SEEING IS CONCEIVING: GENDER, RACE AND VISUAL SEMANTICS AT THE BIRMINGHAM CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the discourses of visuality in the intellectual history of British cultural studies as it developed in the postwar period at the University of Birmingham’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Visual representation has long been perceived by western thought as a terrain unaffected by perception, language and conceptions; however, recent thought has contested this notion and in the process problematized cultural “ways of seeing.” The paper asks how the subjects of British cultural studies were produced but also how and why they were conceived through a visual discourse. It discusses the extent to which this visual discourse at the CCCS was ruptured by the breaking in of previously “invisible” subjects and how this visual discourse itself actually facilitated this rupture. The paper approaches this discussion through a close analysis of key texts produced at the CCCS. It demonstrates that the intellectual trajectory of British cultural studies at the CCCS involved a shift from an oral means of cultural expression to a visual one and then back to an oral form. It examines how the interventions by thinkers on gender and race influenced this shift. The paper concludes that visuality and orality were held in constant tension throughout the intellectual history of British cultural studies at the CCCS, but that a more inclusive and democratic form of orality finally gained ascendancy over a visuality, which was inherently implicated in social and cultural structures of power.
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Image
likeness
resemblance
similitude

Graphic
pictures
statues
designs
Optical
mirrors
projections
Perceptual
sense data
“species”
appearances
Mental
dreams
memories
ideas
fantasmata
Verbal
metaphors
descriptions

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With the Conservatives, there are no blacks, no whites, just people. Conservatives believe that treating minorities as equals encourages the majority to treat them as equals.

Yet the Labour Party aim to treat you as a special case, as a group, all on your own. Is setting you apart from the rest of society a sensible way to overcome racial prejudice and social inequality?

The question is, should we really divide the British people instead of uniting them?

WHOSE PROMISES ARE YOU TO BELIEVE?

When Labour were in government, they promised to repeal Immigration Acts passed in 1962 and 1971. Both promises were broken.

This time, they are promising to throw out the British Nationality Act, which gives full and equal citizenship to everyone permanently settled in Britain.

But how do the Conservatives' promises compare?

We said that we'd abolish the 'SUS' law.
We kept our promise.
We said we'd recruit more coloured policemen, get the police back into the community, and train them for a better understanding of your needs.
We kept our promise.

The Conservatives have always said that the only long term answer to our economic problems was to conquer inflation.

Inflation is now lower than it's been for over a decade, keeping all prices stable, with the price of food now hardly rising at all.

Meanwhile, many businesses throughout Britain are recovering, leading to thousands of new jobs.
Firstly, in our traditional industries, but just as importantly in new technology areas such as micro-electronics.
In other words, the medicine is working.

Yet Labour want to change everything, and put us back to square one.
They intend to increase taxation. They intend to increase the National Debt.
They promise import and export controls.
Cast your mind back to the last Labour government. Labour's methods didn't work then.
They won't work now.

A BETTER BRITAIN FOR ALL OF US.

The Conservatives believe that everyone wants to work hard and be rewarded for it.
Those rewards will only come about by creating a mood of equal opportunity for everyone in Britain, regardless of their race, creed or colour.

The difference you're voting for is this:
To the Labour Party, you're a black person.
To the Conservatives, you're a British Citizen.

Vote Conservative, and you vote for a more equal, more prosperous Britain.

LABOUR SAYS HE'S BLACK.
TORIES SAY HE'S BRITISH.

CONSERVATIVE X

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I dreamed I was in Yorkshire, going from Gomersal-Hill-Top to Cleckheaton and about the middle of the lane, I thought I saw Satan coming to meet me in the shape of a tall, black man, and the hair of his head like snakes; ...But I went on, ript open my clothes, and showed him my naked breast, saying, 'see, here is the blood of Christ.' Then I thought he fled from me as fast as a hare could run.¹

Paul Gilroy begins his book ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’ with this passage quoted from E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class. Thompson originally takes this from the journal of John Nelson, a Birstall stone-mason in the 1760s, who represents the emblematic subject for Thompson’s historical narrative – a working-class white man. The passage’s racial aspect lies in the very fact that Satan appears in the image of a “tall black man” with his hair in dreadlocks “like snakes” signifying a foreign, non-British “Otherness” whose very presence threatens the dreamer. However, it is also important to note that while the image of the Other here is racially figured as foreign and non-white, it could have just as significantly been framed as an unruly woman. Hence, the quote is not important in itself but rather as an image that represents a nexus between two key themes in the intellectual history of British cultural studies that we shall discuss in this paper: the recognition that the subject of British cultural studies is implicitly raced and gendered and the ability of an image to convey a range of cultural meanings, understandings and prejudices.

Thompson often used oral accounts from working-class subjects in his histories to access and articulate working-class lived experience. The excerpt above is indeed similar to a spoken recollection in its vernacular structure and rhythm. Richard Hoggart, one of the founding figures of British cultural studies and a contemporary of Thompson, also sought to portray and analyze the lived experience of the working class. Hoggart asserted

that the oral culture of British working-class subjects was an expression of their historical and day-to-day experience. His emphasis on investigating working-class experience through their oral tradition was, however, disrupted in the 1970s when cultural researchers began to study the visual aspects of working-class youth cultures. The result was a shift from analyzing oral modes of cultural expression to a new attention to visual modes. However these visual modes were eventually found to be anything but objective and neutral as we shall see. The ways of seeing and the images cultural researchers deployed were deeply implicated with gendered and raced power relations. But these power relations were hidden and later critiques of the visual at the CCCS, by such writers as Paul Gilroy and Angela McRobbie, had to reveal them.

Modern western thought has often considered visual representation to be unaffected by perception, language and concepts. However, many twentieth-century continental thinkers have contested this and have problematized cultural “ways of seeing.”

This paper is concerned with how researchers at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) began to be influenced by such cultural ways of “seeing.” The work at the Centre was also shaped by the emergence of persuasively “invisible” cultural subjects namely women and people of colour. The way in which the dialectics of visuality facilitated these interventions is further evidenced through a close analysis of the works of key CCCS members.

Scholars such as Norma Schulman, Dennis Dworkin and Graeme Turner have chronicled the intellectual history of British cultural studies, but none have analyzed in

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2 Some examples are Roland Barthes’s deconstruction of popular images, in Mythologies (1972); Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the display of commodities in the shopping arcades of Paris, in The Arcades Project (1999); Jacques Lacan’s work on the Mirror Stage, see “Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in Modern Literary Theory, a Reader. Ed. Philip Rice and
detail the importance of visual representation at the CCCS. Throughout the intellectual history of the CCCS visuality and orality have been held in constant binary tension. In the 1970s the emphasis on the visual even came to eclipse orality. The result was an important shift in relations of power. Visuality allowed for little possibility of dialogue with its subjects, while, as we shall see, orality encourages communication between the subject and the observer.

In the late 1970s the Centre shifted from an oral to an *ocularcentric* approach as researchers began to discipline their subjects by considering visual representations of them. The work on subcultures by CCCS writers like Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, John Clarke and others used visual languages and signs to set meanings and definitions in place. The 1970s ethnographic approach to subcultures was “a way of seeing” which brought with it its own scopic regime permeated with a physics of power. Subjects came to be visually identifiable, and the researchers who attempted to analyze them drew on a language that was not only visual, but also gendered and raced. Later critics of this approach would come to draw on less visual and more oral tropes and meanings.

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3 There is much literature dealing with the theoretical approach of CCCS including accounts by its former members (Stuart Hall *et al.*). However, there is comparatively little work charting its intellectual history – the exception being Norma Schulman “Conditions of their Own Making: An Intellectual History of the, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham,” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 18 no.1. [1993]: 51-71, Dennis Dworkin (*Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and Origins of Cultural Studies* [Durham and London: Duke University, 1997]) and Graeme Turner (*British Cultural Studies: An Introduction, Second Edition* [London and New York: Routledge, 1990]).

4 Martin Jay uses the term *ocularcentricism* to describe the epistemological privileging of vision in Western thought that goes back as far as Plato’s notion that ontological universals are accessible to “the mind’s eye” and continues through the Renaissance discourse on perspective, the invention of the printing press, and the rise of modern science (Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in *Vision and Visuality, Discussions in Contemporary Culture* 2, ed. Hal Foster [Seattle: Bay Press, 1988], 2.).

But how exactly can “looking” act as a conduit of power relationships? Martin Jay and W.J.T. Mitchell both explore the putative predominance of the visual in modern Western thought, arguing that there is “a close analogical connection between the rationalism and humanism of the Enlightenment project, and the notion of human vision as an agent of illumination and clarification.” Unlike language, which can produce and communicate more nuanced meanings, vision can only produce an understanding that is “external” and “without any meaningful continuity between past and future.” Jay has revealed the recent “antiocularcentrism” or devaluing of sight as a sign of disillusionment with scientific observation and a renewed appreciation for more subjective interpretations – this shift has occurred especially within Marxian thought. This intellectual shift is significant as Marxist thought has formed the lingua franca of modern British Cultural Studies since its Postwar inception. Indeed, Marxism itself was crucial to the development of the CCCS, as Marx’s conception of class relations formed the intellectual basis for the examination of popular culture as an expression of working class agency.

