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Visual Communications

Subcultures and Style

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Introduction

I have chosen for my thesis the subject of subcultures. The idea of subcultures within society interests me in that there are so many different ideas, ways of lifestyles that we can see everyday. The world we live in has become so fragmented: difference is everywhere, subcultures are so diverse and interesting that they paint a picture of how society works. These subcultures echo what is going on in society and translate it into style and movements. There is such an energy about subculture: the youth of the world trying to change things. They always see the world from a different perspective than adults who have become accustomed to it.

The energy of adolescents is channelled through subcultures - this is the only area where they have influence over, so they make the most of it and styles become off-the-wall - never seen before. Being young is a great time, while you're there you can express yourselves without the hang-ups of being a mature adult.

In my thesis, I will first of all discuss the background to subcultures and the reasons for their creation and what they have done. Next, I want to discuss anti-fashion: what fashion is and what anti-fashion is. To explain subcultures, I will talk first about punk - the most influential of all subcultures (in my opinion) and then discuss in less detail another culture - skateboarders. I hope to give the reader an insight to these subcultures.

Subcultures

Background

There is no set time in which the idea of subcultures began, so you could almost say they have always been around but not always in public view or often referred to. It is more in the last thirty years that subcultures have made an impact on society. But what is a subculture? It is culture but is also anti-culture in a way that it rebels against mainstream and accepted culture. Culture is "a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture from such a definition is the clarification of meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life - a particular culture". (Williams, 1961, p.57)

We can determine from this that a subculture is like a culture but it is an 'alternative' one. It is not a dominant culture in the overall scheme of culture in particular societies. It is more underground, consist of generally young people, has a different approach to the way of life than the dominant cultures. Subculture members' ideas and lifestyle vary from groups such as politicians, professors and other such sections of the dominant society. For some they are fleeting and form a rite of passage, others move through a series of subcultures and many more remain committed to one long term. What people seek in a subculture is freedom of expression and opinion; it brings them freedom in lifestyle, sexuality and politics.

Subcultures vary so much that there is no particular formula for one. Nowadays, nearly every particular style has its own group and many of these develop into exclusive underground subcultures. From the catwalks to the rainforests, from the ghettos to Hollywood, subcultures of many different manners can be found - *tribes*, *high fashion junkies*, *streetstylers* and then *suits*, all quite different, but each is its own little culture. When there is no formula in the formation of subcultures, it makes it difficult to sort out one from another (see figure 1). Nowadays, there is much crossover between subcultures, they are influenced by similar groups,



Fig. 1: Melrose Place kids



Fig. 2: Piercings

many groups wear similar clothes - skaters and hip/hop rappers. Many subcultures take ideas from each other - the idea of piercing popularised by punk has filtered into most of the subcultures of the 90s (see figure 2).

Essentially, the main ingredients of a subculture are the way its members act, look (style), react to what goes on around them, how they are perceived by others and that they exist

outside of or in reaction to the mainstream or dominant cultures. For example, the hippies acted different from their parents, they want peace, not war, love and expressed it through peaceful demonstrations and concerts. They dressed in an 'earthy' kind style wearing a lot of flannel baggy loose flower covered garments (see figure 3). They also indulged in what the dominant culture frowned on - drugs.



Fig. 3: Hippies

Subcultures have appeared more quickly and more numerous since after the Second World War and this trend has continued right up to the present day of 1999. This I believe is because the fifty years plus, in between, has been a time of rapid change which has never slowed down, only gathered the momentum towards the year 2000. Think of how many subcultures you can name from the 80s and the 90s - goths, b-boys, skaters, heavy metallers, ravers, new-agers, indie-heads, grungers, to mention a few. This is because in the fast moving era of post war, modes and categories have been abolished, no longer adhered to. The interest and ideals of each previous generation have been dismissed or re-ordered to suit each group. The ideals have been altered by the following generations as they attempt themselves to construct 'their' own meanings in 'their' own time and age.

The new styles and the new tribes grew at margins like one of those TV slides of cells dividing and there was simply no way you could order them. The inequalities of money, power and life chances showed no sign of going away, but expectations frothed and bubbled quite uncontrollably (York, 1983, p.13).

York creates an analogy between the complexity of subcultures and the breeding of cells. This is quite apt because since the beginning of this century, the population of the earth has increased dramatically from 1 billion to over 6 billion, thus affecting the overall social climate of the world. In ways, these created new technologies, countries were not separated by oceans anymore; they had telephones, TVs and planes. When there is such an amount of young people in the world, they need to spend their spare time involved in something. Usually, they find what we are looking for in subcultures.

Subcultures are for the most part a section of a person's life when they are adolescent and just beginning to form their opinions and interests. "Adolescence and early adulthood is a period for reshaping values and ideas and exploring one's relationship to the world" (Hebdige, 1974, p.17). Subcultures provide a particular function for young people. They create places for young people where there is a sense of comradeship, where they feel like they belong are accepted. Subcultures offer an alternative from which they can select certain cultural elements which distinguish them from dominant groups - style, values, ideologies and lifestyle - are the basic elements of a subculture and are the reason they are so varied. Subcultures are different mixes of these ingredients, in different times, societies and countries.

These ingredients are used by young people to develop a new identity, their own individual identity, usually one which has little or no connection to their present fixed identities which include home, school and work. Their new subcultural identity is like a means of escape in the only area they can change. Some people believe these extra curricular identities to be like pastimes. This may not be true; they are like a way of life during leisure time where the choices are made by the individual and not the controlling world. During the period of adolescence, the development of a new identity associates young people with similar minded people, affecting the way they look, act, think, dress, what they listen to and their interests.

There is one major factor about subcultures that I have not mentioned yet, because it needs its own discussion. This is the rebellious nature of subcultures. Not all subcultures are of this nature but the fact that most members are teenagers is a definite sign that the rebellious intent is there. The youth of any subculture are often rebellious, because they are dismissed and denounced, sometimes they are treated as threat to society - to the order of things as they

stand. Change for the most part is feared by the older generations, as it is unpredictable and uncertain. The status quos of society is constantly interrupted by various groups: in the 60s, the hippies marched; in the 70s, the punks rioted; nowadays, concerts get out of control; skaters are a menace to the authorities.

Sometimes the groups are passed off as a joke, as an amusement for the power holding section of society. But it is quite hard to ignore the younger section of society. There is so much emphasis placed on the preservation of young people - these are the future. Why should they be lampooned and looked down on? Difference and diversity are the key elements to life.

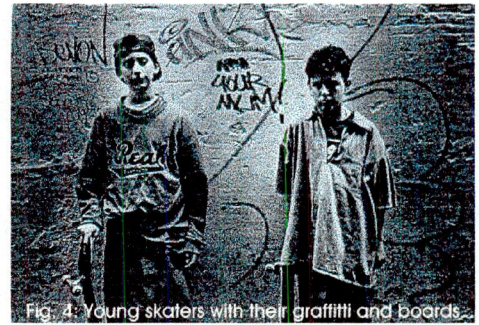


Fig. 4: Young skaters with their graffiti and boards.

