and Popular Music

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From 1940s zoot-suiters and hepcats through 1950s rock 'n' rollers, beatniks and Teddy boys; 1960s surfers, rude boys, mods, hippies and bikers; 1970s skinheads, soul boys, rastas, glam rockers, funksters and punks; on to the heavy metal, hip-hop, casual, goth, rave and clubber styles of the 1980s, 90s, noughties and beyond, distinctive blends of fashion and music have become a defining feature of the cultural landscape. The Subcultures Network series is international in scope and designed to explore the social and political implications of subcultural forms. Youth and subcultures will be located in their historical, socio-economic and cultural context; the motivations and meanings applied to the aesthetics, actions and manifestations of youth and subculture will be assessed. The objective is to facilitate a genuinely cross-disciplinary and transnational outlet for a burgeoning area of academic study.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Nathan Wiseman-Trowse a colleague, great writer and researcher and fellow traveller in the pursuit of knowledge and experience through music and life. Taken from us too early. Rest in peace.

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Dick Hebdige (born 1951) is an expatriate British media theorist and sociologist, and a Professor of Art and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His work is commonly associated with the study of subcultures, and its resistance against the mainstream of society. His current research interests include media topographies, desert studies, and performative criticism. Hebdige has written extensively on

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Peter Webb

Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) was a landmark study that cast its shadow over research, analysis and interpretation of post-war youth subcultures in and out of academia. The summaries on the back of the original edition were from *Rolling Stone* (the US popular music magazine), *Time Out* (the British listings magazine) and the *New York Times*, revealing the book's global reach. In their synopses, moreover, they hint at the insights, theoretical limits and absences that have since generated so much debate.

[...] complex and remarkably lucid, it's the first book dealing with punk to offer intellectual content. Hebdige ... is concerned with the UK's postwar, music-centred white working-class subcultures, from teddy boys to mods and rockers to skinheads to punks. [*Rolling Stone*]

With enviable precision and wit Hebdige has addressed himself to a complex topic – the meanings behind the fashionable exteriors of working-class youth subcultures – approaching them with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that combines semiotics, the sociology of deviance and Marxism. [*Time Out*]

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This book is an attempt to subject the various youth-protest movements of Britain in the last 15 years to the sort of Marxist, structuralist, semiotic analytical techniques propagated by, above all, Roland Barthes. [*The New York Times*]

Such issues—and more—will be discussed through this edited collection. ‘White working-class subcultures’? Well, Hebdige also wrote about reggae, Rastafarianism, Caribbean immigration and race relations, arguing that British youth cultures were oft-born out of a relationship and a dialogue with British immigrant communities. But was such an influence one way, as Hebdige suggests, or were black Britons equally informed by white working-class cultures? More to the point, essentialising notions of ‘black’ and ‘white’ culture has long raised thorny questions. And any notion of subcultures being inherently working class will always render challenge and discussion. Theory-wise, the domains of Marxism, structuralist, post-structuralist and semiotic analysis deployed by Hebdige invite critique, allowing for useful ideas as to how best interrogate and research youth and subcultures into the current period and beyond. And is this a boy’s only story? Is it transnational? What about sex and sexuality?

Subculture drew from a range of sources. Its focus was nominally punk, but it ranged far and wide to explain and contextualise the advent and meaning of the latest in a long line of ‘spectacular’ youth cultures. Scattered throughout are references to the Marxism of Gramsci and Althusser, the post-structuralism of Derrida and Barthes, the literary and semiotic theories of Saussure, Volosinov and Kristeva, the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the philosophical musings of Genet. His emphasis on class and ethnicity have become major reference points for academics and researchers; but they have also informed popular understandings of subcultures past and present. Back in 1979, Hebdige was continuing in the tradition of the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), suggesting subcultures operated on a level of double articulation: that is, in relation to both the dominant (bourgeois) culture and the parental (generational) culture. He also used terms such as ‘polysemy’, ‘bricolage’ and ‘homology’ to explore the ways by which signs and signifiers could be read, used, adapted and subverted through time and space. So, with regard to punk, Hebdige noted how a safety-pin or bin-liner could become a sign of resistance to the disposability of popular culture or the atrophied state of Britain on the 1970s.

