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STYLE AS HOMOLOGY AND SIGNIFYING PRACTICE

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STYLE AS HOMOLOGY

The punk subculture signified chaos at every level, but this was possible only 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 first applied the term "homology" to subculture in his study of hippies and motorbike boys, using it to describe the symbolic fit between the values and life-styles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns. In *Profane Culture*,¹ 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"), hallucinogenic drugs, and acid rock which made the hippy culture cohere as a "whole way of life" for individual hippies. In *Resistance Through Rituals*,² Stuart Hall et al. crossed the concepts of homology and *bricolage* to provide a systematic explanation of why a particular subcultural 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." 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."³

The skinheads were cited to exemplify this principle. The boots, braces, and cropped hair were considered appropriate and hence meaningful only 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."⁴

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 "soul-less," 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 toward 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 and other objects "enacted" that transition from real to symbolic scarcity which Paul Piccone 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."⁵

We could go further and say that even if the poverty was being parodied,

the wit was undeniably barbed; that beneath the clownish makeup 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. As J. Mepham writes, "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."⁶

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, commonsense 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 David 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. Nonetheless, 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, the conflict with the resurrected teddy boys and the widespread support for the antifascist movement (e.g., the Rock Against Racism campaign) seem to indicate that the punk subculture grew up partly as an antithetical response to the reemergence of racism in the mid-seventies. 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* why she wore a swastika replied: "Punks just like to be hated.")⁷ This represented more than a simple inversion or inflection of the ordinary meanings attached to an object. The signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (nazism) it conventionally signified, and although it had been repositioned (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.⁸

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 favor of the idea of *polysemy*, whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings. Attention is consequently directed toward 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."⁹

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—imposes 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*.”¹⁰

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 theater,” 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”—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, 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 Révolution du langage poétique* 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.”¹¹ She counts as radical those signifying practices which negate and disturb syntax—“the condition of coherence and rationality”¹²—and which therefore serve to erode the concept of “actantial position” upon which the whole “Symbolic Order,” is seen to rest.¹³

Two of Kristeva’s interests seem to coincide with my 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”) 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 toward 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 fit together homologically precisely through its lack of fit (hole: T-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 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 makeup, masks, and aliases which seem to have been used, like Breton’s art, as ploys “to escape the principle of identity.”¹⁴

This working-classness 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 made sense only 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 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*.¹⁵ This break was both inscribed and reenacted in the signifying practices embodied in punk style. The punk ensembles, for instance, did not so much magically resolve experienced contradictions as

represent the experience of contradiction itself in the form of visual puns (bondage, the ripped T-shirt, etc.). Thus while it is true that the symbolic objects in punk style (the safety pins, the pogo, the ECT hair styles) were "made to form a 'unity' with the group's relations, situations, experience," this unity was at once "ruptural" and "expressive," or more precisely, it expressed itself through rupture.¹⁶

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 "styl-ists" 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 nonetheless 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 weekend or evening spent letting off steam. In most cases it is used, as Phil Cohen suggests, magically to achieve both ends.¹⁷ 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 nonetheless 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, and so on—beyond even the different political and racial affiliations of the two groups, the different relationships with the parent community, 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 fifties wardrobe (the drains, the winklepickers, quiffs, etc.) and to the ironic and impious uses to which these "sacred" artifacts 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!). Behind punk's favored "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. 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, to a "'then' which was superior to 'now'" which, as Melly goes on to say, is "a very anti-pop concept."¹⁸

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—*significance*. 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:

Significance 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"); significance—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, significance 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.”¹⁹

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” (obtuse) 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” fishlike eyes cut across this typification in such a way that “there is no guarantee of intentionality.”²⁰ 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 “significance” and “obtruse 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 significance” 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.”²¹

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*, Jean 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.”

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 toward 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.

NOTES

¹ Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

² Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Piccone, “From Youth Culture to Political Praxis,” *Radical America* 3 (15 November 1969).

⁶ John Mepham, “The Theory of Ideology in *Capital*,” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, No. 6 (University of Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1972).

⁷ *Time Out*, 17–23 December 1977.

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 1971).

⁹ Sylvia Harvey, *May 68 and Film Culture* (British Film Institute, 1978).

¹⁰ Colin McCabe, “Notes on Realism,” *Screen* 15, No. 2 (1974).

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

¹² Allon White, “L'éclatement du sujet: The Theoretical Work of Julia Kristeva,” University of Birmingham (1977), photocopy.

¹³ Kristeva’s “Symbolic Order” 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.

¹⁴ “Who knows if we are not somehow preparing ourselves to escape the principle of identity?” A. Breton, Preface to the 1920 Exhibition of Max Ernst.

¹⁵ Piccone, “Youth Culture.”

¹⁶ Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals*.

¹⁷ Phil Cohen, “Sub-cultural Conflict and the Working-class Community,” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, No. 2 (University of Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1972).

¹⁸ George Melly, *Revolt into Style* (London: Penguin, 1972).

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in Stephen Heath (ed.), *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Roland Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” in Heath (ed.), *Image-Music-Text*.