In order to explain the reasons for Marx’s importance herein it is necessary to briefly trace the historical circumstances of British cultural studies itself. The project, as it took root at Birmingham in the mid-1960s, was partially shaped by the postwar British social and political movement of the New Left. Dennis Dworkin asserts that British cultural

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8 Their main concern is the place of the visual in Marxism’s metaphors of truth and knowledge. Marxism, in Jay’s words, was “beholden” to ocularcentric speculation, that is, the belief that access to truth and knowledge could be obtained by seeing it, in modern western phenomenology (Jay, 374).

studies “cannot be viewed in isolation; it must be seen in the context of the crisis of the British Left, a crisis virtually coterminous with the postwar era.” The individuals involved with the New Left gathered in reaction to the success of the Conservative government and the corresponding weakness of the Labour Party in the 1950s. The movement came together to revitalize Leftist politics, but its members distanced themselves from the conventional Left, which they saw as out of touch with the economic and social realities of postwar Britain. Although the New Left did not coalesce into a permanent organization, it did foster “a new political space” in which both a radical historiography and British cultural studies could be nurtured.

Contemporary British cultural studies as an “institution” arrived in 1969 with the founding of the CCCS as a postgraduate research institute at the University of Birmingham. British cultural studies owes much to this as the CCCS produced what are generally regarded as the foundational texts of the field. Indeed, Tony Bennett contends that the history of the CCCS “has come to function as an exemplary narrative whose rhetorical claims and manoeuvres have been drawn on to help sustain and develop similar stories elsewhere.”

British cultural studies can, however, be traced to earlier cultural commentators in the nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Mathew Arnold, the Leavises, and T.S. Eliot. These “traditional” commentators narrowed their definition of culture to texts produced by “high” culture – the “Great Tradition” of English literature (for example,

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11 Dworkin, 45.
12 Tony Bennett, Culture: A Reformer’s Science (London: Sage, c1998), 44.
Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare). Although these pioneers are credited with being the first to negotiate the "text" of culture from a British perspective, they derided mass or popular culture. The Birmingham group, in contrast, granted popular culture an entirely new order of importance. Its primary intent was to cast light on the working-classes' lived experience through the study of working-class culture. Richard Hoggart is the most important example of this generation of researchers.

Hoggart, the director of the CCCS from 1964 to 1969, himself came from a working-class background and was involved in teaching adult education. He was also very interested in the role of culture in Britain's class-based society. Postwar Britain promoted extended educational opportunities (specifically adult education) as part of an effort at renewal and reconstruction, but class politics were still very much prevalent in everyday life.

Hoggart enthusiastically valorized popular culture as a genuine expression of the British working class. He was interested not only in how popular culture was created, but also in how it expressed a lived working-class experience. According to Hoggart, the elite within society attempted to legitimate their power and privilege by projecting their "fields of value," which then became the dominant culture. Hoggart saw popular culture, or the "authentic" working-class culture of pre-war Britain, as an instrument of class struggle by which the working class could express its own values and outlook. He interpreted working class popular culture as an interconnected, entity – a *Gestalt* – reflecting working class family structure, recreational patterns, language and communication, and an organic sense of community. This rich working class culture was, Hoggart asserted, in direct contrast to the "commodified" culture (consisting of

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13 Dworkin, 80.
popular music, television programs, pulp novels, and Hollywood movies) imported largely from the United States in the post-war years.\(^\text{14}\) Intellectuals like Hoggart came to see popular culture as a subject worth studying and preserving as it was losing ground to this imported, banalized mass culture.

Hoggart based much of his work on the Leavises’ methodology of applying literary criticism to culture in general. This approach asserted that by looking at culture and art, one could gain insight into the true complexity of a society as it is experienced by people day-to-day – what Hoggart referred to as “the felt quality of life.”\(^\text{15}\) But while Hoggart subscribed to the literary-critical approach, he also emphasized an oral analysis of cultural experience. His accounts were derived from his personal experiences and were intended as a visceral expression of what it “felt like” to grow up as part of the working class in Britain. The power of the spoken word to invoke an emotive response from the reader is emphasized in Hoggart’s recollection of the hardships endured by his grandmother:

> Today, if I hear someone using words like ‘sorrow’ and ‘misery’ freely, they usually sound slightly archaic; they are to be reserved for special events. To my grandmother they were regular words together with ‘care’ and ‘hardship’, used as often and as meaningfully as ‘nuisance’ and ‘awkward’ among many of the people I know today. When my grandmother spoke of someone ‘taking the bread from her mouth’ she was not being dramatic or merely figuratively; she was speaking from an unbroken and still relevant tradition, and her speech at times had something of the elemental quality of Anglo-Saxon poetry.\(^\text{16}\)

Hoggart saw the attitudes and experiences of the working class reflected in the oral tradition of speech patterns and common idioms. Even the title of one of Hoggart’s most

\(^{15}\) Hoggart, 20.
important works, *Speaking to Each Other*, consisted of an oral trope. *The Uses of Literacy* expressed similar ideas: “Speech will indicate a great deal, in particular the host of phrases in common use. Manners of speaking, the use of urban dialects, accents and intonations, could probably indicate [even] more.” Hoggart recalled many phrases which allow a glimpse into the quotidian experiences of the working class. For example, “‘E shows well for it anyway’ (of a well-nourished child)... and ‘If it’s not there y’ can’t put it there’ (of the intelligence needed to pass the scholarship examination)” He also drew on extensive examples of idioms that expressed the working class attitude of “putting up with things” in the course of their difficult lives. Sayings like “‘mek yer own life’; ‘keep yer end up’, [and] ‘life is what y’ mek it” exhibited such a stoic working class outlook.

The English urban popular song and the “popular art” of club-singing were other important expressions of this oral tradition. In Hoggart’s view, this popular art played a significant role in allowing the working class to maintain its ties to its traditions and history within the context of day-to-day leisure activities: “Some features of songs and singing among the working-classes illustrate better than anything else both their contact with older traditions and their capacity for assimilating and modifying new material to their established interests.”

Hoggart, however, generally avoided romanticizing this oral community. His recollections were mixed and equivocal as he mentioned not only the gentle and nurturing aspects of working-class culture but also its more vulgar aspects: “Listen to [the

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16 Hoggart, 44.
17 Hoggart, 21.
18 Hoggart, 27.
19 Hoggart, 78.
working class] speaking of their sexual adventures and plans; [and] you are likely to feel smothered by the boring animality, the mongrel-dogs-rutting-in-alleyways quality. It is a quality which owes as much to an insensitivity in relations as to a freedom from hypocrisy. To each class its own forms of cruelty and dirt; that of working-class people is sometimes of a gratuitously debasing coarseness. Nevertheless the orality of working class culture (including its vulgar aspects) was indispensable to its functioning as a community of shared values and shared lived experiences. This perspective evokes Leonard Bloomfield’s work on Speech-Communities in which he claimed that group of people “interact by means of speech” and that this is the most important kind of social cohesion – even more so than economic or political or groupings.

Stuart Hall became the director of the CCCS in 1969 following Hoggart’s departure and his incumbency marked a profound change in British cultural studies. Hall was born in Jamaica in the early 1930s to middle-class conservative parents; he earned a scholarship to Oxford in 1951 and set off for England. In 1964, Hoggart invited him to serve as his deputy at the CCCS. Hall was acutely aware of the need for cultural discourse to ask both theoretical and political questions, and so he became a progressive activist as well as an academic. Hall’s directorship facilitated a shift in direction for the CCCS, towards the analysis of mass culture. Since that culture was overwhelmingly visual, he also helped shift its focus in that direction by encouraging the analysis of movies, television, and fashion. Under Hall’s directorship, work began on audience

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20 Hoggart, 124.
21 Hoggart, 77.
reception of the mass media, the consumption of commodities, and, most significantly, youth subcultures.

In the 1970s, researchers at the CCCS began examining the visual "performances" of youth groups such as "punks," "mods," and "skinheads" and began to read them as a form of symbolic resistance to the dominant cultural system. Researchers like Dick Hebdige saw subcultures as a strategy for youth groups to "renegotiate their position" and make a cultural and social space for themselves. Youth subcultures came to be seen by those at the CCCS as a symbolic response to the decline of the traditional working class culture praised by Hoggart and others. These subcultures attempted to reproduce traditional notions of working class community while simultaneously embracing modern consumer society. They did this not through oral traditions but through the visual strategy of "style." Consequently, the researcher's job was to decode this style by observing and deciphering its meaning.

The importance of the visual in the ethnographic techniques at the CCCS was first evident in Phil Cohen's "Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community" (1972), originally published in the second issue of the Centre's journal, Working Papers. Cohen's work, instrumental to subsequent CCCS research, studied British urban youth, and focused on strategies that allowed subordinate groups of youth to construct their own cultural meanings. These social groups defined themselves through their distinctive beliefs and practices, social relations, institutions, and, most importantly, by their display of material objects. A colleague of Cohen's at the CCCS, Steve Butters, noted that while there was no formal methodology for the work being done on subcultures at CCCS,

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24 Turner, 103.
there was a set of principles called the “Participant Observation Paradigm” (POP). This research methodology involved the observer studying a group as an active participant. The vocabulary of the visual was dominant in “Participant Observation” as the ethnographer “enters ‘the field’ to observe at close hand ‘how it works’.”

As Butters put it, the observer functions by practicing a childlike “open gaze” of attentiveness; or by repeatedly shifting his observational site.... He must constantly develop his “grounds for watching” what he is working on, so as to discover more in it, or alongside it. ...whether he has a clear rationale for looking at events, in terms of an appropriate perspective which will help to characterize them....

Objective detachment was still thought to be achievable through copious notes which could be “scanned” later for observations and codings. This methodology was thus highly visual – a point underscored by Butters’s use of visual tropes such as “gaze,” “watching,” and “scanned.” It was questionable methodology however, both as an objective way of looking and in the value assumptions it imposed on subcultural practices and symbols.