The way in which youth rebels is in refusal to become the accepted norm. Hebdige believes this refusal work making *all gestures have a meaning associated with something* (Hebdige, 1974, p.31). Different subcultures do different things to counteract the dominant groups. Such an act is graffiti (see figure 4), an expression of power to change something into another thing, thereby changing its meaning. As Maler says, it's about your presence on theirs: *hanging your alias on their scene*, (Maler, 1974, p.39).

There is always tension between the dominant and subordinate, it is usually found reflected in the surfaces of subculture. The rebellious actions and the choice of clothes are totally at odds with the powers in control, e.g. you would not normally witness any president or minister in totally outrageous behaviour or wearing anything that would in effect cast them aside from their peers and shock everyone. It is the dominant class that holds the means of mental production. What this means is that those who do not have any control over mental production are usually subject to it. Subcultures are vehicles for opposition to this - they rebel against the decision-makers and follow new paths that are a direct reaction to the system in lace (dominant ideologies). They refuse to conform under the pressure of these dominant cultures.

To rebel against a higher power, subcultures use the most accessible means, which is highly visible, and easily available to them Style has for a long time been used as a form on refusal and rebellion and as a sign of belonging to a particular group. Visual appearance - a style is used to break the codes of previous generations and is an integral part in the development of subcultures. Style involves expressive forms of presentation, giving out signals of your associations. Style is used to stray off the beaten path of the norm and create an exclusive identity. Such styles do in the course of time begin to appeal to a wider range of people. Such styles become quite popular and examples of such subcultures with memorable styles are Teddy Boys (50s), Mods (60s), Rockers (70s, 80s, 90s), Punks (70s, 80s), Goths (80s, 90s), B-Boys (80s, 90s), Grungers (90s), Ravers (80s, 90s), Skaters (70s, 80s, 90s). The list goes on considerably.

Style

Style is a major part of subculture. The actual attire is how a group represents itself/presents itself to societies' scrutiny. What is worn is a particularly big issue as it is a 'sign'

to other people and other subcultures. In this way, clothes become far more than just a practicality, just used to cover the body. Mundane objects are often incorporated into outfits and this adds a new dimension, meaning to them. Such objects used are the safety pins (punks), chains (rockers, skaters), beads (hippies). Genet talks about these mundane objects becoming signs and taking on new meanings, usually symbolic. They become something else as they are placed in a new context. Sometimes, they are like warnings - they "warn the straight world in advance of a sinister (or different) presence and draw upon themselves vague suspicions, uneasy laughter" (Genet in *Youth Culture*, M Brake). These objects can sometimes be tokens of self-exile, hippies had long hair, at beginning of this new way of wearing hair, it was not approved of by older generations and dominant forces. These changes are like badges that give an outsider an insight as to the person's belief, way of life, what interests them. Wearing or associating with these objects and styles is sometimes seen as a crime against the natural order of things. Examples of such that shocked are the quiff (50s), the mods' scooters (60s), the leather, PVC, metal of the punks (70s).

It is a number of these styles and objects that construct the basis for a subculture's look. A subordinate (a subculture), a culture then constructs a new style which is at odds with mainstream styles of dominant cultures. The objects and garments become for some subcultures gestures of defiance and contempt towards the dominating group.

If we look at figure 1, we can see a group of teenagers, hanging out at *Melrose Place* in California showing off their individual street styles. In this picture, the young people show lots of different symbols - some of them have facial piercing and chains - punk influence: studs and leather; rock 'n' roll influence: logoed tee-shirts; modern music industry influence, badges and patches - skaters and rock music, combats grunge influence. The 'A', anarchy symbol, is very noticeable too and represents another punk influence. This photograph underlines the fact that much of the nineties' subcultural elements are basically previous subcultures products but fashioned in a new mix with other styles.

Subcultures anti-fashion

The two subcultures I want to discuss are punk and skaters. I have chosen these



Fig. 5: Punk

because punk is such a well known alternative culture and the word 'punk' immediately evokes images of leather clad spiked people who turn totally away from society (see figure 5). I wanted to know more to understand the reasons behind the 'anarchy'. I chose skating as it is not too well known, especially in Ireland, yet it has a major impact on street style and other alternative cultures in today's society. Punk, in my view, was the most adventurous of subcultures; it had a direct influence over many styles especially street ones, and the whole definition of punk as rebellion -anti-everything - anarchy made it the most immediately accessible non-mainstream culture. Punks' main physical emphasis was the visual representation of non-conforming and this followed through into everything, the music, the dance, the graphics, the image and the way of life.

Skating interested me for the fact that it has very little written about and because I myself would associate with many of today's alternative cultures which

are actually fairly similar - grunge, indie, new wave and skater. To many people, it seems like an extremely modern subculture, well, it is and it isn't. Skateboarding's roots are back in the fifties but it took many years for it to develop from a pastime of north-American kids into an actual subculture. The subculture of skating evolved, unlike punk, around a form of recreation. Its beginnings were very moderate but it has developed into a very definite and visible part of the 90s streetstyle.

These subcultures interest me because they are street cultures. Both punk and skating were born on the street. This is where the most interesting things happen - in fashion or anti-fashion. The clothes of street are like a representation or collage of societies' different sections and divisions. Unlike workwear - uniforms that set people apart from each other - they indicate allegiance and give an insight into the people wearing them. *The street has a seductive appeal like holy relics, streetstyle garments radiate the power of their associations. Every age uses dress and body decoration to signal what is most important at that historical moment* (T Polhemus, 1994, p.7). He continues saying that back in history, clothes would indicate how rich and powerful people were, but now people use their clothes to say, "I'm original, I'm authentic", and "I associate myself with this", "I reject that".

Anti-fashion - punk and skate

Both punk and skating would be considered more underground than mainstream. This means they would declare themselves anti-fashion. What is anti-fashion? Fashion is the term used to describe the style of clothing worn by most people of a country. Fashion is or reflects a form of behaviour accepted by most people of the society - a particular fashion remains popular for a few months or years before being replaced by another. Something is *in fashion* when it is accepted by the majority, but then becomes unfashionable when the majority of society rejects it. Fashion is usually influenced by what went before and generally recycles old ideas. Much of what is on the catwalk has been influenced by subcultures (see figures 6 and 7)

So what is anti-fashion? It is everything that goes against particular styles and tastes as in anything that does not conform to high fashion (labels) or ordinary standard forms of visual



Fig. 6: Surfer influence on high fashion

representation. This is a tricky area because labelling a particular style is not as simple as stating for example, 'this outfit represents the type of person I am' or 'this is what I'm into'. Styles have evolved and mixed and sometimes there are too many symbols to be interpreted. Punk is more of an original and clearly states its intent.

