

## **5. Critically examine the ways in which sub-cultural style has been appropriated as an object of investigation by cultural historians.**

The aim of this essay is to look at definitions of sub-culture and in particular, the ways in which sub-cultural style has formed the basis of investigation by cultural historians. The role and significance of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies will be examined, along with the Frankfurt and Chicago Schools. Examples of sub-cultural groups that have formed the basis of investigation, such as 'Teddy boys' and 'Mods', will be identified and discussed. The ways in which they appropriated certain aspects of design to signify their sub-cultural style will also be looked at in detail. This essay will begin by looking at early theories of sub-culture and then move on to discuss contemporary issues surrounding the subject looking, in detail, at the ways in which ideas about sub-culture have changed and developed.

The study of sub-culture has been appropriated as an object of investigation by cultural historians since the late 19th Century. The Chicago School was founded in 1892 and was the earliest department of sociology in the United States<sup>1</sup>, which conducted investigations into crime and deviance within urban groups. This was followed by The Frankfurt School in 1923 who also conducted studies into the behaviour of urban groups that demonstrated a loss of authentic working-class culture. The Frankfurt School gathered Marxist theorists who severely opposed capitalism and its affect on society<sup>2</sup> and as a result were interested in behaviour that resisted dominant cultural forms. Studies, investigations and definitions of sub-culture continued to develop during the 20th and 21st Centuries. Cultural historian, Miles Gordon states:

"One of the functions of any science, 'natural' or 'social' is admittedly to discover and isolate increasingly smaller units of subject matter."  
(1947, in Gelder & Thorton, 1997, pg.40)

This is an interesting point to begin with as Gordon is stating that the study of sub-culture must be broken down into smaller sections in order to understand them. Examples of these 'units' would be the type of music a sub-culture listens to and what clothes they wear. Gordon goes on to state that the study of a sub-culture should involve a 'logical extension of the concept of culture' (ibid.) in that sub-cultures are a product of all cultures and cultural formations. Gordon however, also believes that concepts of culture can be problematic when investigating sub-culture, as we have 'often been 'content' to stop the concept of culture at national boundaries' (ibid.) In other words, he is stating that investigations into the different cultures of a particular country should take place,

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<sup>1</sup> Information source: [www.owl.net/rice.edu/Chicagoschool](http://www.owl.net/rice.edu/Chicagoschool)

<sup>2</sup> Information source: [www.encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/frankfurtschool](http://www.encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/frankfurtschool)

rather than assuming that one country has one culture. Gordon's study in to sub-culture took place in 1947, a time when there was not a large number of significant sub-cultural groups for him to refer to. Significant and recognisable sub-cultural groups did not emerge until the second half of the 20th century but Gordon still underlines some key points. One of the most crucial points he makes is stating that a sub culture is a 'world within a world', (ibid. pg. 41) as this notion is very important in understanding the activities and lifestyles of sub-cultural groups. He also states the importance of looking beyond factors such as class and race, in order to gain a wider perception of the behaviour of sub-cultural groups. Gordon states:

"A wider conception of the sub-culture would give us a keen and incisive tool which would prevent us from making too broad groupings and enable us to discern relatively closed and cohesive systems of social organisation." (ibid.)

In other words, he is explaining that it is easier to understand the behaviour of certain groups in society if aspects of sub-cultural groups are investigated and understood, resulting in a more coherent understanding of society as a whole. A problematic aspect of Gordon's work is that he believes that children are born into a particular sub-culture and then become 'deviant' by not conforming to the expectations of that particular group. It would be more accurate to state how children are born into a 'dominant' culture and then become 'deviant' by adopting the morals and values of a particular sub-culture. The sub-culture that Gordon is referring to here is inevitably determined by class and race, whereas the sub-cultures that will be looked at during this essay are predominately determined by style.

Becker offers us a more relevant reflection of the type sub-cultures that have formed the basis of investigation by cultural historians. Becker states:

"Though their activities are formally within the law, their cultures and way of life are sufficiently bizarre and unconventional for them to be labelled as outsiders by more conventional members of the community." (1963, in 1997, pg.55)

Becker is stating that we must understand sub-cultures as different to 'conventional' or dominant ways of life. Becker goes on to state how people who form these 'deviant' groups 'develop a distinctive way of life' (ibid.) and in order to understand sub-cultural activity it is necessary to 'understand that way of life.' (ibid.)

The study of sub-culture developed a great deal in the 1970s, notably at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), with cultural historians such as Stuart Hall and Dick

Hebdige having significant input. It was during the 1970s, through the Birmingham School, that the first major research into youth sub-cultures began in Britain. Highly involved, complex studies into the behaviour of working-class, urban sub-cultures represented a decline in the celebration of the achievements of the modern movement. The emphasis was no longer on the role of 'high culture' in society but on the activities and behaviour of popular 'low culture.' Stuart Hall took over from Richard Hoggart as director of the Birmingham School in 1968 and combined models and insights drawn from Marxism, post-structuralism, critical race theory and feminism.<sup>3</sup> The Birmingham School also borrowed ideas from Gramsci's hegemonic theories in order to make significant advances in sub-cultural theory. Brake writes:

"The examination of youth sub-cultures was made as an attempt to solve certain problems in the social structures, which are created by contradictions in the larger society." (in Hall & Jefferson, 1976, pg. 29)

In other words, Blake is stating that sub-cultures were a product of certain aspects of the larger society, such as capitalism, consumerism and globalisation. Factors such as these created social unrest, particularly within the working classes, which led to certain groups appropriating certain styles of dress and behaviour in order to create an identity for themselves through a collective critique of society.