Pierre Bourdieu claimed that academics occupy a particular social space, a space that is a social universe unto itself; consequently a “scholastic point of view” or “scholarly vision” is inseparable from this “scholastic situation.” Hence, what is perceived from

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26 Butters, 267.
27 Butters, 265.
28 The scholastic situation refers to the economic, social, and cultural conditions that exist inside academe and that are in fact necessary for scholastic work to be accomplished in the first place. This includes the existence of paid tenured teaching positions, the economic means to concentrate on research, the network or community of academics to support such endeavors and a culture that values and puts pride in academic work for its own sake (Pierre Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, c2000], 54, 128).
observing a subculture is partially a product of the researcher’s own subjectivity and social circumstances. This phenomenon became unavoidable in British cultural studies: indeed researchers were encouraged to let personal politics play itself out in their work. This is an example of what Bourdieu calls a “scholastic fallacy” as the motivations that were seen in a subcultures were actually a reflection of the researcher’s own subjectivity.29

The way in which scholarly vision may be influenced by subjective politics can be seen in the history of British urban ethnographic observation itself. The fallacy of “scholastic vision” can be clearly seen in the “Mass-Observation” experiments of the 1930s, which set out to produce an ethnographical record of the British working class’s social behavior. Historian Peter Gurney claims that “this quest was highly voyeuristic,” as researchers exercised a “scoptophilic” gaze over their subjects, reproducing upper class representations of the working class as a highly sexualized group. Gurney emphasizes that Mass-Observation’s “project was shot through with an intentionality informed by particular class and gender assumptions that need to be properly unraveled.”30 Ethnographic researchers have traditionally taken their vision to be neutral and empty of preconceptions; this, however, is an illusion. Researchers at the CCCS were just as susceptible to this error as they too began to rely profoundly on the visual.

The shift of attention at the CCCS to a “looking” at youth subcultures first began with Paul Willis’s Profane Culture (1978), based on his 1972 dissertation, which was one of the most influential studies on youth subcultures to be produced at the CCCS.31 It was an

31 Dworkin, 155.
ethnographic analysis of two working-class subcultures: motorcycle boys and hippies, both of which contested the values of the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{32} While the radicalism of these groups was eventually appropriated by the culture industry, Willis saw a valuable political lesson even in their defeat.\textsuperscript{33} These groups had a creative and subversive dimension even in the face of the oppressive forces “immobilizing” them.\textsuperscript{34} Indirect resistance came to be the dominant trait of subcultures, which was manifested through style rather than more overt forms of protest.

*Resistance Through Rituals* (1974) and Willis’s second book *Learning to Labour* (1977), both advanced this understanding of subcultural resistance.\textsuperscript{35} *Learning to Labour* was an ethnographic “snapshot” of the cultural experiences of a specific group of working class boys living through the transition between school and work.\textsuperscript{36} This work serves as the prime example of a case-study of youth subcultures; however, the broader methodological approach of *Resistance Through Rituals* remained “the Centre’s quintessential statement on subcultures.”\textsuperscript{37} It was this latter work that set the theoretical groundwork for the CCCS’s shift towards studying the visuality of youth subcultures.

The first chapter of *Resistance Through Rituals*, “Subcultures, Cultures and Class,” outlined the overall theoretical approach of the project, which was that cultures, even working class cultures, were not homogenous, but consisted of fragmented social groups that possessed their own “distinct patterns of life” and gave “expressive form to their

\textsuperscript{32} Dworkin, 155.  
\textsuperscript{33} Willis, in this way, recalls E. P. Thompson’s approach of “history from below,” and the notion that even failed acts of resistance have much to teach contemporary social action.  
\textsuperscript{34} Dworkin, 157.  
\textsuperscript{35} Although *Learning to Labour* was published before *Profane Culture*, it is a later work.  
\textsuperscript{37} Dworkin, 164.
social and material life-experience."  

Such "maps of meaning" distinguished subcultures from each other and the parent culture for both their members and for outsiders. The focus of concern was to show how these maps were understood, interpreted and experienced by the subcultures themselves and encourage researchers to re-create these maps through participant-observation.

In participant-observation the researcher dealt "first, with the most immediate aspect - the qualitative novelty of Youth Culture.... [and then] with the most visible aspects of social change which were variously held to be responsible for its emergence." For example, Hebdige observed that punks did not merely respond to the British social decline of the late 1970s, but "dramatized" it. Indeed punk as a "style" was a visual articulation of the social and economic travails facing British youth at the time. This interpretation of "style" recalls Benjamin's concept of "ur-phenomena," whereby the total historical character of a historical period can be revealed more profoundly through an image than it can be through a descriptive and critical-reflexive diegesis of itself. For example, some photographs of specific events instantaneously convey the spirit or mood of the time to the viewer, far more effectively than a verbal description would.

John Clarke, a researcher at the CCCS and a key contributor to Resistance Through Rituals, wrote that style "stands apart - a visible construction, a loaded choice. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read." Hence, a subculture's "style objectifies the group's self-image": it is by appearance that members distinguish and project their group

38 Cited in Turner, 103.
40 Dworkin, 154.
41 Clarke, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview," 17 (Emphasis in original).
42 Hebdige, Subculture, 85.
44 Hebdige, Subculture, 101.
identity. But the approach to subcultures outlined in *Resistance Through Rituals* also situated youth subcultures in terms of both the parent culture (that is the working class culture of parents) and the dominant culture. Subcultures were above all visually “coded” representations of conflicts and contradictions affecting the working class as a whole. Basing their approach on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, the researchers in *Resistance Through Rituals* argued that the struggles of subcultures could be folded into a grand historical narrative of the British class struggle. Subcultures were taken to be expressions of the larger working class struggle; what needed attention was the particular form this expression took.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige explicitly shifted the emphasis from “class politics” to the “politics of style.” This was, crucially, a move away from the privileging of oral expression Hoggart had engaged in and a move towards a concern with visual expressions of identity. Drawing heavily on the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes, Hebdige’s study of styles more profoundly represented a shift of emphasis from diachronic, lived experience to synchronic expressions of identity. Unlike orality, style was read not as the expression of “lived-lives”; it was a signifying system that visually communicated cultural belonging. The ethnographer’s job was consequently to decode the hidden meanings in the subculture’s identity by examining its style. Hebdige elaborated: “the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly

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46 Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci provided a compelling framework for analyzing society and culture, which had a significant influence on the CCCS. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony postulated an understanding of how a society is bound together without direct authoritative control. The dominant group exercises their control over the subordinate classes not simply through their access to force, but through their ability to create consent through “intellectual and moral leadership.” Significantly, culture is the location in which this struggle over hegemony occurs (Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. Davis Forgacs [New York: New York University Press, 2000], 249).
by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style.”48 For example, the Mods (see Figure 1) “fetishizing” of their appearance was viewed as an act of resistance by way of an inverted symbolic representation of the parent culture: “The mod dealt his [sic] blows by inverting and distorting the images (of neatness, of short hair) so cherished by his employers and parents, to create a style, which while being overtly close to the straight world was nonetheless incomprehensible to it.”49 Although Hebdige felt unable to call this subcultural style politically successful, as it did not significantly influence the social or cultural status quo, he did interpret it as a “romantic victory” by virtue of its symbolic resistance through being-seen.50

By focusing intently on the subcultural use of the visual, Hebdige and other researchers actually reproduced the subculture’s fetishization of the image. This is evident in Tony Jefferson’s meticulous description of the Teds’ (see Figure 2) style of dress:51

Originally, the Edwardian suit was introduced in 1950 by a group of Savile Row tailors who were attempting to initiate a new style. It was addressed, primarily, to the young aristocratic men about town. Essentially the dress consisted of a long,
narrow - lepelled, waisted jacket, narrow trousers (but without being ‘drainpipes’), ordinary toe-capped shoes, and a fancy waistcoat. Shirts were white with cutaway collars and ties were tied with a ‘windsor’ knot. Headwear, if worn, was a trilby. The essential changes from conventional dress were the cut of the jacket and the dandy waistcoat....

The later modifications to this style by the Teds were the bootlace tie; the thick-creped suede shoes (Eton clubman chukka type); skin-tight, drainpipe trousers (without turn-ups); straighter, less waisted jackets; moleskin or satin collars to the jackets; and the addition of vivid colours. The earlier sombre suit colours occasionally gave way to suits of vivid green, red or pink and other ‘primitive’ colours.... Blue-suede shoes, post-Elvis, were also worn. The hair-style also underwent transformation: it was usually long, combed into a ‘D-A’ with a boston neck-line (straight cut), greasy, with side whiskers and a quiff. Variations on this were the ‘elephant’s trunk’ or the more extreme ‘apache’ (short on top, long at sides).  

Jefferson takes care to place each style element within its pop culture context and its special significance in the style as a whole was thoroughly explicated. Just as the subcultures themselves were consumed with the visual significance of their dress, so too was the researcher. Hebdige’s description of the mods also makes this very clear:

The life style to which the mod ideally aspired revolved around night clubs and city centres which demanded a certain exquisiteness of dress. .... His ideal model-mentor for this style would be the Italian mafiosi-type so frequently depicted in crime films shot in New York.... Alternatively, an equally acceptable, perhaps even more desirable image was projected by the Jamaican hustler (or later “rudie”) whom the mod could see with increasing regularity as the decade [1970s] wore on operating with an enviable “savoir-faire” from every available street-corner. Thus the pork-pie hat and dark glasses were at one time essential mod accessories....

Another and perhaps more pervasive influence can be traced to that of the indigenous British gangster style, the evolution of which coincides almost exactly with that of the mods.  

The visual was similarly important for other subcultures: “Fights which ensued when individuals insulted Teds are explicable in terms of a defence of the self and the cultural extension of the self symbolised in their dress and general appearance.” Indeed the Ted viewed his own appearance as synonymous with his identity as a member of the group. Researchers never critically questioned this visual regime as a process deeply implicated with forms of societal power other than class (such as gender and race) but took stylistic appearance as a meaningful form of resistance neutral to extraneous factors. According to the editors of Resistance through Rituals, the visibility of subcultures was inseparable from their political and historical class role. Style was implicitly conceived as an epiphenomenon of the deeper historical experience of class.