Can we call punk 'anti-fashion'? Well, originally, it was the most extreme anti-fashion, it was everything that mainstream and dominant cultures feared - it was shocking, in your face, expressive, violent, disturbing and visually very interesting yet frightening. But then parts of punk became absorbed into mainstream fashion and high fashion - the fishnet tights, leather, multi-coloured hair, Dr Martens. All these became credibly fashionable after punk peak in the late 70s. Anti-fashion becomes fashionable - it is inevitable in our society today that yesterday's rebellious intents become tomorrow's popular culture.

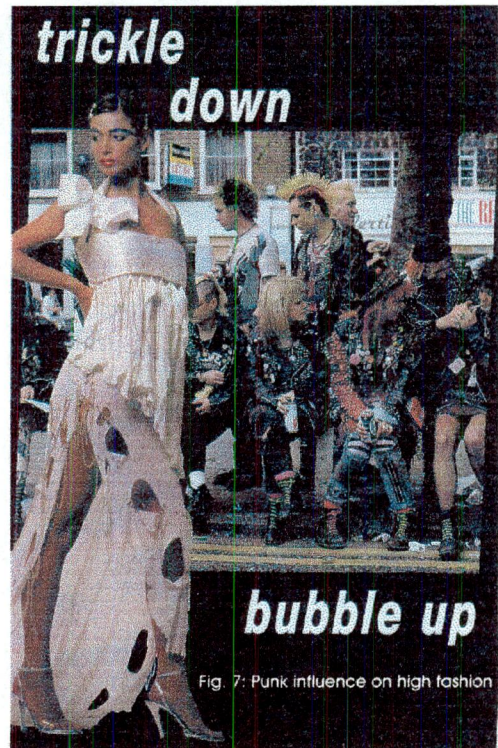


Fig. 7: Punk influence on high fashion

Another way of looking at anti-fashion is that people who believe themselves to be anti-conformist 'I'm original' are in fact very scarce because most of these people usually associate with similar minded, similar taste people who resemble themselves. This is, whether they like it or not, another separate form of fashion on a smaller scale. The word fashion does not only apply to the catwalks, but it comes right down to everybody's level and is promoted through 'labels' on TV and every other form of media.

"The man who consciously pays no heed to fashion accepts its form just as much as the dude does, only he embodies it in another category, the former in that of exaggeration, the

latter in that of negation. Indeed, it occasionally happens that it becomes fashionable in whole bodies of a large class to depart altogether from the standard set by fashion", (Georg Simmel in Fashion, Culture and Identity, F Davis, 1992, p.71).

What happens with these small anti-fashion breakaway groups is that once they are noticed by the media, the original essence of what they are about becomes irrelevant and the style is taken and monopolised by the big companies who churn out ready made versions of the original style. The media influences so many people so nothing stays original for long anymore. The originals are consumed and replaced by mass-produced easy to find acceptable versions. This has happened to both punk and skaters, but in different ways and with different reactions I will discuss later in the piece.

Everybody would like to think that in terms of their style, etc., they are original but the chances are that they have been influenced by all the modern media. With the coming of MTV, the World Wide Web and other communication set-ups, information is sent out and received at amazing speeds. The amount of media you see and are influenced by is phenomenal. There always has been this influence but most especially in modern society. Grunge, rave, indie and the other subcultures of the nineties are virtually bits and pieces of the culture gone before (dance, new wave, punk, hippies) with some new ideas and coupled with the all important teenage rebellion factor. In modern subcultures, there are more signs to figure out - there are references to both modern and old subcultures. Today's society is very diverse, but very few people actually pledge to one particular style - they flirt with many different styles in an attempt to get their own angle. This is from the fear of being labelled.

With one presentation of self, for example, a young woman with a shaved head, a nose piercing, black mascara and false eyelashes, a worn denim jacket, a Mod-style 'target' T-shirt, tight black lycra leggings, DMs, a Prada rucksack - one discerns signifying references to (amongst other things): in your face, Tank-girl feminism, Indian ethnicity, Swinging London, 60s futurism, serial liberation, women of ill repute, 70s glam, cowboys, rebels without a cause, on the road bohemians, Mods, Skinheads, Punks, Hippies and students as well as high fashion elitism signalling wealth (T Polhemus, 1996, p.15).

This description shows us many signs we are putting out. Why do we do this? *Because we don't want to be categorised - to become just a stereotype. Because the world we live in is itself full of confusion and contradiction. Because (as in our politics and everything else) simple either/or categories and labels no longer suffice. Because now that the god of modernism is dead, everything is possible. Because we're on line, plugged into the global village. Because the past and the future have dissolved 'into the now'. Because what's clear clearly isn't. Because we've increasingly found that only personal appearance is capable of expressing where we as individuals are at in a kaleidoscopic and enigmatic world.*" T Polhemus, 1996, p.17

Everybody would like to be considered individual but how do you communicate that in a way that may be read? Everything we wear and all our associations tell something about us - they are visual signs that project a small bit of you, perhaps your style likes and style dislikes. Just like the woman Ted Polhemus talks about, you can be 'read'. It is in this way that subcultures exist, they are communicating a different message than the dominant culture in our society. But in this day and age - electronic era - we are receiving and giving out messages at a

faster pace and sometimes these contradict each other and the code for deciphering the signs gets all muddled up. This is because people are breaking all the rules (in clothes wearing), mixing sportswear with workwear, the old and the new and in extreme cases crossing the traditional gender divides.

Most modern subcultures, i.e. from the late 80s, all have crossovers and are very rarely unique. It is this mixing and matching of very different garments that is one sign of this.

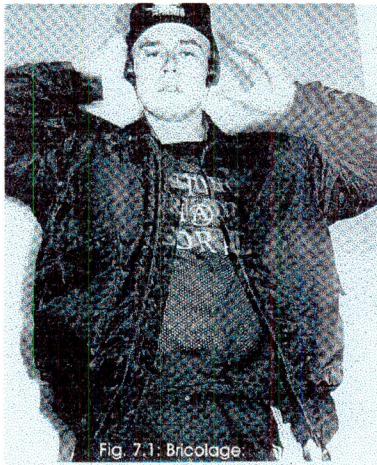


Fig. 7.1: Bricolage:
baseball cap; destroy mesh T-shirt; flight jacket

This style has been used by many subcultures and is called *bricolage* (see figure 7.1) - "objects and artefacts (both of a symbolic and concrete form) has been recorded and placed in new contexts so as to communicate fresh acts of meaning" (Michael Brake, 1985, p.14). Ted Polhemus calls this style of mixing and matching images the supermarket of style. It is a very apt term because we do tend to use clothes like that, we select garments but never were a particular uniform that strait jackets us. We were 'old' and 'new' with influences that could be going back as far as the fifties, for example, denim jeans with a big turn at the hem - fifties, yet contemporary. This

constantly changing style is just mixes of past, present and, a prediction of future styles. We all do this unless we are steadfastly seriously committed to one particular subculture. For example, I do it every day - baggy jeans (workwear like) with ripped hems, brand runners, tee shirts with logos, piercings. Every everything you wear or hold on your person is part of an assemblance of signs of different meanings. Baggy ripped trousers could be a reference to baggy music - early 90s: Stone Roses, Happy Mondays, inspiral carpets or hip hop/rap or skateboarding or rave. Label runners, depending on the brand and style, they might be basketball boots referring to rock music, or rap; 'old skool' runners referring to hip hop, skating, indie, acid jazz or just 70s sport. It even comes down to the way you wear the clothes - runners with loose laces; tongue sticking out distinguishes you as a certain type of person. The piercings could affiliate me with punk philosophy, new agers, metallers or many alternative 80s/90s subcultures.