Dick Hebdige was also one of the pioneers of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and his book, *Sub-Culture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) has been hugely influential to the study and understanding of subcultures. Hebdige refers to sub-cultural groups such as the 'Teddy Boys', 'Mods', 'Rockers', 'Skinheads' and 'Punks' as groups who 'are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonised and treated, at different times, as threats to public order.' (1979, pg. 2) Hebdige underlines some key points that have been the focus of study for cultural historians, for example; the use and appropriation of 'mundane objects' that come to signify greater meanings within sub-cultural group. The safety pin was an object that was appropriated by the Punks in a similar way to which the Lambretta motor scooter was a symbol of being a Mod. The Lambretta scooter was designed and produced as a cheap, convenient mode of transport for the Italian working classes but when appropriated by the 'mod' sub-culture, it took on a whole new set of values and meanings. Objects such as these became 'tokens of a self imposed exile.' (ibid.)

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<sup>3</sup> Information source: [www.jahsonic.com/Birmingham](http://www.jahsonic.com/Birmingham)

Hebdige writes:

"The tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of sub-culture - in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning." (ibid. pg. 3)

The most significant British working-class subcultures developed in the post-war period and Brake believes they created 'a mini history of culture of their own.' (1985, pg.72) These groups came about as part of a 'dissociation from middle-class dominated contexts of school, work and recreation.' (ibid. pg.60) Housing was one of the problems faced by the working class as the government failed to re-house families in the new towns of the 1950s. This led to local authorities introducing dense areas of high-rise flats that 'lacked any of the informal social controls generated by the neighbourhood.' (Cohen, 1972, in Gelder & Thornton, 1997, pg. 90) An example of a working class sub-culture that emerged in the post war period was the 'Teddy Boys'. They first appeared in the late 1950s which was a 'drab and dreary' (ibid.) period in Britain and were influenced by American film stars of the time. Brake writes:

"They were the first rebellious folk devils, mainly from unskilled backgrounds, left out of the upward mobility of post-war British affluence, lacking grammar school education and unable to gain entrance into white collar work, or apprenticeships into skilled trades." (ibid. pg.73)

What was interesting about the 'teds' was their style of dress as they appropriated an upper-class style of dress in an attempt to 'cover the gap between largely manual, unskilled careers and the 'all-dressed-up and nowhere-to-go' experience of Saturday evening.' (Hall and Jefferson, 1993, pg. 48) The cult heroes of the teds included Marlon Brando's 'menacing biker hipster', (Brake, 1985, pg.73) James Dean's 'sensitive mixed-up kid' (ibid.) but 'the prime masculinity model' (ibid.) was Elvis Presley who 'spoke to working class youth everywhere.' (ibid.) Hall and Jefferson write:

"Some sub-cultures appear only at particular historical moments: they become visible, are identified and labelled (either by themselves or others): they command the stage of public attention for a time, then they fade, disappear or are so widely diffused that they lose all of their distinctiveness." (1993, pg.14)

The Teddy Boys are a relevant example to support this statement as they belong to a certain historical period with a certain style that meant a lot at that time. The death of particular styles such

as that of the teds came about by a 'gradual adoption by younger age groups for whom it has less meaning.' (Brake, 1985, pg.73) Brake writes:

"The author has seen pre-school Fonz look-alikes, with no conception of nostalgia for the mythical 1950s. At this age it is specific folk heroes, of course, and not styles which are appropriated." (ibid.)

In other words, Brake is stating how sub-cultural styles lose their initial meaning when they become commoditised, either by younger age groups or other 'dominant' groups in society.

The reaction of the media to sub-cultural activity has always been an interesting talking point as most sub-cultural groups are initially represented as a threat by the media and then as members of a certain social group. The style of the mods is an interesting one to look at as their distinctive style was rapidly over popularised by the media. The essence of being a mod was all about looking good and keeping clean and smart. Polhemus writes:

"If they wore Parkas, it was purely to protect their precious suits or expensive casuals from the rigours of a life lived on a Lambretta." (1994, pg. 52)

The mods however, were soon 'sickened by the sacrilege that was committed in their name' (ibid.) as by the end of 1962 'Mod' had become the code word 'for all that was happening in an increasingly swinging London.' (ibid.) As with what happened with the teds, a younger section of society began to appropriate the style but they were more concerned with doing drugs and 'having a lark, rather than ensuring their trouser seams were pressed to perfection.' (ibid. pg. 53) Intense exposure by the media, along with appropriations from younger groups within society, eventually lead to certain sub-cultural styles losing significance and meaning and then disappearing completely.

Studies into sub-cultural style have proven to be an important and incisive tool in understanding important sociological issues. In today's society there are not as many visible and significant sub-cultural groups as there were in the immediate post-war period and throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Yet this absence of distinctive sub-cultural groups can help us to understand certain aspects of contemporary social conditions. In the past, sub-cultural groups developed as a reaction to changes in society such as capitalism and consumerism. In today's society there seems to be more of an acceptance of these 'modern' practices and also a decline in traditional working class culture. The styles that are appropriated in contemporary society by young urban groups such as 'Goths' and 'Grungers' seem to be imitations of famous music stars such as Marilyn Manson and Fred Durst

rather than acting as a critique of social conditions. Appropriations such as these highlight the fact that capitalism and consumerism have actually become part of contemporary sub-cultural styles.

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