Visible characteristics, which distinguished the subculture from the norms of the parent culture, were seen to be based on political choices. These characteristics constituted a transgressive visual spectacle. They were, in Hebdige’s words, “profane articulations,” that “are often and significantly defined as ‘unnatural.’” For CCCS researchers, “style” allowed subcultures to articulate an experience that relied on class as the primary form of collective agency. Dick Hebdige’s frequent use of the term “spectacular subculture” signifies visual resistance, which occurs in the interstices of a modern capitalist society, which is itself, a “society of spectacle.” Guy Debord writes in

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53 The mods appeared in London in 1964. They were very self-conscious of their style as a parodic display of the consumption and expropriation of “modern” commodities. The Italian scooter became one of the most famous mod icons (Hebdige, “The Meaning of Mod,” 89).


57 Hebdige, Subculture, 91-2.
The Society of the Spectacle, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." In other words, in late capitalist society visual representations become increasingly important in societal relationship. 58 Hebdige noted that "the success of the punk subculture as spectacle [is] its ability to symptomatize a whole cluster of contemporary [class] problems." 59 It was this transgressiveness that "magically" linked subcultural style to expressions of a communal class experience. 60 This transgressiveness was in turn accomplished by inverting or subverting dominant cultural meanings in highly visual ways.

Researchers interpreted a subculture’s use of commercial commodities as an important tool in the challenging of cultural hegemony. In simple terms, subcultures created style through their consumption of goods produced by mass culture, which were already cultural signs or symbols with their own “meanings, associations, [and] social connotations.” 61 The strategy employed by members of subcultures was then to take these signs and “intensify or exaggerate or isolate” their meanings and thereby change them. 62 Subcultures combined these signs “according to a ‘secret’ language or code, to which only members of the group [possessed] the key.” 63 The display of commodities did not in itself produce style; rather it was the organization of signs according to a code that reflected the values of the group that made style. Nevertheless, the organization of

59 Hebdige, Subculture, 87 (My emphasis).
these signs was to be read visually. This to-be-looked-at-ness was above all the defining characteristic of “style.”

Hebdige invoked the idea of “bricolage,” whereby subcultures appropriated commercially produced commodities for their own ends.64 These commodities were combined in ways not intended by their producers in order to produce oppositional meanings.65 Through bricolage, subcultures engaged in a form of symbolic resistance to both the dominant culture and the parent working-class culture.66 While subcultures strived for “novelty,” they moved from originality and resistance to commodification and ideological dispersion of their style, as subcultural artifacts fed back into the commodity producing industries.67

“Style” was not only defined by those who displayed it, but also by the parent culture who pictured it as an Other through negative media representations. The media identified subcultures as visual metaphors for “youth” as a whole. For the media the “image of youth often carried with it the threat of ‘what could go wrong.’”68 Hebdige describes the creation of representative images of social groups by the media:

...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

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64 *Bricolage* was originally coined by Claude Levi-Strauss referring to “the re-ordering and re-contextualisation of objects to communicate fresh meanings, within a total system of significances, which already includes prior and sedimented meanings attached to the objects used” (John Clarke, “Style,” in *Resistance Through Rituals*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson [London: Routledge, 1975], 177).
65 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 103.
66 Jean Baudrillard has noted, culture involves the production of symbols, but every cultural symbol is recycled from an earlier form and is therefore a *simulation*. Subcultural styles thus took this notion to its logical and spectacular conclusion (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995]).
people a ‘picture’ of their own lives which is ‘contained’ or ‘framed’ by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it.  

Clarke used as an example the skinhead (see Figure 3), whose “image [was] presented to the [media] audience with wholly negative connotations.” In this way the media’s negative representations served to provide the nationalist discourse with a series contrasting images, which helped define and delimit normalcy.  

Yet, despite this ground-breaking work, researchers of subcultures at the CCCS were trapped into limited ways of seeing. The intellectual concerns of British cultural studies were not only inflexibly class-based, but also focused implicitly on white, working-class, male subjects. The visual approach at the CCCS thus failed to “see” other cultural subjects, particularly women. In their 1976 paper, “Girls and Subcultures: An Exploration,” Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber asked two critical questions: “Are girls... really not active or present in youth subcultures? Or has something in the way this research is done rendered them invisible?” McRobbie and Garber answered the first question by observing that girls were active within youth cultures but often in much different ways than boys. They answered the second question in the affirmative. Women at the CCCS in the 1970s recognized that female cultural subjects were nowhere to be seen and that both the groups and the topics studied had an “unambiguously masculine prerogative.” Male-centered studies of style consequently “unconsciously reproduce[d] their subculture’s repressible [sic] attitude towards women.” McRobbie also noted that

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69 Hebdige, Subculture, 85 (My emphasis).
70 Clarke, “Style,” 186.
73 Turner, 165.
“This is not to say that women are denied style, rather that the style of subcultures is primarily that of its men. Linked to this are the [subculture’s] collective celebrations of itself through its rituals of stylish public self-display and of its (at least temporary) sexual self-sufficiency.”

Subcultures relied on phallogocentric strategies of style to display their identity. These strategies were implicitly male as they emphasized vigorous independence coupled with masculine conceptions of personal agency. Subcultures drew on patriarchal meanings and male-oriented notions of resistance by mimicking popular movie images of the lone manly protagonist (for example, the cowboy, the gangster, or the private eye) who needed no one and survived by his tenacity and wits.

McRobbie and Garber’s paper marked the beginning of feminist interventions in these discussions of subcultures at the CCCS. *Women Take Issue* (1978) was a further critique of the middle-class, male bias of the Centre. The Editorial Group responsible for this groundbreaking volume articulated the barriers it faced: “Women’s continuing ‘invisibility’ in the journal *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, and in much of the intellectual work done within CCCS (although things are changing), is the result of a complex of factors, which although in their particular combination are specific to our own relatively privileged situation, are not unique to it.”

*Women Take Issue* was the work of a collective, including Angela McRobbie, Charlotte Brundson, Dorthy Hobson, Janice Winship, and Rachel Harrison, who came together at the CCCS as the Women’s Studies Group in 1974 with the mission of investigating and analyzing women as cultural agents. It was an important opening into the study of the cultural lives of women and of

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74 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 117.
75 Editorial Group, Women’s Studies Group Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies University of Birmingham, *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women’s Subordination* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 7 (My emphasis).
“feminine” cultural forms (such as teenage and women’s magazines). The Women’s Studies Group stressed that the work at the CCCS, even the avant-garde studies of subcultures, contributed to patriarchal oppression by relegating women to “relative obscurity.”

Over a decade after the initial feminist inroads in British cultural studies, McRobbie put forth a more developed critique of the masculinized approach to subcultures in *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991). Her critique of *Learning to Labour* paid particular attention to its romanticization of the “lads” and its neglect of the fact that their rebellious creativity reproduced misogynist attitudes: “unambiguously degrading to women is the [way the study reports without comment the] language of aggressive masculinity through which the lads kick against the oppressive structures they inhabit – the text is littered with references of the utmost brutality.” McRobbie found a prime example of this in an account of classroom behavior:

> Her being labelled a ‘cunt’ undermines one teacher’s authority. Boredom in the classroom is alleviated by mimed masturbating of a giant penis and by replacing the teacher’s official language with a litany of sexual ‘obscenities’. The lads demonstrate their disgust for and fear of menstruation by substituting ‘jam rag’ for towel at every opportunity.  

Here Willis failed to comment on “the [sexual] violence underpinning such imagery.” Neither did he acknowledge the cruelty of the boys’ sexual double standard or problematize the way “images of sexual power and domination” were used as a defensive ploy by “the lads.”

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76 Schulman, 51-71.  
77 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 21.  
78 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 21.
to convey the agency of the boys to resist authority—but chose to read it against the grain to reveal the way in which hostility to women was imbedded in both the boys' behavior and the study's account of it. While the passage valorized boys as agents of resistance, it silenced other agents, specifically women. The author's admiration for the lads' "subversion" blinded him to the sexist aspects of the boys' behavior. He presented the scene as an uncomplicated image of youth's resistance against traditional expectations of growth into manhood.

What, however, would an examination of issues that did pay attention to women look like? Or, as McRobbie put it, "Where girls are visible, what are their roles and do these reflect the general subordination of women in culture?" Observing girls who were pushed to the periphery of sight—such as the "teddy-girls" of the 1950s, and the "motorbike girl," "mod girl" and the "hippy" of the 1960s (see Figures 4)—would serve to answer these questions. Such observations would, for example, show that as the mod unisex style gave way to the ambiguous sexuality of the hippie, "both women themselves and femininity as a representational form became more acceptable within the prevailing vocabulary of youth subcultures." Furthermore, McRobbie proposed that women living within youth subcultures were also influenced by stylistic regimes:

Participation was almost wholly reliant on wearing the right clothes, having the right hairstyle and going to the right clubs. With this combination right, the girl was a mod. Like her male counterpart, the mod girl demonstrated the same fussiness for detail in clothes, the same over-attention to appearance. Facial styles emphasized huge, darkened eyes and body-style demanded thinness.

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79 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2.
80 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 7.
81 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 7.
This, however, had been completely neglected by male researchers at the CCCS mainly because the role women played had to be excavated from beneath the surfaces of styles—something the researcher’s visual approach simply was not concerned with.