Because, in this day and age, 'choice is it', it's everywhere - there is no fine line between fashion and anti-fashion. We tend to take what we want from each section, then move onto the next; it's like a throwaway identi-kit, e.g. a pair of denim workstyle jeans with a Ralph Lauren shirt, finished off with a pair of retro 70s style Adidas Gazelle trainers. There are so many brands and so much influence by the media and the 'street' that anything goes in this overproductive society we live in. Here are two quotes I found interesting considering they come from top fashion designers: *People who look like they're too interested are not in tune with the times*, Calvin Klein; *In things that are considered in bad taste, you can always find a certain beauty*, Jean Paul Gaultier (Fred Davis, 1992, p.52). Even these top designers believe in the idea of anti-fashion as important as fashion and its place in or against certain subcultures and societies.

Next, we will discuss punk, the original *anti-fashion*, why it came about and its impact. In the mid-seventies, time was ripe for a new musical revolution. Popular culture was stagnant, the hippie generation was dying out and economic recession was causing unemployment24youth

of Great Britain's urban areas were dispirited and needed something to interest them. They were the offspring of the hippie generation but felt no affiliation with it.

Discussion on punk

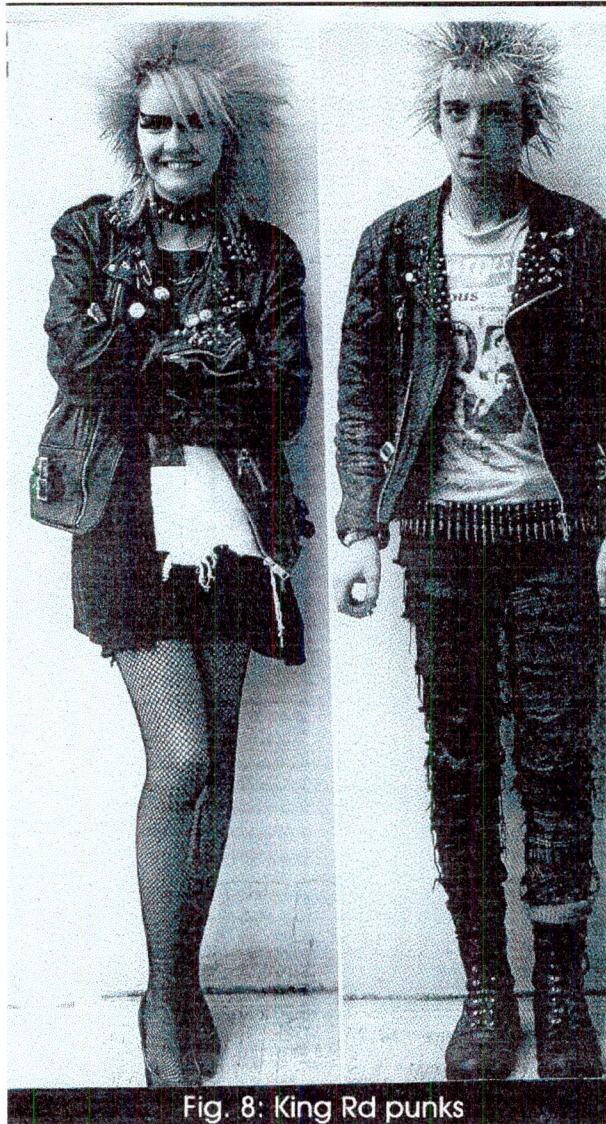


Fig. 8: King Rd punks

Punk developed in the summer of 1976 where young people from inner London and its suburbs began to react to the boredom of their daily lives. Initially, the movement was largely made up of working class and unemployed youths, but later middle-class youths were also involved. On Saturdays, large groups of them would assemble at the end of Kings Road, London (see figure 8), known as the worlds end, as it was considered to be the 'bad' end of the Kings Road, never having been prosperous, making it the ideal place for the launch of the 'punk' revolution. One of the focal points was Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's shop 'Sex' (see figure 9).

Westwood and McLaren were two of the most influential forces in the creation of this new subculture. The shop on Kings Rd was a small clothes shop, often changing its name along with the clothes to suit the current taste of the youth. It had been called 'Let it rock' and catered for teddy boys and then it became

'too fast to live, too young to die' and sold fetish garments. It was in 1975 that it became 'sex'. Its name was spelt out in ten feet high and made of pink plastic, and it attracted quite a lot of the youth as it's far from the norm at that time in London. The shop and what it stood for attacked the hippie ethic. The crowd associated with the shop and area were not interested in love and peace - they had a ready aggressiveness and projected an image of toughness, which was up to be expressed by ideas about style that they were forming. This style involved leather and ripped garments along with studs and chains.

Another place, which was frequented by this breed of youth, was a nightclub called Louises. This club had originally been a lesbian club, but by the end of the summer of 76, the club on Poland Street, Soho, London, was dominated by leather clad, spiked, pierced gangs of 'punks'. Louises was a liberal place and nearly everything was acceptable. The young punks

took full advantage of this and their style developed into a streetstyle expressive of their apparent aggressiveness. This new style was intended to make a shocking statement.

McLaren and Westwood profited by the interest of the disillusioned youth and McLaren decided to form a band called the Sex Pistols (see figure 10) and named after the shop. In the beginning, the band were intended to be models for Westwood's latest creations and attract attention to the shop. The successful collaboration between McLaren's irrepressible spirit and Westwood's off-the-wall innovative design were in essence the making and shaping of punk. The hype surrounding this new venture reached far and wide and punk became an unmissable feature of London. In America, similar things were going on. New York's club scene was changing, and a new breed of musicians were turning up. Like in London, the new development was anti-hippie. Musicians like Richard Hell, Patti Smith, The New York dolls (who McLaren briefly managed) were engaging in an evolution of Rock.

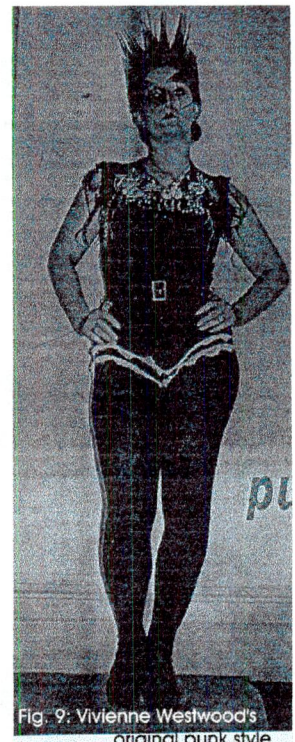


Fig. 9: Vivienne Westwood's original punk style...