He wrote of punk's adoption and blending of objects that were either hidden by mainstream culture (e.g. fetishwear) or not then seen as fashion (e.g. ripped trousers and dog collars). He explored how systems of meaning were constructed around the ordering of seemingly disparate things.

In the 1970s, subcultures were visible, instantly recognisable and often deemed to have a stylistic unity. Subcultures and musical genres were woven together, with analysis focusing on connections between the two. As we moved through to the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, however, such presumptions began to break down. Lifestyle theories, bound to consumption and fluid identities, were professed, leading to critiques of both Hebdige and the CCCS more generally. The concepts of scenes and milieu were presented as alternatives, with scholars debating the very idea of homogenous, unified subcultures. Attention turned to how subculturalists themselves lived the experience of subculture; how elements of locality and the impact of global flows shaped their understanding and presentation of subculture. Could we still, with conviction, say that subcultures existed; or were we in a post-subcultural world? What had happened to them and how had they developed since Hebdige's work? Was Hebdige's theoretical approach and research methodology still useful for anyone studying these phenomena in the new millennium? The literature and state of such debate will be explored in each of the following chapters.

Hebdige and Subculture in the Twenty-First Century is organised into three parts that hope to deal with various points of contention. It celebrates the importance of Hebdige's work whilst also casting a critical eye. It asks how *Subculture* can still help and inform us. But also to what extent its shortcomings necessitate alternative perspectives and updated approaches. Part I, entitled 'Theories and Debates', analyses the theoretical focus that directed Hebdige's work. Clearly the world has changed and we have had what is sometimes called the 'fourth industrial revolution' of mediated communication and the rise of the Internet. As a result, the theoretical terrain that Hebdige once inhabited has for some time been contested and critiqued by scholars such as David Muggleton, Andy Bennett, Steve Redhead, Sarah Thornton and others. Reflecting on this, Andy Bennett argues here that *Subculture* was in fact an already deeply postmodern study. Suggesting that Hebdige's work has a much closer proximity to post-subcultural work than previously recognised, Bennett argues that *Subculture* presents punk as the last great British

subculture. In predicting only ‘no future’, Johnny Rotten denied a ‘magical solution’ to the problems of the day and refused to propose another one. Punk, for Bennett and as written about by Hebdige, was in fact the moment when the idea of youth culture as a modernist project fell away. Instead, the subversive qualities of postmodernism that had always—in Bennett’s view—underpinned post-war youth subcultures became apparent.

In Chapter 3 Shane Blackman considers criticism of Hebdige’s empirical methodology, particularly the suggestion that he did not listen to or hear the voices of those to whom his theories applied. Blackman focuses on two criticisms: firstly that Hebdige’s work is overly determinist and, secondly, that his theoretical framework is too restrictive. Blackman counters this by stating that Hebdige’s theoretical framework does not get in the way of him understanding the subversive nature of, for example, punk. As importantly, he suggests the second criticism is in fact one of elitism. After all, Blackman reminds us, Hebdige’s work was based on participant observation, auto-ethnography and a ‘scavenger technique’. The idea, as Hebdige himself put it, was to ‘talk through the topic rather than about it!’ (Hebdige 2012).

Peter Webb, in Chapter 4, contextualises the theoretical development of Hebdige’s work, situating it in the tradition of F. R. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and John Berger. In particular, Webb tackles the problems of class and ethnicity by illuminating the way in which Hebdige underestimates the intermingling of working-class and middle-class backgrounds in subcultural milieus. In the same way, Webb suggests punks were more ethnically integrated than Hebdige presumed, arguing that the relationship between punk and reggae worked in both directions. By critiquing the essentialised categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’, Webb reveals their porous nature and prioritises the lived experience as means to affect individual and collective identities.