McRobbie, and the other women researchers at the CCCS, revealed that girls created distinctive cultures, not in public spaces, but in the private spaces of the home and bedroom: “The important question may not be the absence or presence of girls in male subcultures, but the complementary ways in which young girls interact among themselves and with each other to form a distinctive culture of their own.”\(^{83}\) The “orthodox” approaches to youth subculture that focused on public displays of style accordingly failed to see a whole world of girl culture: “the rituals of trying on clothes, and experimenting with hairstyles and make-up were home-based activities. It might be suggested that girls’ culture of the time operated within the vicinity of the home, or the friends’ home. There was room for a great deal of the new teenage consumer culture within the confines of the girls’ bedrooms.”\(^{84}\) This “domestic” culture of leisure and consumerism, hidden from the prying eyes of the male researcher, involved the creation of styles within intimate groups of girls. Male researchers at the CCCS may have overlooked these cultural activities, but girls had long been targeted and marketed to, through commodities like girls’ comics and magazines with “feminine” content containing articles on fashion, pop music and romance.\(^{85}\) This new research began to reveal the extent to which, in the modern configuration of public and private spheres at least, boys participated in more public and overt displays of style while girls gravitated to more private forms of expression.

\(^{82}\) McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 9.
\(^{83}\) McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 11.
\(^{84}\) McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 6.
\(^{85}\) McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 11.
Girls, like boys, McRobbie continued, manufactured their own unique styles through innovative techniques of consumption. However, while male subcultures deployed style for public display, female subcultures encouraged an intimate dialogue and discussion between close-knit groups of friends: "They prefer fashion, beauty and ‘female’ interests to the team spirit of the club. That is, their culture finds expression partly in and around the commodities focused directly on aspects of femininity. They prefer these to the official youth club ‘activities’."

McRobbie noted that there were girls who also participated in spectacular public displays in the subcultures, but they remained the exception rather than the rule. Hence, the emphasis on the public spectacle of style by Hebdige and others reinforced both the idea of subcultures as a male domain and, at the same time, the street as an “arena” of male dominance: “It has always been on the street that most subcultural activity takes place... it both proclaims the publicisation of the group and at the same time ensures its male dominance.” The display of style on the street consequently reinforced the modern cultural dichotomy of public spaces being gendered masculine and of private spaces being gendered feminine. But moreover it deployed notions of display and ways of looking that were gendered in-and-of themselves.

In the decade between the publication of McRobbie and Garber’s article and the publication of Feminism and Youth Culture, a range of work was done which reinterpreted cultural practices that were previously devalued in British cultural studies, most notably, dance. McRobbie declared that “when dance has found its way into accounts of working-class culture, it has tended to be either derided as trivial or else

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86 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 42-58.
87 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 29.
taken as a sign of moral degeneration." For example, Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy*, saw dancing as a part of the culture of femininity, and therefore as transitory and inconsequential. He wrote: “Everything [girls choose] to do seems urban and trivial; it would be difficult to hold their attention for long to anything not part of the dream.” McRobbie countered that “The link between dance and youth subculture is reflective of how a crucial element in subcultural activity was played down, if not altogether ignored.”

Through the study of dance, McRobbie explored an alternate “feminine” mode of expression that contrasted with the overtly masculine display of subcultures. While dance is an artistic practice, it is also a social practice, a leisure activity and a visual means of social and sexual communication, “a way of speaking through the body.” McRobbie’s observation of dance reemphasized the potential for dialogue that exists within female youth subcultures: “Dance for girls represents a public extension of the private culture of femininity which takes place outside the worried gaze of the moral guardians and indoors in the protected space of the home.” This implies an interesting dichotomy: McRobbie equates the “gaze” (that is the visual) with the authoritarian patriarchal aspect of culture while “speaking through the body” suggests more democratic possibilities through feminine bodily communication.

Although dance was a means of conforming to the social and cultural expectations of the feminine, it also had the “ability to create a fantasy of change, escape, and of achievement for girls and young women who are otherwise surrounded by much more

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88 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 29.
89 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 195.
90 Hoggart, 45-6.
91 McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 196.
mundane and limiting leisure opportunities.” McRobbie interpreted dance as “an art, a representational form, a performance and a spectacle, it has an extremely strong, almost symbiotic relationship with its audience.... Images of dance have the effect of making people want to do it.” Like the experience of a spectator in the darkness of a cinema, the act of dancing is an immersive form of visual escapism “capable of transporting... the viewer away from the difficulties of everyday life.” However, there is an important difference between the fantasy afforded by cinema and that realized through dance. As McRobbie explained, “Dance operates as a metaphor for an external reality which is unconstrained by the limits and expectations of gender identity and which successfully and relatively painlessly transports its subjects from a passive to a more active psychic position.” Dance is obviously a visual performance, but it suggests the possibility of dialogue between dancer and audience. It is of an entirely different order of the visual than phallocentric subcultural forms of display and “looking” in male subcultures, which were extremely exclusionary.

The exclusionary elements in masculine ways of looking were also explored in feminist film theory. A discussion of this body of theory will perhaps facilitate our understanding of visuality’s role in the study of subcultures. Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) published in the film journal Screen, was a highly influential analysis of the gendered nature of film audiences and how they, in turn, watched. Mulvey drew on psychoanalytical accounts of the formation of the “self” in

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92 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 195-7.
93 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 192.
94 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 192-3.
95 McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 201.
96 Dennis Dworkin describes Screen as “an alternative approach to cultural studies” in the 1970s that closely examined “the ideological dimension of cultural practices, texts, and genres” (Dworkin, 144).
order to examine how popular Hollywood cinema reproduces the “male gaze.” Cinema, she argued, produces visual pleasure in two contradictory ways. The first is scopophilia: “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.” This concept of the controlling gaze requires the subordination and objectification of women. The second involves “developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect.” This refers to the connection fostered between the male character on the screen and the male audience member. It is this second aspect that has a relevance to our discussion of the visual relationship between male ethnographer and male subcultural member.

The subjectivity of the viewer, Mulvey argued, is a construction. Using Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror phase – which refers to a period in the development of the ego in which the child recognizes itself in the mirror – she suggested that, like the child, the film spectator identifies himself with the male character on the screen. This also articulates the visual relationship between the male researcher and the male subcultural subject. The researcher observing style idealized his object of study and identified subjectively with him (see our earlier discussion of the researcher’s projection of his own political perspective onto the subject). This was further evident in the fetishization of the details of the stylistic modes of dress, and the valorization of dramatic displays of resistance.

Feminist interrogations of the work on subcultures not only showed how visuality at the CCCS was gendered but it also showed that there were alternative ways of conceiving

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97 “Popular” is used here not in Hoggart’s sense of the word, but synonymously with mass cultural commodities.


99 Mulvey, 25.


101 Mulvey, 6-18.
culture – such as the emphasis on orality – that were not so implicated with male power. The intervention of feminists also allowed other vectors of analysis to be pursued at the CCCS. The most important of these was race. Just as women had not been seen initially, so it was realized in the late 1970s that other subjects had become “invisible” in British cultural studies because of their racial difference. Work at the CCCS thus came to examine raced ways of looking. This drew on a long and complex history of the relationship between race and vision. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European scientists developed a vision of the natural world that was profoundly gendered and racialized. The scientific gaze was anything but neutral, as Londa Schiebinger demonstrates in her book *Nature’s Body*, rather it was profoundly shaped by preconceptions about gender and race. The scientist organized his work in terms of these sexual and racial notions, mapped what he saw through his scientific gaze, and made his findings confirm these presumptions. ¹⁰²

In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), the first publication from the CCCS to discuss racial issues, Stuart Hall observed how in the late 1970s the media’s construction of the “mugging” crisis in London and the social subject of the “mugger” were conflated with cultural perceptions of racial minorities and broader social problems. The racially circumscribed image of the “mugger” (the young, black male) provided a convenient scapegoat for the dominant white cultural order to reassert itself through a policy of “cracking down” on crime. The next important work on race to emerge from the CCCS, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in ‘70s Britain* (1982),¹⁰³ was a collection of essays written in the aftermath of Thatcher’s 1979 victory and the race riots of the early

1980s.\textsuperscript{104} This work was built on the foundations laid by Hall in \textit{Policing the Crisis} and it too emphasized the need to reexamine race and racist images in a historical and social context, rather than viewing them as universal constants across the range of human experience.\textsuperscript{105} Both works explicitly identified their projects as “raced” interventions in British cultural studies.

This newfound emphasis on raced ways of seeing did not arrive in a vacuum. The 1970s marked a period of painful social and economic disenfranchisement for black people in Britain due to widespread economic hardship. Racial conflict was exacerbated by the increasing tendency of white Britons to see black Britons as outsiders incapable of assimilation. The result was the entrenchment of the disadvantages faced by blacks. Contrary to white Britons’ belief that black people were treated the same way as whites in every respect, Britons of Asian and West Indian descent continued to face discrimination in employment, housing, and education.\textsuperscript{106} As a result of this “crisis,” a cultural and social discourse emerged in an attempt to manage the problem of race relations. In due course, this discourse on race constructed a knowable image of blacks based on white fears and anxieties. It was this image that CCCS observers, operating with the aid of a new postcolonial theory, began to consider and dissect. Assisted by Said’s \textit{Orientalism} in 1978, postcolonial thinkers had taken up the idea that the formation of a body of knowledge concerning the colonial (or raced) subject and the consequent construction of a stable “knowable” representation of this raced “other” is crucial to the

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\textsuperscript{103} Paul Gilroy, Pratibha Parmar, Hazel V. Carby, and Errol Lawrence were among the contributors. \\
\textsuperscript{104} Dworkin, 180. \\
\textsuperscript{105} Like \textit{Women Take Issue}, this was a collection of essays written at the Centre. \\
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workings of colonial (or racial) power.\textsuperscript{107} As postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha put it, "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘Other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible."\textsuperscript{108} Researchers on race at the CCCS and postcolonial thinkers elsewhere emphasized the importance of recognizing how conventional understandings of race rested on images that serve to reify racial prejudices.