Basically, there are few reasons why punk appealed to so many people. (One is the fact that they were being suppressed by the older generation who had talked so much of 'the youth'). The hippies had an optimistic utopian dream, the generation who became punks grew up in the shadow of this dream which never materialised. The punks sought out a completely different route. The socio-economic conditions were bad with rising unemployment and economic stagnation. In terms of popular culture, it was not an exciting time - Abba dominated



Fig. 10: The Sex Pistols

the charts, it was also the time of *Saturday Night Fever* and disco dancing. This was typically American and too far removed from their way of life to be of interest to them. It was this mainstream attitude of 'everything's alright-lets get on with life' that the punks had no time for. They wanted something real and something that was not manufactured. They were sick of hearing the same mainstream popular music that had no connection with the deprived lives they were living.

I believe that the main force behind punk was that they wanted something new with no 60s hippie influence, no ideals to be aspired to. Something that was real and not a dream - a reflection of society and what was wrong with it. A point was made to counteract the hippies' ideals. The 60s were about love and peace, long hair, a return to nature. The 70s punks were sinister, black leather, aggressive, metal wearing and had perverse bondage tones to their style.

Reaction

What underlined the punks' attitude was that they felt hard done by. To quote Sid Vicious (see figure 11), they saw 'no future' and wanted to broadcast this. Punk was an ideal vehicle for them. They were disgruntled at the state of the society they inherited and the apparent loss of prosperity previous decades had promised. Punk was partly a reaction towards the 60s upbeat positivity, its members realising that everything was not as easy as it had been made out to be.

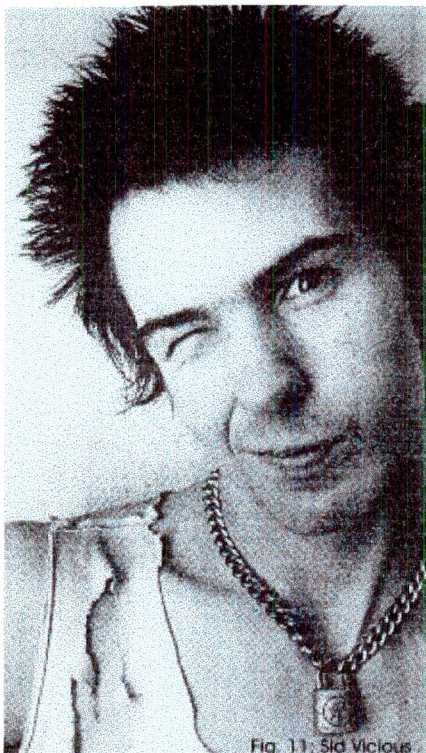


Fig. 11: Sid Vicious

Punk in its essence aimed to shock and contradict. It was a way, for the people involved to change the ideas of acceptably, to challenge the norm, the status quo. Punk wanted to break down the codes of the way the youth 'should' act, challenge the accepted modes of beauty and conduct. Perhaps it can be said that there are three words which sum up the initial punk philosophy - rebellion, poverty, leisure.

Punk was accepted by the youth of the mid-seventies as the only way to be noticed in a society that didn't care. Punk was a way of life which gave the young people something to put their ideas to. Although it was the dominant youth subculture in London in the mid/late 70s, it was given vicious press. The media had taken the punk image and constructed it stereotype who supported the idea that punk was a 'menace'. Punk was then in effect shaped by the groups it despised - the hippies and the



Fig. 13: Sex Pistol lyrics

media. Punk in its loud brash way set out to destroy the status quo of a stagnant culture of the mid-70s and attracted much attention by doing so.

Because punk was an urban streetstyle, it was a readymade fashion(or anti-fashion). It had to be affordable for those who subscribed to its ideals, projecting their angst and their attitude of non-co-operation. The disillusioned youth of these urban areas welcomed punk as it was ground level, it had nothing to do with fame or popularity, it wasn't interested in icons or star worship - anyone could be a punk (see figure 12).

The symbolism through clothing was central to ripped tee shirts with prints in offensive language, Nazi regalia, the Union Jack were all employed by them. Unlike the hippies who would talk forever about spirituality, peace/love, their political agenda, the punks scowled, threw abuse and were sometimes physically aggressive and they wore their symbols for all to see. These were mixed and matched according to each individual's wants.

Their extreme reaction to the 60s was totally negative. Anger, violence and locked in hostility were often displayed. They blamed their predecessors for no future. Their in-your-face attitude was their reaction. It is no wonder parents were in shock and afraid for the youth when heard the names of the people their young were listening to - Johnny Rotten, Jane Suck, Sid Vicious. The general public were alienated from this new generation. The shock of the normal everyday people was reflected in newspapers and TVs lampooning this new breed. The police hounded the punks, always expecting violence where they congregated.

The music industry were also not too happy with the punks. They were disgruntled at the alarming pace of punks' domination of youth culture. They claimed that punks were getting 99% of the press, but only selling 1% of the records. The critics dismissed punk as a mere fad, a passing phase. They claimed that there was a lack of creativity in the music and were relieved when the industry was restored to its creative, positive norm following the decline of punk as a form of music and as a style.

Punk undermined every relevant discourse, Hebdige, 1985, p.108.

Punk was like an attack on society in every way - they wanted to be despised. Punk's primary motivation in my view was to 'shock'. It is believed that this shock was probably more than that which greeted Elvis, the Rolling Stones and the hippies altogether. Outrageous is the word I would use to describe the punks. They were totally non-conformist, and wanted to be alienated from society, living their life in an aggressive way - the look, the language, the physical presence was all part of their reaction against social norm. They thought they needed personal armour against everything - the system was wrong. They decorated themselves in straps, buckles, spikes, collars, S and M equipment, strips of rag - they used garbage as jewellery and presented themselves as anarchists, often using the 'A' inside a circle as a statement on their clothes.

Punks lived a life so different from the average citizen that it put fear into people. Something not understood or not coherent with the norm is always going to be questioned and feared. Punks were considered barbarian, uncivilised who is indeed what they were, but that is in the context of the particular society they were in. Punks were creating their own rules, dress codes, and leisure, which obviously did not go hand in hand with the moral rules of society. But then they never intended to.

In the music, the aggression showed strongly. It was basic but intense, direct, heavy guitar over a loud but simple drum sound. Punk rock was defined as *the sound of less musically competent but more rebellious bands*, (*Melody Maker*, 28 May 1977). The Clash and the Worst



Fig. 12: Anybody could be a punk!

were not, perhaps, amazing or gifted musicians. Instead they used verve and rawness and aggressive lyrics to get their message across. Their anti-romanticism showed in such songs as *Belsen was a gas* (see figure 13) and *If you don't want to fuck me, fuck off*.