Finally, in Part I, Pete Dale takes issue with the theoretical grounding of *Subculture*. Dale suggests Hebdige’s theories could be improved by taking a much more in-depth post-structuralist approach. He praises the use of Kristeva and Barthes. But, Dale argues, Hebdige’s use of Derrida was limited and allowed for missed opportunities/possibilities. If, for example, we take a deconstructive approach, then consideration of punk as countercultural rather than subcultural may offer original insight. Dale ends by saying that Hebdige’s analysis is still useful and does important work by not presenting a romanticised assessment of subculture.

Complexities remain, however, and Dale urges future researchers not to 'sweep' their research subjects into too tidy a set of theoretical boxes.

Part II of the book looks at the 'Others, Absence and Identity' of Hebdige's work. The first intervention is by Christine Feldman-Barratt, who asks and illuminates how Hebdige's text connects to women's experience of participating in and/or observing subcultures. Feldman-Barratt examines how young women are included in Hebdige's text, before then exploring the absence of women's voices and the ways by which women in punk used music and style to navigate and subvert gender identity. As Feldman-Barratt makes clear, female scholars have contributed much to the study of subcultures, responding to Hebdige and developing complementary and original analyses.

Rehan Hyder's chapter, on the 'phantom legacy' of *Subculture*, takes up the issue of race and ethnicity. Hyder explores how stylistic and symbolic resistance have helped reflect debates about syncretic creativity and reshaped notions of youthful identity in multi-ethnic Britain. Hyder discusses the absence within Hebdige's work of ethnicity in terms of music, e.g. there is no discussion of soul and funk in the syncretic mix. He also looks at the absence of Asian youth, presenting such gaps as spaces for further research and new readings of subcultural development. For Hyder, a new heritage and a new identity may be forged in the interaction of differing ethnic groups through subculture if the ethnic groups are not discretely bound. Hebdige, for Hyder, set the debate up well. But left too many questions unanswered and under-researched.

The third and final part assesses how well Hebdige's analysis may be brought to bear on newer, more recently developed subcultures. The first contribution is by Edia Connole, looking at Black Metal from within the scene itself. Here she relates Hebdige to the idea that Black Metal is not representational and considers how far it is possible to develop an analysis through immersion in a subculture. To do this, Connole draws on 'speculative realism' and explores the meanings of key Black Metal signifiers relevant to environmental catastrophe and the obliteration of the human subject. Moving beyond Hebdige, she suggests we need new and different philosophical tools to understand the nature and lived experience of a subculture such as Black Metal.

Second in the final part is Martin Heřmanský's study of Czech Emo subculture. In particular, he uses ethnographic research to consider offline and online cultural spaces, focusing especially on the agency of subjects. By so doing, Heřmanský challenges Hebdige's reliance on

structural factors and his contention that working-class subcultures unconsciously commented on their surroundings. For Heřmanský, Emo is mainly a middle-class subculture where the members experience alienation through their non-normative stance. Their practice is deliberate, or conscious, he argues, and thereby shapes and reworks public and private space for means of communication. The offline and online sites are complementary, allowing for connections to be made, identities to form and interaction across the subculture.

Third, Paula Guerra examines ‘resistance and sociability in the internet age’, using the Portuguese punk scene as a case study. Guerra considers how punks in Portugal used online apps and communication to make music cheaply and interact via social media. Now over forty years old, this continuing community has blurred the idea of subcultures being *youth* cultures, with punks young and old interacting in the same scene. For Guerra, Portuguese punk continues to acknowledge its history, but has also developed a fluidity—or elasticity—to adapt and reinvent itself. Hebdige, obviously, could not have anticipated such developments. Nevertheless, Guerra argues that the rigidity of some of his categories and observations are contested by the development of technologies and scenes such as in Portugal.

Finally in this part, Lucy Robinson and Chris Warne look at the process and uses of teaching Hebdige within academic institutions. The chapter firstly historicises how Hebdige has been taught. It then looks at wider trends and understandings of subcultural work, locating Hebdige therein before exploring how Hebdige may help us understand teaching as a practice. Robinson and Warne work through the problematic notion of teaching subculture; of presenting subculture and resistance within the academy. They finish by suggesting that although subculture is probably taught in the ‘wrong’ place, it is nevertheless a contradictory process. Universities recuperate and commodify ideological forms. But teaching Hebdige also prevents the trivialisation of subcultures; it can keep them charged. And in return, subcultures bring a toxin into the institution; what should not be taught is taught.