The sociologist Paul Gilroy was one of the most important CCCS intellectuals to provide an exegesis of these new meanings of race during this period. In ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’ (1987), Gilroy critically analyzed the relationship between race in Britain and the construction of a British national cultural identity.\textsuperscript{109} Race, for Gilroy, does not correspond to “any biological or epistemological absolutes:” it is rather an “open political category.”\textsuperscript{110} But though race is a mutable category that is culturally contingent, it is nonetheless linked to skin colour – an emphasis on the visual that, as Bhabha suggested, served to secure “race” in what appeared to be a knowable structure (in that race could be seen), that reinforced existing power relationships.\textsuperscript{111} Gilroy’s idea that race could not be classified by any natural means (not even physiologically or genetically) thus opposed the prevalent power of the visual towards race in modern society.

Taking up the thread of inquiry begun in Policing the Crisis, Gilroy discussed the evolution of “race” as a policing problem during the mid 1970s, when blacks became associated with crime and urban centers. He asserted that “Britain’s ‘race’ politics were

\textsuperscript{108} Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question – the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” Screen vol. 24, 6 November-December 1983, 18-36.
\textsuperscript{109} Work done on this book was technically done after Gilroy had left the Centre however it is a clear extension of the work that he had done there.
quite inconceivable away from the context of the inner city which provides such foundations for the imagery of black criminality and lawlessness."  

This, in turn, produced a constellation of conceptual images that illustrated the racial anxieties of white Britannia. Rather than facilitating understanding of race relations, these images simplified and fixed racial concepts, closing off the possibility for further dialogue about race. For example, the power of the “image of the lone white child in a class full of blacks which was so central to that nightmare vision still makes this a theme a public political issue with great popular resonance.”

Such mental images belonged to a cultural visual field categorized by the authors of Policing the Crisis as a “public image” – an image that arises in contemporary culture in order to make sense of the world (see Mitchell’s useful diagram on the etymology of the image, Figure 5.1). Hall defined a public image as “a cluster of impressions, themes and quasi-explanations, gathered or fused together.” This visual representation is a powerful means of simplifying complex issues – such as race relations. Public images are “graphically compelling,” but, as Hall suggested, this is also their failing. They “stop short of serious, searching analysis,” and instead “they tend to appear in place of analysis – or analysis seems to collapse into the image.” In this way, the public image serves to “foreclose the problem.” This is the especially case where “further analysis threatens to go beyond the boundaries of a dominant ideological field” – in other words, where it disrupts dominant cultural ways of understanding and thinking.

111 Bhabha, 18-36.
112 Gilroy, 'There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,' 228.
What was important was how these “public images” of race traversed political divides. Gilroy observed that throughout the 1980s the British Left’s political strategy attempted to counter the Right’s monopoly on British patriotism by constructing an “alternative” national identity around the English working-man. British Leftist historians, most notably E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, attempted to locate the working man at the center of a “true” British cultural identity, yet this identity was unambiguously white (as can be seen in Thompson’s use of John Nelson’s dream image). Hence, “modern English cultural uniqueness” was conceived largely through the visual binary of black and white which, in turn, helped shape cultural idioms of “Britishness.” This explicitly visual way of conceiving and understanding race displaced earlier more plastic concepts: “Notions of the primitive and the civilised which had been integral to pre-modern understanding of ‘ethnic’ differences became fundamental cognitive and aesthetic markers in the processes which generated a constellation of subject positions in which Englishness, Christianity, and other ethnic and racialised attributes would finally give way to the [contemporary age’s] dislocating dazzle of ‘whiteness.’”

Indeed the power of visual representations of race overwhelmed any possibility of problematization through meaningful dialogue. While prior racial discourses had allowed some play and negotiation in the conception of race, the visual served to fix race into the poles of black and white. There could be little discussion of the nature of race when visual racial representations presented themselves as indisputably “true” by the very fact they could be seen.

These “new” conceptions of race and “Britishness” were primarily embodied in the form of popular media images. Appeals to a pure ethnic Britishness were combined with

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metonymic "public" images denoting Britishness (such as the Union Jack, Big Ben, or men with bowler hats) that may not have had a single concrete referent, but were what W.J.T. Mitchell calls "hyper-icons."\footnote{116} As the authors of \textit{Policing the Crisis} pointed out, "Together, these images produce and sustain an uncodified but immensely powerful, conservative sense of Englishness, of an English 'way of life', of an 'English' viewpoint which – it also, by its very density of reference, asserts – everyone shares to some extent."\footnote{117} Images of racial difference were excluded from this nationalist discourse, but when they were included, they frequently constituted a non-British Otherness by which to define a "true" national identity.

Gilroy used a specific example of the way the visual played out in racial/political discourse: the Conservatives' ethnic election poster of 1983. This poster was encoded with raced signifiers that could be read on several levels (see Figure 7). The poster's central message was a variation of the "one nation, one people" theme, and criticized Labour's treatment of blacks as a minority deserving "special" treatment. Gilroy explained: "the poster states that the category of citizen and the formal belonging which it bestows on its black holders are essentially colourless, or at least colour-blind."\footnote{118}

Clearly influenced by Barthes's semiotic decoding of popular cultural images that are vested with taken-for-granted meanings, Gilroy offered a deeper analysis of the visual signifiers in the poster.\footnote{119} While the poster's surface message purported to be "colour blind," Gilroy revealed an insidious underlying racism:

At this point the slightly too large suit worn by the young [black] man, with its unfashionable cut and connotations of a job interview, becomes a key signifier. It conveys what is being asked of the black readers as the price of admission to the colour-blind form of citizenship promised by the text.

Blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinct before real Britishness can be guaranteed. National culture is present in the young man’s clothing. Isolated and shorn of the mugger’s key icons – a tea-cosy hat and the dreadlocks of Rastafari – he is redeemed by his suit, the signifier of British civilization. The image of black youth as a problem is thus contained and rendered assimilable. The wolf is transformed by his sheep’s clothing.120

These “key icons” were of course used to visually signify particular representations of race. The very presence of black and Asian diasporas that overtly refused to conform (or could not because of their skin colour) to the national visual ideal represented a threat that had to either be ignored or defined outright as “non-British.” The field of cultural studies itself was not innocent of this racial myopia.

Gilroy felt that the cultural studies movement in Britain was inexcusably side-stepping race in favor of ethnic homogeneity. He declared, “I have grown gradually more and more weary of having to deal with the effects of striving to analyze culture within neat, homogeneous national units reflecting the ‘lived relations’ involved; with the invisibility of ‘race’ within the field and, most importantly, with the forms of nationalism endorsed by a discipline which, in spite of itself, tends toward a morbid celebration of England and Englishness from which blacks are systematically excluded.”121 In his later work, The Black Atlantic (1993), Gilroy argued that the connection of British cultural studies to an atavistic ethnic nationalism was to blame for this deficiency.122 Part of the problem was that culture was viewed not as “intrinsically fluid, changing, unstable and dynamic,” but

120 Gilroy, 'There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,' 59.
121 Gilroy, 'There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,' 12.
rather as a “natural” product of ethnically uniform social groups. In other words, British cultural studies, as it stood at the moment of Gilroy’s interrogation, was unable to conceive of its subject as anything but white.

Gilroy, as we have seen argued that the use of visual images tended to place race into an unquestioning framework that ran counter to an open, dialogue on race and ethnicity. But he did see one anti-racism campaign in late-1970s London as a successful subversion of these rigid visual representations of race. In 1977, the pop cultural forum provided by Rock Against Racism (RAR) allowed British youth (both black and white) to unite and give expression to the social disparities they witnessed and experienced under capitalism. Gilroy asserted that “RAR had allowed space for youth to rail against the perceived inequities of ‘Labour Party Capitalist Britain’” through the medium of popular music and poster art. The strength of RAR was its use of the visual, specifically poster art, to communicate its message:

More important still was the designers’ commitment to the power of looking, rather than reading, as a source of political feelings and consciousness. The fractured form of the montages in particular reproduced the fragments of RAR’s own contradictory constituency while conveying the discontinuity and diversity of the complex social and political process in which a growing British authoritarianism was being generated. In the visual and verbal rhetoric of both RAR and the punks, racism was now more than a symbol.

According to Gilroy, seeing the poster was itself a transgressive act (see Figure 6). The gaze of the viewer is never transparent but is always shaped by cultural understandings of race that she or he is exposed to day-to-day. Since the viewer’s vision is inherently

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124 Gilroy, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,’ 133.
125 Gilroy, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,’ 128 (My emphasis).
"raced," looking at the poster was therefore a subversion of preconceived racist conceptions.

Gilroy thus proposed that "the white reader who does look at this poster thereby puts themselves in a different category from those who will not look... the poster suggests that by the act of looking at the slogan and absorbing its message, anti-racism is created and racism itself abolished." The photomontage of popular images presented on the RAR poster subverted the individual "intended" meanings of these images and created new meanings. It deployed a form of what Benjamin called "thinking-in-pictures" (Bilddenken), whereby understanding emerges spontaneously from the act of looking, rather than through didactic explanation. The success of the RAR poster campaign can thus be summarized as the use of visuality to encourage an epistemological questioning of racist images and conceptions.