If we look at figure 12, a picture of a punk in London, we see an example of the graffiti on the leather jackets of punks. Most punks used lyrics from anthem style songs and emblazoned their jackets with the most outrageous ones they could use. The Sex Pistols were the most common group scrawled onto jackets.

The Sex Pistols were definitely the most notorious of these groups. They achieved notoriety when they swore during a live television interview. Their songs were banned and never played on the British airwaves. Even though the media denied them this promotion, their single *God Save the Queen* went to the top of the charts. They had no particular political agenda describing themselves as being anti-social and into chaos frequently using the slogan *Anarchy in the UK*. The young punks were attracted by this and lived their lives by the creed. The left wing had contempt for them for their lack of political agenda, the right wing believed they should not be wearing Nazi symbols without pledging to Nazism. The punks had really just taken the symbol and placed it in a different context. Instead of allying with Nazism, they used as a shock provoking jewellery.

Hebdige in his discussions of punk lifestyles finds a distinctive connection

between 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 soulless frantically driven music. The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, they wore as the 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 (Hebdige, 1979, p.114).

Even their dance style echoed their separation from popular culture at the time. Most people were dancing like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* but the punks had the *pogo*. The *pogo* was an articulate jerky kind of dance whereby usually two members of the same sex would jump up and down, banging against each other. There was another exclusively punk dance - the *robot*, similar to this *pogo*, but as the name suggests, it was android like. Often during the course of this dance, the punk would not move for minutes at a time in imitation of robot actions. Amphetamines were a sort of drug similar to speed which punks use to increase alertness and energy, and they used them in clubs to aid their totally non-sexual dancing.

The swear words were everywhere with punk jackets, T-shirts, tattoos, in their everyday language, in lyrics, and most especially on the records, music notes, posters and fanzines that circulated through the punk culture. The most popular fanzines of this alternative punk press were 'Sniffin' Glue', 'Ripped' and 'Torn'. They contained reviews, editorials and interviews. They were made cheaply and were usually full of typing errors, grammatical mistakes and obscenities, left unedited deliberately and left in for printing. This contributed to the development of a particular style, one that can be described as anarchic. If you look in particular at the graphic design used by the Sex Pistols on press releases, albums and T-shirts, it is possible to discern a ransom note style that continues to be a recognised trait of punk to this day (see figures 14 and 15). The ransom note consists of individual letters cut out and placed

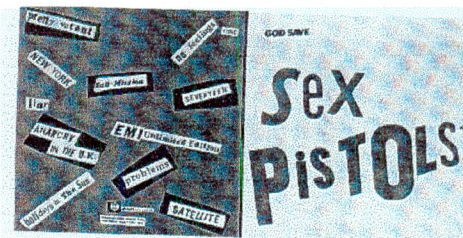


Fig. 14: Cut and paste (Jamie Reid)



with others to form the text, which is eye-catching and superbly effective. The Sex Pistols graphic designer, Jamie Reid, arranged the covers in a collage format, his distinct DIY style stunned the stagnant industry and replaced the old-fashioned airbrush illustration and glamorous photography with

guerrilla graphics. Jamie Reid was creating images for the street and newspapers. He used this juxtapositioning style to convey complicated messages simply. The meaning conveyed by the *God Save the Queen* record sleeve (fig. 16) is clear yet it is amazingly simple. This was typical of punk graphics - the Queen's eyes and mouth are covered by black bars like they use in detective magazines indicating crime or scandal and then are further disfigured by the laying of a collage of different size, font and colour letters to form the name of the album. Designers influenced by this style were Michael Garret, Peter Saville and Neville Brody.



Fig. 16:
God Save the Queen

stripped down second hand store style, (see figures 17 and 18, Grunge and Heavy Metal) goths who developed their dark and moody persona from punk.

If we look at fig 19, we can see a simplified version of how a male and a female punk looked around 1976 at the early stages of punk. The male is wearing a black T-shirt with metal studs and badges, jeans that are ripped and patched. He is wearing two belts, one covered in studs. A leather jacket hangs half on, half off. Around his neck, he has chains and padlocks. His ears are pierced and his hair is so typically punk - it is spiked. The female is also wearing a black T-shirt, but it is ripped. She has striped jeans, two belts and a sleeveless leather jacket.

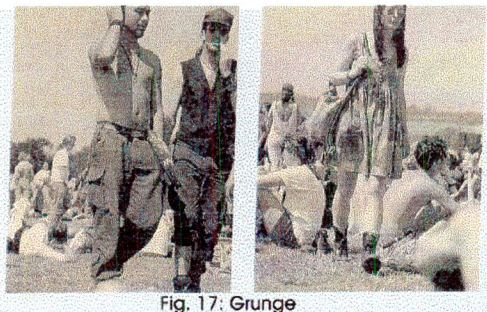


Fig. 17: Grunge

and shock. The punks dressed down for life on the streets. Because punk was a revolt, it was supposed to be directly offensive - the T-shirts with swear words, the pierced faces. Never before had one group gone so far to break out of the accepted. Punks investigated new areas where no one had gone before. They completely stepped out of any conventional idea of

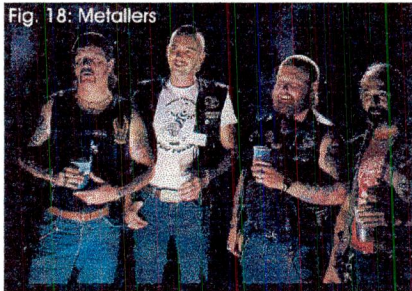


Fig. 18: Metallars

changed colour like a rainbow and stood up off the head by many inches.

Her hair is in a mohican and she also wears chains around her neck. On her arm, she has a tattoo and she is also wearing heavy make-up around her eyes.

The idea behind the punk style was revolt and shock. The punks dressed down for life on the streets. Because punk was a revolt, it was supposed to be directly offensive - the T-shirts with swear words, the pierced faces. Never before had one group gone so far to break out of the accepted. Punks investigated new areas where no one had gone before. They completely stepped out of any conventional idea of civilisation, e.g. cosmetic mutilation, the safety pin hung out of lips, nostrils, cheeks; chains hung from ear to cheek; hair

Punk, c. 1976

Fig. 19: Punk styles



Discussion on skating

Now we turn onto a subculture that has become a major one of the last 10-15 years. Not many people know too much about it as it is a very American culture that has never had major media coverage until the likes of MTV began using clips of it for their ad campaigns. It is not an amazingly ground breaking culture, but has an impact on many styles of the nineties. Considering the mainstay of skater style is the baggy trouser look, this is everywhere today, lots of bands (especially manufactured mainstream pop use this style). It is also a major influence of the metal music scene with the major bands wearing the gear (Korn, Deftones and Limp Bizkit). It has a sort of fused with the punk image to form a hybrid.

