All these factors drew the teddy boy subculture in its second incarnation closer to the parent culture and helped to define it against other existing youth cultural options ( punks, Northern soul enthusiasts, heavy metal rockers, football fans, mainstream pop, ‘respectable’, etc.) For these reasons, wearing a drape coat in 1978 did not mean the same things in the same way as it had done in 1956, despite the fact that the two sets of teddy boys worshipped identical heroes (Elvis, Eddie Cochran, James Dean), cultivated the same quiffs and occupied approximately the same class position. The twin concepts of conjuncture and specificity (each subculture representing a distinctive ‘moment’ – a particular response to a particular set of circumstances) are therefore indispensable to a study of subcultural style.

The Sources of Style

We have seen how the experience encoded in subcultures is shaped in a variety of locales (work, home, school, etc.). Each of these locales imposes its own unique structure, its own rules and meanings, its own hierarchy of values. Though these structures articulate together, they do so syntactically. They are bound together as much through difference (home v. school, school v. work, home v. work, private v. public, etc.) as through similarity. To use Althusser’s admittedly cumbersome terms, they constitute different levels of the same social formation. And though they are, as Althusser takes pains to point out, ‘relatively autonomous’, these structures remain, in capitalist societies, articulated around the ‘general contradiction’ between Capital and Labour (see particularly Althusser 1971a). The complex interplay between the different levels of the social formation is reproduced in the experience of both dominant and subordinate groups, and this experience, in turn, becomes the ‘raw material’ which finds expressive form in culture and subculture. Now, the media play a crucial role in defining

our experience for us. They provide us with the most available categories for classifying out the social world. It is primarily through the press, television, film, etc. that experience is organized, interpreted, and made to cohere in contradiction as it were. It should hardly surprise us then, to discover that much of what finds itself encoded in subculture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media.

Thus, in post-war Britain, the loaded content of subcultural style is likely to be as much a function of what Stuart Hall has called the ‘ideological effect’ of the media as a reaction to experienced changes in the institutional framework of working-class life. As Hall has argued, the media have ‘progressively colonised the cultural and ideological sphere’:

As social groups and classes live, if not in their productive then in their ‘social’ relations, increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices and values of other groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces can be coherently grasped. (Hall, 1977)

So a credible image of social cohesion can only be maintained through the appropriation and redefinition of cultures of resistance (e.g. working-class youth cultures) in terms of that image. In this way, the media not only provide groups with substantive images of other groups, they also relay back to working-class people a ‘picture’ of their own lives which is ‘contained’ or ‘framed’ by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it.

Clearly, subcultures are not privileged forms; they do not
stand outside the reflexive circuitry of production and reproduction which links together, at least on a symbolic level, the separate and fragmented pieces of the social totality. Subcultures are, at least in part, representations of these representations, and elements taken from the ‘picture’ of working-class life (and of the social whole in general) are bound to find some echo in the signifying practices of the various subcultures. There is no reason to suppose that subcultures spontaneously affirm only those blocked ‘readings’ excluded from the airwaves and the newspapers (consciousness of subordinate status, a conflict model of society, etc.). They also articulate, to a greater or lesser extent, some of the preferred meanings and interpretations, those favoured by and transmitted through the authorized channels of mass communication. The typical members of a working-class youth culture in part contest and in part agree with the dominant definitions of who and what they are, and there is a substantial amount of shared ideological ground not only between them and the adult working-class culture (with its muted tradition of resistance) but also between them and the dominant culture (at least in its more ‘democratic’, accessible forms).

For example, the elaboration of upward and downward options open to working-class youth does not necessarily indicate any significant difference in the relative status of the jobs available to the average mod of 1964 and the skinhead of 1968 (though a census might indeed reveal such a difference). Still less does it reflect directly the fact that job opportunities open to working-class youth in general actually diminished during the intervening period. Rather the different styles and the ideologies which structure and determine them represent negotiated responses to a contradictory mythology of class. In this mythology, ‘the withering away of class’ is paradoxically countered by an undiluted ‘classfulness’, a romantic conception of the traditional whole way of (working-class) life revived twice weekly on television programmes like Coronation Street. The mods and skinheads, then, in their different ways, were ‘handling’ this mythology as much as the exigencies of their material condition. They were learning to live within or without that amorphous body of images and typifications made available in the mass media in which class is alternately overlooked and overstated, denied and reduced to caricature.

In the same way, the punks were not only directly responding to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were dramatizing what had come to be called ‘Britain’s decline’ by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth (hence the swearing, the references to ‘fat hippies’, the rags, the lumpen poses). The punks appropriated the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period and translated it into tangible (and visible) terms. In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s – with massive unemployment, with the ominous violence of the Notting Hill Carnival, Grunwick, Lewisham and Ladywood – it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as ‘degenerates’; as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain. The various stylistic ensembles adopted by the punks were undoubtedly expressive of genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety. But these statements, no matter how strangely constructed, were cast in a language which was generally available – a language which was current. This accounts, first, for the appropriateness of the punk metaphor for both the members of the subculture and its opponents and, second, for the success of the punk subculture as spectacle: its ability to symptomatize a whole cluster of contemporary problems. It explains the subculture’s ability to attract new members and to produce the
requisite outraged responses from the parents, teachers and employers towards whom the moral panic was directed and from the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ – the local councillors, the pundits and M.P.s – who were responsible for conducting the ‘crusade’ against it. In order to communicate disorder, the appropriate language must first be selected, even if it is to be subverted. For punk to be dismissed as chaos, it had first to ‘make sense’ as noise.

We can now begin to understand how the Bowie cult came to be articulated around questions of gender rather than class, and to confront those critics who relate the legitimate concerns of ‘authentic’ working-class culture exclusively to the sphere of production. The Bowie-ites were certainly not grappling in any direct way with the familiar set of problems encountered on the shop floor and in the classroom: problems which revolve around relations with authority (rebellion v. deference, upward v. downward options, etc.). None the less, they were attempting to negotiate a meaningful intermediate space somewhere between the parent culture and the dominant ideology: a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed. To this extent they were engaged in that distinctive quest for a measure of autonomy which characterizes all youth sub-(and counter) cultures (see p. 148, n. 6). In sharp contrast to their skinhead predecessors, the Bowie-ites were confronting the more obvious chauvinisms (sexual, class, territorial) and seeking, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, to avoid, subvert or overthrow them. They were simultaneously (1) challenging the traditional working-class puritanism so firmly embedded in the parent culture, (2) resisting the way in which this puritanism was being made to signify the working class in the media and (3) adapting images, styles and ideologies made available elsewhere on television and in films (e.g. the nostalgia cult of the early 1970s), in magazines and newspapers (high fashion, the emergence of feminism in its commodity form, e.g. Cosmopolitan) in order to construct an alternative identity which communicated a perceived difference: an Otherness. They were, in short, challenging at a symbolic level the ‘inevitability’, the ‘naturalness’ of class and gender stereotypes.