More recently, Gilroy has declared that the real agent of historical, cultural and political change is an international black expressive culture. He points to a set of expressive and artistic "subversions" by the black community in Britain that offset the nationalist cultural politics of exclusion. This culture takes a visual form, but also an oral one. Two of the most important outlets for this black expressiveness reside in the British visual arts and black music. In the cheekily-titled essay "Wearing your art on your sleeve," which appeared in Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture (1990), Gilroy calls attention to the way in which artistic expression was played out through the graphic art on record sleeves. This art used visual signs and codes to convey a sense of

126 Gilroy, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack,’ 141.
128 Gilroy, Small Acts, 79.
the black experience, and had a complex inter-textual relationship with the music it packaged:

The text and images found on sleeves existed in relation to the music they enclosed but these different dimensions of communication had a significant measure of independence from each other. Together they constituted an intricate commodity that fused different components of black cultural and political sensibility in an unstable and unpredictable combination. In the 1960s and 1970s, black political discourse migrated to and colonized the record sleeve as a means towards its expansion and self-development.129

Musicians were often able to use record sleeve art “to collude with their preferred audiences in telling ways.” Through visual codes and images, artists were able to give voice to a political and historiographical discourse that was largely ignored in mainstream popular culture at the time. One of the most important ideas communicated through these means was the re-historicizing of race. The illustrations on record sleeves frequently focused on images that were symbolic to black history, yet they grounded themselves in the present by referencing contemporary culture (see Figures 8.1 to 8.4):

For example, the prevalence of images of ancient Egypt during the 1960s and 1970s proved to be an important means for communicating pan-African ideas in an inferential, populist manner. It is worth noting that, appropriated in this way, the ‘traditional’ imagery of ancient Egypt was not counterposed to views of ‘modern’ reality but rather presented in a way that emphasized its continuity with contemporary technological and scientific developments.

It is noteworthy that, although these images are still part of a visual culture that supports African-American music, they were used in a number of rather different ways during the 1980s. One recent vision mediates the heritage of Nile Valley civilizations by inserting the borrowed and ‘blackened’ image of Indiana Jones, the superhuman hero from Steven Spielberg’s adventure films, between the cartouche and the viewer.130

129 Gilroy, Small Acts, 240.
Gilroy’s interpretation of the political use of visuality on record sleeves recalls earlier methods of reading subcultural “styles.” The “stylistic” images on record sleeves reinvented black history by combining it with symbols taken from modern consumer culture in a way comparable to subcultures’ use of *bricolage*. The result was a hybrity in these images that blurred the line between modern mass culture and a “silenced” black history – complicating the “familiar” with the “alien.” Such visual strategies provided “provisional” spaces, which necessitated an active decoding by the consumer/audience. This “folk art” allowed black artists to express a sense of lived experience and history beyond conventional cultural modes of “seeing,” which had either occulted black visual subjects completely or depicted them as stereotypes.\(^\text{131}\)

Elsewhere, Gilroy shows how other images were used as a means to subvert dominant modes of seeing. In 1988, Gilroy wrote a catalogue piece for the D-Max exhibition in London, which has since been reprinted in a longer version in *Small Acts*. The six black British photographers in D-Max collaborated and developed their art together over the course of two years. Their work collectively seeks to address “the meaning and status of blackness itself in contemporary Britain.”\(^\text{132}\) Many of their pieces aim to trouble the ways in which contemporary racism constructs Englishness and blackness as “mutually exclusive” categories.\(^\text{133}\) The D-Max article, as it is published in *Small Acts*, includes a photograph by Ingrid Pollard called “Work by Ingrid” which attempts to negotiate an interstitial passage between the poles of blackness and Britishness. Pollard’s photograph depicts a black woman (the photographer herself) sitting with her camera in front of a

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barbed wire fence, the rolling hills of the English country-side receding into the distance behind her (see Figure 9). Her posture is stiff as she looks off to the side of the frame apprehensively. Although Gilroy offers no comment on this work, its racial semiotic significance is clearly suggested in an article he penned two years later for The New Statesman (1990), which is also reprinted in Small Acts. In this article, “Art of Darkness,” Gilroy discusses the place of black art within the national oeuvre of English painting. “The British school” centers its aesthetic and cultural discourse on a national identity linked to the symbolic imagery of the English landscape. Given that this artistic discourse is implicated in the notion of a homogeneous, ethnically uniform national culture, Gilroy notes, “It becomes necessary to ask whether the aesthetic that underlies these suggestions would view blacks as a natural and acceptable presence in the English landscape it reveres?”\(^{134}\) Contemporary racist discourses, in contrast, “situate” blacks within British cities – in an image of “urban chaos” in which “dangerousness and hedonism” abounds.\(^ {135}\) The photograph depicting a black woman in the English countryside thus complicates conventional cultural idioms of blackness and “authentic” Englishness by juxtaposing these images in an iconoclastic strategy similar to that of the RAR poster. It compels an erasure of the separateness of its two constituents: the black photographer and the English countryside. The fact that the woman in the foreground is physically separated from the rolling landscape in the background re-emphasizes this questioning of the incongruity between blackness and Britishness.

In this same article Gilroy historicizes the ways in which black people have been visualized in the British cultural consciousness even before contemporary postwar

\(^{134}\) Gilroy, Small Acts, 80.
\(^{135}\) Gilroy, Small Acts, 80.
concerns over black settlement and urban crime. His example takes the form of Joseph Mallord William Turner’s famous painting “Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon coming on” (also known as “The Slave Ship”). Turner’s painting depicts a slave ship disgorging its gruesome cargo – the bodies of dead and dying slaves being swallowed up by a hostile sea. This painting, which was exhibited in London at time of the World Anti-slavery Convention of 1840, became symbolic of the national discourse of the time, calling into question the shape of Britain’s future: Turner “deploys the imagery of wrathful nature and of dying slaves as powerful means to highlight the degenerate and irrational nature of English civil society as it entered the 1840s.” But most importantly, the painting demonstrates how inextricably linked English artistic culture and aesthetics were to English reflections on race: “Thinking about England is being conducted through the ‘racial’ symbolism that artistic images of black people suffering provide. These images were not an alien or unnatural presence that somehow intruded into English life from the outside. They were an integral means with which England was able to make sense of itself and its destiny.” Hence, Gilroy suggests that this picture may serve as a historically-grounded challenge to the separation of blackness and Britishness. The result would be the creation of a “hybrid cultural heritage” in which the two poles were accepted as having deep ties to each other through a shared culture and history. Gilroy tentatively suggests that the historical narrative of Britain and the alterity of the black experience may be found to be not separate categories but actually one-and-the-same:

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136 Gilroy, Small Acts, 81.
137 Gilroy, Small Acts, 84.
...we may discover that our story is not the other story after all but the story of England in the modern world. The main danger we face in embarking on this difficult course is that these divergent political and aesthetic commentaries will remain the exclusive property of two mutually opposed definitions of cultural nationalism: one black, one white. Each has its own mystical sense of the relationship between blood, soil and seawater.\(^{138}\)

The breaking-down of this binary would also signal a deprivileging of whiteness, as race and ethnicity would no longer be perceived as the basis for British national identity. Blacks traditionally have no place in the construction of Britishness; however, they may now be revealed as in fact having an integral role in the make up of British cultural and historical identity.

Gilroy however is aware of the drawbacks of relying too heavily on the visual as a tool of cultural expression and subversion. For example, in his recent book *Between Camps* (2000), he critiques the proliferation of multi-racial images in contemporary consumer society. Despite the recent celebration of the “hyper-visibility” of racial diversity in popular images, he asserts that an underlying white “norm” remains against which these images are aesthetically judged. The result is a fetishization of blackness, as the images of beautiful black women and men are exoticized as an “other.” Gilroy elaborates on the racist preconceptions that remain entrenched in contemporary western culture, despite the new found emphasis on diversity:

The historic associations of blackness with infrahumanity, brutality, crime, idleness, excessive threatening fertility, and so on remain undisturbed [; however,] the appearance of a rich visual culture that allows blackness to be beautiful also feeds a fundamental lack of confidence in the power of the body to hold the boundaries of difference in place. It creates anxiety about the older racial hierarchies that made that revolutionary idea of black beauty oxymoronic, just as

it requires us to forget the political movement that made its acknowledgement imperative.\textsuperscript{139}

But while these older racist preconceptions are now disturbed and subverted by beauty being found in blackness, the unease caused by this recent inability to enforce traditional racial boundaries (such as white as desirable, black as undesirable) creates a need for a new racial and aesthetic discourse that delineates black beauty as exotic and different from that of white.\textsuperscript{140} The black body is no longer characterized as a repugnant object but it remains an alterity but in this discourse.

The black body is subordinated to the gaze of a primarily white mass culture, but while the aesthetics of this modern mass culture purport to be “multi-ethnic,” they are still Eurocentric. The black body is deemed a beautiful object through its exoticization as an other and exists as an object to give pleasure to the ostensibly white viewer.\textsuperscript{141} The gaze of mass culture fixes it as an aesthetically knowable and therefore controllable body. In such a visual regime the black body cannot be taken as an object of beauty in-and-of-itself, rather it is always othered. This pleasure-seeking way of looking still seeks to discipline the colonial or racial subject by imposing a set of criteria that place it within a framework of aesthetic knowledge. The black body, though it is now seen as an object of beauty, is still profoundly inscribed with the “social optics of race.”\textsuperscript{142}

Recently work by postcolonial theorists has outlined the visual mechanisms by which such images of racial difference are transformed into Otherness. Bhabha, for example, sees a functional relationship between pleasurable looking and Foucault’s conception of


\textsuperscript{140} This is a process similar to the psychoanalytic notion of “fetishism.”