As a grand finale, the collection finishes with a collective interview with Dick Hebdige himself. This was conducted at the KISMIF conference of 2015, comprising Andy Bennett, Carles Feixa, Dick Hebdige, Paula Guerra and Pedro Quintela. Herein, Hebdige discusses the process of writing and generating the research for *Subculture*. We get a sense of Hebdige as a person and a young man. In particular, we get a sense of

how Hebdige viewed his work as a positional piece written by someone interested and invested in working out what was happening in British popular culture in the 1970s. By reflecting on his work, Hebdige discusses pertinent questions relevant to subcultures and countercultures and the apparent tension between studying and experiencing cultural styles.

Taken altogether, this collection hopes to offer insight into Hebdige's work and considers its value for the twenty-first century. There are, as in the original *Subcultures* text, absences that need to be addressed. Sexuality and sexual identity, for example. But despite this, we hope the book stands as testimony to a pioneering and seminal study. It is our contention that Hebdige's analysis and approach still resonates. Over forty years since its publication, *Subculture* inspires us to find meaning in style and style in meaning.

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PART I

Theories and Debates



Hebdige, Punk and the Post-subcultural Meaning of Style

Andy Bennett

Published in 1979, Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* has become a seminal text within the subcultural literature. Applying a semiotic reading to the stylistic assemblage of punk, Hebdige famously claimed that the British punk image adopted the rhetoric of crisis present in Britain during the late 1970s and displayed this on the surface of the body. Eight years later, Hebdige's follow-up study, *Hiding in the Light* (1987) was mooted as his embrace of a postmodern sensibility, including a deconstruction of punk using a then-fashionable language of signs and signifiers to explain the influence of postmodern affect on the punk image, style and rhetoric. While there is little to dispute in the claim that this latter work was indeed highly influenced by the postmodern turn in cultural theory, it could equally be argued that *Subculture* was itself in many ways a deeply postmodern study, particularly in its interpretation of punk as a style that spectacularly cut up and pasted together fragments of the foregoing eras of post-war British youth cultural style. Twenty-one years after the publication of *Subculture*, David Muggleton's (2000)

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Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style cleverly drew on the title of Hebdige's work, setting itself up as a post-subcultural counter-thesis to Hebdige's original argument. In many ways, however, Muggleton's premise relied on the framing of Hebdige's work as more firmly associated with the subcultural theory canon than was arguably the case. The purpose of this chapter is thus to revisit and re-evaluate Hebdige's reading of punk as a critical moment in the story of youth culture. Key to the argument presented in the chapter is that in his recounting of the sartorial history of post-war youth, culminating in punk's cutting up and reassemblage of this history, there is closer proximity between Hebdige's work and the post-subcultural studies that followed it than has previously been acknowledged.

SUBCULTURE IN CONTEXT

Subculture: The Meaning of Style remains one of the most popular and highly cited books on the theme of post-war youth cultures. Although a relatively short book, it contains both a well-crafted and informative historical analysis of the development of post-war British youth culture from the 1950s through to the mid-1970s (including important detail on the influence of African-American and African-Caribbean music and style on this development) and a still relatively unique semiotic interpretation of punk style drawing on the semiotic theory of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) and Roland Barthes (1977). Often described as a text associated with the groundbreaking work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) based at Birmingham University, in many ways *Subculture* is more reflective of Hebdige's post-CCCS career and, in particular, his direct experience of the burgeoning punk scene in London. Indeed, among the many seminal pieces of youth cultural research published during this period (see, for example, Hall and Jefferson 1976; Willis 1978), *Subculture* is among the more contemporaneous examples of such work relative to the theme of its topic matter. Appearing in 1979, during a period in which the punk and new wave scenes were both still critical currents in British youth culture, *Subculture* was perceived as something of an authoritative work that accurately captured the zeitgeist of the punk style. This is illustrated by the fact that the book remains one of the very few academic texts on youth culture and music to carry endorsements from the mainstream music press on its back cover (Bennett 2007).¹