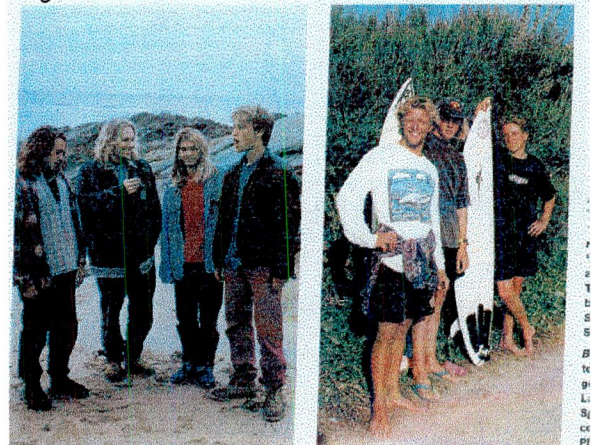
Skating began in the 1950s in the USA. It began with young city dwelling adolescents with little to do. There is a legend that says there was some kid who wanted to surf, but lived too far away from the beach or lacked the transport to get there. He took the wheels from roller-skates (around for a long time before skating) and fixed them to a plank of wood - he then became the first sidewalk surfer. There is no exact date or entirely correct information as to the creation of skating, but it has come from humble beginnings, probably in someone's back garden to a highly recognised symbol of youth street culture.

In the 40 years skating has been around, it has gone through many changes. In the beginning, it was very small and was developing quite slowly. Post-war America was still getting back on its feet and money was not that easy to come by. Bicycle was a main form of teenagers' fun. When skateboards arrived on the scene, they did not have a major impact. Yes, many took to this unusual activity, but more as just as an adolescence pastime. Just something boys tried out in their teens.

In the first twenty years from the late fifties to the 70s, there was little change. The first skaters were hardly noticed and were rarely adventurous. They were content to just push around on the board and attempt downhill. Skating stayed like this for a few reasons. There was not enough money for people to infect into what seemed like another craze that would disappear as soon as it began. It was seen as a young person's thing and they rarely had money to spend on

such interests. At the time, many teenagers were more interested in the music scene - rock 'n' roll; motorcycles and cars. They saw their heroes in the picture house and bikes and cars became their interests. During this period, skating evolved little. There was no real style to the culture. In fact, it would hardly have been called a culture. It was just the youth of America trying out a new concept. Skating had no agenda; there was no particular style of music associated with it or clothes that signalled skaters. They listened to the popular music and wore denims, check shirts, T-shirts and the all-round sports shoe - *Converse All Star*.

Fig. 20: Surfers' influence on skaters was considerable



It was not until the 70s when things began to change. The skaters became influenced by their ocean comrades (fig. 20). The skaters began to wear similar clothes - bright and baggy and took their lead from the surfers. They realised that the surfers had found the appropriate gear to wear - baggy loose, lots of room to manoeuvre. Skateboarders began to catch onto the cool brands that surfers wore. At this time skaters had no one else to connect with and skaters were the most likeliest allies. The skaters were interested in surfers in since it just began have left the town and the cities to move to the best surfing spots. They left their 9-5 life behind for one closer to nature. They exchanged the world of hectic metropolis life to one of a surfer's paradise - living beside the ocean and catching the perfect wave - they want an affiliation with nature.

Skaters liked the idea of dropping out as many subcultures have since then, especially the hippies but when it came down to the question of nature, they realised they had very little in common with surfers apart from their mode of pleasure. The surfers had an empathy with nature - the great sea - searching for the perfect wave. This was not shared by the concrete dwelling boarders - they had no understanding of this as they were an urban breed, and nature was scarce in their habitat. The skaters had no understanding of nature like the surfers and unlike the surfers, they were frequently at odds with the authorities. In essence, they were similar to punks who they were also influenced by but not till the 80s.

Although their ideologies differed, surfers still had influence of their younger brothers. Even into the mid-80s, surfing multi-coloured look passed onto the street skaters. But around this time skaters noticed punk. Although punk's home was England, it reached America quickly and had influence on all manners of subcultures and even of high fashion. Skaters saw themselves as much a street group as punks and were influenced by their style of rejecting totally the mainstream codes of living. The skaters became more of a street style; with this influence, clothes became customised, something that was definitely borrowed from punk - jeans were cut up to the shins, ripped chains were incorporated, hairstyles became bizarre.

I believe it was their alienation by the authorities that led them to becoming more of a subculture. Rebelling is part of youth and most groups do it whether it means drinking under-age, shoplifting or just using offensive language; all teenagers want to be part of something and become noticed. With skating, the breaking of rules

incorporated skating where it became illegal. The skaters had been banned from public places by over-ambitious police forces, and to achieve revenge, the skateboarder frequently visited spots where they were banned from. The authorities believe banning such activities was the answer - they would just go away. This banishment enraged skaters who thought the street was

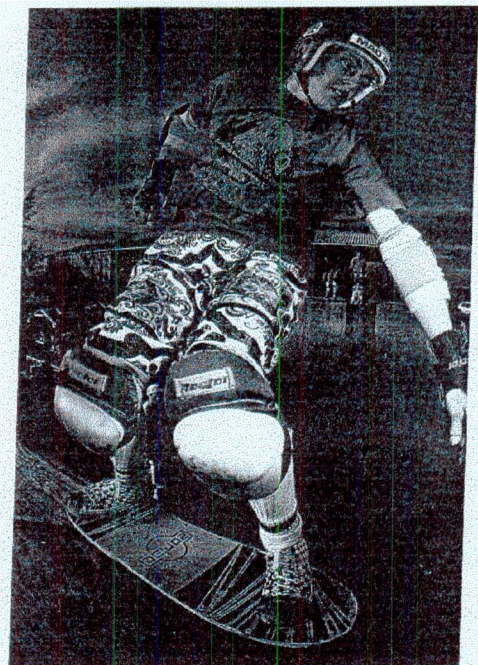


Fig. 21: Late 80s skater showing surfer influence
skaters

much theirs. Skaters became more of an underground group, a tighter more extreme, the die-hards, not the average pastime skater, but the real 'urban dwellers'.

It was in the seventies that the skaters became more recognisable as a group. It's true that their first influence was the surfers, but in the late seventies, when punk arrived, it had a major influence on every style of clothes. The skaters' common ground with the punk was shown through stylist imitation. Skaters took a great interest in punk as they saw it as culture on the same 'street' level as them; it was an urban phoenix. Like punk, skating the streets and steps of inner cities was born out of boredom of the status quo.

This influence of punk did not mean that the American skaters dressed like punk, but the aesthetic was there. It was just another form of dressing down. The clothes were oversized, mixed and matched, but also practical which is always going to be a factor in subculture that revolves around something like a skateboard. This is not to say they were not still influenced by the surfers; they were, but there were different strands. Even in to the late 80s, many skaters still adopted the semi-surf look if we look at fig. 21. The skater is wearing clothes that show a strong influence from surfer clothing. It's casual and loose with bold stripes and colours on the short trousers and a typical logo emblazoned T-shirt. He is a British skater who was a bit behind the Americans, but nevertheless still shows how influential the surfers were.

