In Dan O’Bannon’s seminal text *Return of the Living Dead*, the punk rock character *Suicide* has a moment of existential unbalance. Unbeknownst to Suicide, the dead will soon return to life and eat his brains, but right in this moment, Suicide poses—hands on hips, dressed in black leather, covered in chains, piercings, and styled with a pseudo-skinhead haircut. My childhood mind can even now see Suicide looking off into the graveyard distance, while a punk rock girl clings to his arm; he says to her, “I mean I got something to say, you know? What do you think this is all about? You think this is a fucking costume? This is a way of life.” Before Suicide’s brains are ripped from his head, he is positioned as the outsider of this film’s American punk rock group; he is the one no one understands—he the single American punk rocker who *gets* that his style is a sign. The look of Suicide, even his name, is *not a costume*, but a sign for lifestyle, for ideology, and for concept. Perhaps Suicide would fit into the subcultures of author Dick Hebdige’s British underground made up of mods, rockers, and punks. Hebdige writes to an audience of capitalist citizens who see these subcultures as destructive youth trends—harbingers of bad times to come—but Hebdige’s purpose is to demystify and destigmatize the Suicides of the world. Hebdige sees the style—the costumes—of these subcultures as signs to be deciphered against the hegemonic control of the superstructure. A close analysis of the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Hebdige reveals a complex argument that post war British subcultures were
more than just meandering, destructive youth, but instead, these subcultures can be interpreted in far more complex ways than what their superficial exteriors communicated.

Hebdige uses semiotics as his vehicle for decoding the signification behind British subcultures, but Marxist theory colors the lens of interpretation. Hebdige notes several scholars rely heavily on Marxist traditions to use semiotics as a tool for decoding signs that create meaning in society and culture, and it is precisely these scholars who have unveiled the cultural hegemony at work in capitalist cultures. Culture is only a piece of the ideological forces at work on the shaping of populace identities per scholars Hebdige cites such as Louis Althusser—a prominent Marxist theorist (12). Hebdige the uncovering of the ruling class’ imposed ideology allows subcultures to emerge beneath larger culture and challenge the hegemonic forces that push ideology (16). He launches into a detailed analysis of Britain’s stylistic subcultures: the punks, the mods, the teds, skinheads, hippies, and glams. Their styles a sign to be decoded, and their ways of life a challenge to the structural forces they saw aligned against them.

Hebdige creates a strong sense of ethical agency as he works through numerous subcultures and the meanings they represent in British society. For example, he writes, “African traditions, like drumming, has in the past been construed by the authorities (the Church, the colonial and even some ‘post-colonial’ government) as being intrinsically subversive, posing a symbolic threat to law and order” (31). Hebdige begins a long analysis of the reggae subculture by exploring its historical roots beginning with one of history’s most hegemonic means of dominance over a group of people—the subjugation of Africa. When considering the African traditions such as tribal drumming and how those traditions were often depicted in twentieth century media, Hebdige’s argument gains resonance. The often-offensive trope of the African savage coming from the depths of the jungle played on audiences’ fears for decades shaping
ideology about how people of color are viewed. That Hebdige immediately sets the reggae
subculture as being historically linked to the tribal rhythms that posed a threat to law and order
shows how the views of the larger culture are negatively formed against this subculture’s style. A
threat to law and order is a threat to the promise of capitalism, and ultimately the promise of
acquiring commodities.

What commodity means to the larger culture in society is far different than what it means
to youth subcultures. Hebdige writes of the punks, “Dread, in particular, was an enviable
commodity. It was the means with which to menace, and the elaborate free-masonry through
which it was sustained and communicated on the street--the colours, the locks, the patois--was
awesome and forbidding, suggesting as it did an impregnable solidarity, an asceticism born of
suffering” (63). Commodities in culture function as items of value that can be bought or sold. To
British youth subcultures, commodities became the signification of their acts. Dread as a
commodity was powerful because it was something the punks could obtain through an
assimilation with reggae subculture--a complete denial of British white culture, and through this
denial, through this use of dread, a legitimate threat to law and order was enacted. Or as Hebdige
argues subcultures embody “symbolic challenges to symbolic order” (92) and thus rises moral
panic.

Ultimately, Dick Hebdige puts much of subculture into two groups: blacks and white
working class, and for Hebdige the similarities of these groups are sizable. The subcultures
created from both groups are often derided by the “serious” (131), but the groups share much in
common. As I read, a consideration arises from Hebdige’s observation of the historical
differences of the two groups and the protests that might arise in equating them; that to set the
white working class against the young black subculture of Hebdige’s British study--or even to
link these groups in a modern context--creates animosity between the subcultures who may share similar fates and social mobility. All in a society they increasingly want to change. The hegemonic structure of their capitalist nations has for too long imposed ideological notions, yet it seems these ideologies are no longer hidden for these subcultures, and they seek to affect change. But if the subcultures look at each other as the *Other*, much as larger society looks at them as the Other, then it appears ideology is functioning in new, disruptive ways. As Hebdige explains, “[T]he Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. . . . Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown’ (Barthes, 1972)” (97).
Works Cited


Discussion Questions:

1. Hebdige brings up the process of recuperation (94). “The conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass produced objects.”
   - How does this process of recuperation work to destroy/defang/remove the “threat” of youth subcultures?

2. The work of semiotics can decode signs in culture and Hebdige shows how scholars such as Barthes “sought to expose the arbitrary nature of cultural phenomena, to uncover latent meanings of an everyday life which, to all intents and purposes was ‘perfectly natural’” (9). The idea that signs (anything that can be interpreted to have meaning from words, to sounds, to concepts) function in an arbitrary manner is interesting in that the meaning is hidden. Hegemony then, would be only an expression of the ruling class—not a subversive means to control.
   - But can hegemony function autonomously? Without a guiding hand of what the ruling class desires?
   - If ideology functions in covert ways, does the word *covert* not imply a methodological approach to how ideology is parsed out through society?
   - Does Hebdige’s overall argument about how subcultures function in opposition to ideology suggest autonomy within ideology itself or that ideology is set out on determined paths by interested parties? (32)

2. Youth subcultures have long been regarded by the greater population as dangerous and destructive. Yet Hebdige points to the importance of youth culture questioning the meaning of adolescence and how transitioning to an adult world works. Educational philosophers such as John Dewey have also noted that mental growth stops when we stop learning and asking questions. A function of the adult world seems to be to stop questioning the adult world and to accept it.
   - Does Hebdige’s argument about the importance of subcultures imply that these youth cultures are still in a state of growth, of learning? Why/why not? If so, what is the implication for the greater culture at large who has accepted the ideological implications of their society?

4. This book made me think a lot about current political issues in America. Law and order, ideology being imposed directly to us through the media, through politics, through schools, all to communicate specific messages. These symbolic concepts are being symbolically challenged by youth subculture movements in America—and Hebdige’s
alignment of white working class and young black culture seemed particularly relevant. Especially given the divide between white working class voters and the movement of Black Lives Matter. I do not have a question about this, nor do I know if it is something we can discuss in context of British lit, but I feel Hebdige was rather prophetic in his analysis of subcultures and the directions they could go. (131)