\textsuperscript{141} An example of this is the controversial work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

\textsuperscript{142} Paul Gilroy, \textit{Between Camps}, 23.
surveillance as a form of societal control. Moreover, Bhabha sees this gaze as also part of the Lacanian impulse to look (the *scopic drive*) in the construction of subjectivity and its corresponding alterity. By looking, the individual constructs its own subjective identity in opposition to an Other through a process Lacan calls "Imagining." Judith Butler takes this point further noting that this process of privileging the specific subjectivity of the viewer is concealed within the western gaze: "within [western] culture the ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one which presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as if it were no perspective at all." Indeed it is a crucial aspect of the gaze that it presents itself as neutral, transparent and disembodied while simultaneously concealing its links to gender, race and a subjectivity. The critical analysis of this process is one of the key objectives of Gilroy's work, as we saw in his analysis of the Conservative campaign poster.

But if the visual is always influenced by forms of societal power, what alternative is there for the subordinated Other to express her or his own identity and experience? While visuality has provided thinkers on race in British cultural studies with an important means to critique images of race, Gilroy is wary of relying solely on visuality as a means to express identity since ways of seeing are so profoundly imbued with the physics of power. For example, in his discussion of record sleeve art, images are an auxiliary to the music they package. It is, he implicitly argues, through more oral forms of cultural expression that the marginalized may find more egalitarian means of expression and communication.

143 Bhabha, 18-36.
Both dance and music, as they are discussed by McRobbie and Gilroy respectively, invoke orality as a mode of communication.\textsuperscript{145} Gilroy's historical characterization of both music and dance within the black experience and community – specifically in slave society – emphasize a link to oral culture. Walter J. Ong, in \textit{Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word}, has argued that the audience interacts with the oral performer (of speech, music, or dance) and his or her performance is, consequently, shaped by this relationship. In this way orality is conducive to communication and a sense of "community" in that it encourages participation and dialogue (more so than visuality).\textsuperscript{146} Similarly, Gilroy observes, "The expressive cultures developed in slavery continue to preserve in artistic form needs and desires which go far beyond the mere satisfaction of material wants. In contradistinction to the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life, these expressive forms reiterate the continuity of art and life."\textsuperscript{147} Gilroy presents black art and culture (mainly in the form of music) as the products of the "lived relations" of black people. He sees this "lived-in" oral culture as a historical means of expressing experience, and more importantly, as a historical means of resistance against oppression. Hence his view of black culture has much in common with Hoggart's organic reading of working-class culture.

The chapter " 'Jewels Brought from Bondage': Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity" in \textit{The Black Atlantic} examines music and performance as a means of


\textsuperscript{145} There are clear parallels between McRobbie and Gilroy's respective perspectives and conclusions. They often reference each other's work, most notably concerning the place of music and dance culture. For example see McRobbie's "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity" in \textit{Postmodernism and Popular Culture} and "Recent rhythms of sex and race in popular music" in her most recent book \textit{In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music} (1999).

communicating the unspeakable racial terror of the slave experience. Music, Gilroy claims, “can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness. The power and the significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language.”

While music is a means of expressing the inexpressible, it is also instrumental to creating a transatlantic black diasporic identity.

In both *The Black Atlantic* and *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* he draws attention to contemporary black music’s transnational and transcultural genealogy by discussing musical genres such as Reggae and Hip-Hop.

The revaluation of orality and the apostasy of the visual through the work of McRobbie and Gilroy in a way represents a coming full circle in the intellectual history of British cultural studies. Hoggart and other early thinkers at the CCCS were acutely aware of culture as a “lived” and “felt” phenomenon that could not be understood completely by “looking.” Culture for them could not simply be read; it reposed in its living subjects who had to speak about their experiences. That is not to say that later on Hebdige and other observers of subcultures totally abandoned orality; they were still conscious of listening to their subjects. But, as this paper has demonstrated, they turned to visuality as the primary means of delineating their subjects.

Undeniably the intellectual trajectory of the CCCS has taken it back to orality, but this is not necessarily the orality of Hoggart. It is an orality fundamentally different from its earlier manifestation. The emphasis on the oral in the early history of British cultural studies at the CCCS, thorough the work of Hoggart and others, was intended to authorize

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the organic culture of the working class, and emphasize the shared community values and experience reflected in vernacular speech. This oral culture was nativist in that it rested on an ethnically reducible conception of the British working class and was—as to recall Gilroy’s memorable phrase—a “morbid celebration of England and Englishness.” It was the product of a different historical period, predating both second-wave feminism and the mass colonial migrations and racial awakening of the 1970s.

What is the ontological nature of this latter “orality”? According to Gilroy, the oral cultures of music and dance represent a rejection of modern modes of cultural communication, such as text and images. These oral forms are “actively reimagined in the present” while being simultaneously transmitted through history from the past. In other words, this orality draws on modes of communication (such as music and dance) that are pre-modern but that are acutely aware that they reside in a temporal state of post-modernity. This orality, as a rejection of the visual, is paradigmatic of the recent antiocularcentrism that Jay has asserted is characteristic of postmodernity.

Both Gilroy’s view of music and McRobbie’s analysis of dance signify oral modes of communication: dance is a “way of speaking through the body” and music is as “important as the gift of speech.”[152] Gilroy notes that “The oral character of the cultural setting in which the diapora musics have developed presupposes a distinctive relationship to the body.”[153] This connection between music and dance—sound and the body—is articulated further as “reggae, soul and hip-hop share a cultural pattern in which listening

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to music, [which is] inseparable from dancing to it, becomes an active social process.\textsuperscript{154}

Orality, as a form of communication, thus again becomes linked to notions of community, the body, and, of course, dialogue.\textsuperscript{155} Both dance and music, as they are discussed by McRobbie and Gilroy respectively, are forms of what philosopher John L. Austin refers to as "illocutionary acts" – intentional acts of communication.\textsuperscript{156}

It is through the discourse of cultural studies that both McRobbie and Gilroy implicitly see these oral forms of communication as facilitating dialogue and exchange. An ideal theoretical community for such oral communicative acts to occur has been postulated by Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the "dialogic" – a textual and/or social space wherein several voices are heard and yet no voice dominates.\textsuperscript{157} Bakhtin’s ideal speech situation is constituted by a plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices, with no possibility of a decisive resolution in the form of a "monologic" truth or single authoritative consensus.\textsuperscript{158} While ways of looking which, as we have seen, are overdetermined by the social architecture of power, the dialogic, in contrast, represents a location for oral modes of expression to occur without being dominated as much by the physics of power. Does then the CCCS represent a possible dialogic space for such oral expression and identities to be realized?

The answer is a cautious "yes." One of the key factors for making this possible has been the deconstruction of pre-existing structures of identity. The orality articulated by

\textsuperscript{154} Gilroy, The Black Atlantic, 215.

\textsuperscript{155} Ong notes that oral cultural expression is linked to ideas of community, corporality and the organic ways of conceiving while typographical (or text and visuality based) culture emphasizes the individual, the disembodied mind, and "Sparsely linear or analytic thought" (Ong, 40).


\textsuperscript{157} Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

\textsuperscript{158} G. Douglas Atkin and Laura Morrow "Dialogic Criticism" in Contemporary Literary Theory (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 223-4.
McRobbie and Gilroy is an attempt to suture together new identities based not on a priori essentialized structures (such as class, gender, or race) but on hybridized and improvised contingencies. In the ambiguous aftermath of feminism and critical race theory, British cultural studies has attempted to construct an intellectual space in which all voices can be heard and not only those of class, gender and race. This is not to say that it has always succeeded in this task, but other voices have found a place within this very tenuous "polyphonic heterogeneity."^{159}

In early 2000, McRobbie and Gilroy co-published a collection of articles on Hall’s intellectual contribution to British cultural studies entitled *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, a book they co-edited with Lawrence Grossberg.^{160} The title refers to the challenges facing British cultural studies both from within and without. The field’s future success or failure to resolve these challenges remains continually “without guarantees.” Nevertheless, tensions are woven into the very intellectual fabric of British cultural studies itself. Hall himself declared, “there is something at stake in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other important intellectual and critical practices. Here one registers the tension between a refusal to close the field, to police it and, at the same time, a determination to stake out some positions within it and argue for them. That is the tension.”^{161} Indeed such tensions have existed throughout the history of the CCCS, yet they have never conflicted to the point of theoretical or political aporia.

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Michel Foucault has used the term *parrhesia* to denote acts of communication that put the speaker at risk. These are “speech activities” that are linked to a certain social situation: it is the speaking of a social or political “truth” that puts the speaker itself in danger by provoking the response of the dominant order.\(^{162}\) This was the conscious intention of intellectuals at the CCCS, most famously under Hall’s directorship: to interrogate conventional cultural wisdom even in the face of great risk.

On June 27, 2002 *The Guardian* reported that the University of Birmingham administration had decided to liquidate their Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at the end of the academic year.\(^{163}\) As of the writing of this paper, this “restructuring” has brought the illustrious history of the CCCS “in its present form” to a close.\(^{164}\) This has led to the protest by a “who’s who” of intellectuals.\(^{165}\) However, there has been precious little ink spilled over the issue in the mainstream British press, a fact which is perhaps a sign of dark days ahead for cultural and media studies departments all over Britain. In 1993, during the waning of the Thatcher era, Norma Schulman speculated that there was “less danger that [the CCCS’s] adversarial thrust will be spent in this era [of neo-conservative politics] than there would be in a more egalitarian, populist, anti-elitist, and liberal age.”\(^{166}\) Given recent events, it appears she prophesied with uncanny accuracy. After five years of New Labour government the CCCS’s story may end in both silence and invisibility. However, the fact remains, the Centre for

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\(^{163}\) The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was merged with the department of Sociology in the late 1980s.

\(^{164}\) See Polly Curtis, “Birmingham’s cultural studies department given the chop,” *EducationGuardian.co.uk*, Thursday June 27, 2002.


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\(^{166}\) Schulman, 51-73.
Contemporary Cultural Studies has taught all of us (both inside and outside the academy) to hear and see in more revealing and telling ways.
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