A particular compelling aspect of *Subculture* is Hebdige's attempt to produce a reading of the punk style that not merely corresponds with, but visually dramatises the worsening socio-economic crisis in Britain at the end of the 1970s. It is in this respect, that is to say, in Hebdige's reading of punk style in relation to structural issues of class and social inequality, that the influence of his early experiences of being a part of the CCCS youth research team are most evident. Although different CCCS theorists had focused on particular eras and/or aspects of post-war British youth,² each adhered to a common conceptual underpinning that interpreted youth style as a direct, if largely subconscious, response to the oppressive conditions of working-class existence (Harris 1992). A common perception during the 1950s and early 1960s was that post-war political consensus and increasing affluence had led to a withering of class as individuals from different class backgrounds were effectively able to buy into a middle-class lifestyle (Zweig 1961; Leys 1983). For the CCCS, however, such a reading of altered class relations in post-war Britain did not bear up to close scrutiny, something which they argued was borne out through examination of class-based responses to various forms of popular media and culture (see Clarke et al. 1976). In the case of youth, the key CCCS text, Hall and Jefferson's (1976) edited anthology *Resistance Through Rituals* put this argument into context through a series of studies that focused on different eras of post-war British youth culture such as the teddy boys (Jefferson 1976), the mods (Hebdige 1976) and the skinheads (Clarke 1976). Each of these studies suggested that although the working class and, in the case of mod, lower middle class youth associated with each of these styles may have appropriated the spending power associated with a more middle-class lifestyle, their real opportunities for social mobility remained delimited by their class background (Clarke et al. 1976).

In exploring this position, the concept of 'subculture, which up to that point had been primarily used in relation to aspects of criminal deviance' (see, for example, Matza and Sykes 1961), was applied by the CCCS to examine how the cultural assemblages of mass-produced fashion, argot, posture and rhetoric displayed by post-war youth symbolised their contradictory circumstances of being economically empowered while at the same time structurally trapped in a socio-economic dead end. Drawing on this and other key tenets of the CCCS work, Hebdige's *Subculture* offers an analysis of what many perceive as the concluding chapter in the history

of British youth culture during the immediate post-war era or what some writers have referred to as the ‘last *great* British subculture’ (see, for example, Clarke 2003). According to Hebdige, if previous youth (sub)cultures in Britain, despite their repressed working-class backgrounds, had at least enjoyed times of relative affluence, the very emergence of punk signalled a dramatic socio-economic downturn that gripped Britain at the end of the 1970s as a new era of neo-liberal economics began to take hold of the nation signalled by the rapid decline of industrial production and the beginning of a period of political rule by successive conservative governments that would, in the end, last for almost 20 years. In a vivid observation, Hebdige suggests in *Subculture* that punk was essentially ‘*dramatizing*’ Britain’s decline by:

...appropriat[ing] the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves throughout the [late 1970s] and transl[at]ing it into tangible (and visible) terms...In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s - with massive unemployment, with the ominous violence of the Notting Hill Carnival, Grunwick, Lewisham and Ladywood - it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as ‘de-generates’; as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain. The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety. (1979: 87)

Taking this analogy further, Hebdige argues that the chaos and meaninglessness being experienced by British working-class youth during the late 1970s was reflected in punk’s appropriation of household objects such as safety pins and dustbin liners, together with its cutting up and repositioning of the whole sartorial history of post-war British youth on the surface of the body. For Hebdige this dramatic overturning of youth cultural history punctuated by an appropriation of mundane domestic utility objects as satirical objects of fashion further projected the moment of crisis that emerged at the end of the 1970s. Certainly in his depiction of the body as a canvass for expressing the frustration and meaninglessness evinced by young punks, Hebdige demonstrated a significant advance on the way that subcultural theory had previously positioned youth in what it conceived of as a theatre of class struggle. For perhaps the first time in the tradition of British subcultural studies, a sense is portrayed in *Subculture* that youth is reflexive, that while its stylistic responses