The influence of punk on skaters was quite considerable. I think the first attraction to punk is the 'rebellious' element - it has always had a place in young people's lives. Skaters from the late 80s and early 90s more or less revolutionised skateboarding with massive interest amounting in it. I think there are two reasons for this: (1) the influence of punk and its ideals; (2) the input of cash into skateboarding itself. The combination of the two helped skateboarding become world widely popular. Every kid had an interest in this streetstyle DIY culture where the two most important things were hanging out and looking cool, see figure 22.

It was in the late 80s that skating became more of a subcultural group rather than an aimless pastime. The new breed of skaters benefited from companies who wanted to invest in the area. Companies set up to manufacture boards, trucks, wheels and protective equipment. With more interest in skating, there had to be somewhere the skaters could go. The government in the US decided to do something about the problem of these nuisance skaters on the streets. They built purpose-made skate-parks- a new phenomenon in the world of skating. These incorporated everything skaters wanted that they had on the street. It also meant it was an area where skaters could go out and skate without hassle from the authorities. These skate parks made everyone happy. The skaters had a designated zone, the authorities had less trouble. These skate parks were sponsored by brands such as Vans and the DC Shoe Company.



Fig. 22

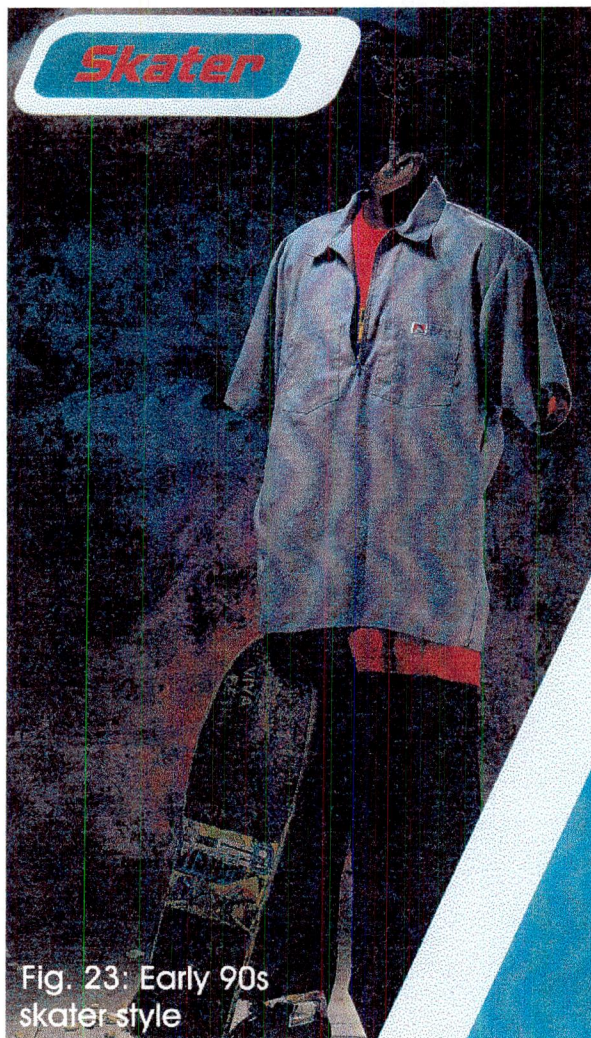


Fig. 23: Early 90s skater style

Skating has flourished since the opening of such venues. They attract thousands of skaters and have become a communal meeting place for the culture. These parks are like a haven for the previously rejected youth culture.

From the late 80s to the present day, skating has changed dramatically. It has become a new 'sport' with many skaters getting the chance to skate professionally under sponsors such as Ethnies and Shortys. The money has brought skating very much into the public eye and it has become acceptable to society.

In the 80s and the 90s, the new generation became more interested in their style. Many skaters performed their new clothing companies designing to skaters' needs. These clothes broke away from the surfer influence and a new influence can be seen. This is that of rap. They have always worn baggy styles, but these clothes new

clothes were ready made. Jeans, combats, shorts were the preferred standard. The 'skater punk' seems to have deteriorated and instead labelled gear was brought to the fore. Rap clothes such as Dickies influenced these new designs. The companies influenced by rap wear (such as 'Five', 'Fuct', 'Pervert'), brought out a massive array of new clothes from woolly hat emblazoned with the companies' names to specially designed skate runners.

Much of these clothes, although designed ready-made, were customised. This is another new departure for skaters. The baggy jeans were cut up to knee-length out and ripped, so they fall over the runners, chains were added (still a sign of punk influence). If we look at fig. 23 we can see the typical early 90s skate wear. The clothes modelled here are: a grey cotton shirt, Ben Davis, USA; a cotton T-shirt; baseball hat; baggy cotton trousers - Sloppy Joes or Fuct; suede skate trainers - Vans Half Cabs Cabelleros. This style is typical of the 90s, it is directly influenced by hip-hop styles. Every garment had to be XL or bigger. The runners have been customised - cut down from the ankle and sealed with skate brand stickers. The T-shirt is worn inside out because the style is considered dated and therefore uncool. The trousers have to be baggy, hang extremely low - the lower the cloth area, the cooler; the hems have to be frayed (this usually happens to every day activity, but if not, it's customised).

The board is another major area of customisation (see figure 22 again). The one pictured is sprayed and covered in stickers - Vision (another skate label). This customisation is what keeps skateboarding alive. Most skaters graffiti their boards with spray cans, paints,



stickers and over the course of its use, it acquires knocks and scratches, giving each one its own individuality. This customising of board and clothes is part of skateboarding since the die-hards realised that the culture was being cashed in on. The problem was that as the companies promoted the new gear, many 'wannabes' were catching on to the style. The styles like Bench and Pervert were becoming popular with trendy types who had never risked their life on a skateboard. The skaters saw the only obvious solution was to keep changing their style to retain authenticity. This does mean that skating is a quite expensive business, but the continual change has the positive effect of keeping the subculture dynamic, creative and very innovative stylewise.

Conclusion

I have discussed the subcultures of punk and skating - two quite different groups: one, punk, a major influence on the subcultures that followed and two, skaters, not quite as influential but at the forefront of style in modern subcultures. While punk influenced everything from heavy metal to skaters, skaters are a new breed. They have their origins in the 50s, but I think the early 90s and on have been their time to flourish. The style they emit has influenced the catwalks just like punk before. The baggy look is one that oozes street-style and the attitude of looking cool and hanging about appeals to many young people. Unlike the punk, it poses no threat to people and has not revolutionised the music industry, but has caught the attention of the world.

I think we should always allow creativity to flow whether it's through heavy music, mad clothes styles, piercings and tattoos, mass movements; it all adds up to create a most interesting and diverse world. We need people to be creative; we don't need critics. No matter what I say or believe, I know that subcultures will always be around to test the boundaries of the so-called dominant powers.

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