

A study on the visual style and cultural identity of rock music in the 1960s–1970s

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Abstract. Based on Barthes' semiotic analysis model of *Mythologies*, combined with subculture and social identity theories, this paper adopts the case study method to research rock visual texts from the 1960s to the 1970s. In the first-level semiotic system, rock visual style generates symbolic rebellious language through the reconstruction of mainstream symbols, the disruption of signification structures, and the mediated resistance of the body. In the second-level system, the interaction between visual style and socio-cultural context enables young people to complete the social identity process of "categorization-identification-comparison", thus forming group identity. Eventually, it realizes symbolic resistance to the existing discourse system. Rock visual style is a cultural resource that can be continuously reinterpreted and recoded. It helps inspire young people to conduct self-construction through visual style and promote the continuous generation of the meaning of "rock and roll".

Keywords: rock visuals, identity, semiotics, rock and roll

1. Introduction

Rock and roll is not merely a musical genre, but a comprehensive cultural phenomenon spanning sound, image, body and ideology. Through musical expressions, the transmission of visual symbols, the advocacy of social movements and the shaping of lifestyles, it has profoundly influenced young generations around the world and evolved into a cultural force with independent thinking. The 1960s to the 1970s was a golden age for the vigorous development of rock culture, as well as a crucial stage for the gradual formation and evolution of its visual style. Throughout its development history, every evolution of rock music—whether it be progressive rock, punk, British pop or electronic rock—has triggered corresponding innovations in visual style [1]. The rock visual style of the 1960s and 1970s was not confined to the visual presentation of music; it was a stylistic system that expressed the spirit of resistance and conveyed positions through visual symbols (such as album covers, promotional posters, the image building of rock stars, and related art and design). It not only enhanced the communicative appeal of music itself, but also demonstrated functional attributes beyond its form, playing a role in symbolic rebellion, cultural identity and symbolic confrontation against the existing discourse system.

This paper takes Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis framework of *Mythologies* as the theoretical basis, exploring how rock visual style from the 1960s to the 1970s expressed rebellion through semiotic operations,

further promoted the formation of rock cultural group identity, and ultimately presented symbolic resistance to the existing discourse system.

2. The three-level semiotic system of rock visual style in the 1960s and 1970s

The rock visual style of the 1960s and 1970s was not only a visual carrier of music, but also a semiotic tool for young individuals to express rebellion, a visual medium for rock cultural groups to form cultural identity, and a symbolic representation of social issues at the visual level. These functional attributes were gradually established through the mutual embedding of visual style practices and socio-cultural contexts under specific historical conditions. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis framework of *Mythologies* provides a theoretical foundation for understanding this mechanism. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's modern semiotics, Barthes combined the signifier and the signified to form the first-level semiotic system, which presents the literal meaning of the symbol. When this entire set of first-level symbols is taken as a new signifier and combined with a new signified, it constitutes the second-level semiotic system, which serves to express the socio-cultural functions endowed by society. The second-level symbols continue to merge, ultimately generating the third-level symbols that embody ideology—what Barthes referred to as "myth" [2]. In rock visual style, rock visual symbols from the 1960s and 1970s first functioned as first-level symbols to express rebellion; these elements converged to form an overall style, becoming the second-level signifier, whose signified was the rock cultural group identity shaped by this style. Finally, it transformed into the deepest third-level symbols: the challenge to the existing discourse system, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The three-level semiotic system of rock visual style in the 1960s and 1970s

The three-level semiotic system	
I Signifier: Rock Visual Symbols	I Signified: Rebellion
II Signifier: Rock Visual Style of the 1960s and 1970s	II Signified: Rock Cultural Group Identity
III Symbols: Challenging the Existing Discourse System	

3. Semiotic rebellion: resistance through style

After World War II, the economies of European and American countries gradually recovered and grew, but material prosperity did not resolve the deep-seated problems in the social structure; issues such as social stratification and group differences still persisted. The younger generation was both the beneficiary of post-war prosperity and the skeptic and challenger of the existing order and value system. However, with the existing discourse still maintaining cultural dominance, young people lacked direct channels of expression within the system and turned to the semiotic field for symbolic resistance. Youth culture during this period was neither fully assimilated nor completely rebellious; instead, it launched a form of "negotiated resistance" in the fields of leisure and daily consumption [3]. Rock visual symbols were hidden in daily life, yet sufficient to construct boundaries with the existing discourse system. In the first-level semiotic system, rock visual symbols, as signifiers, carried out symbolic expression through the reconstruction of mainstream symbols, the disruption of visual signification structures and the mediated practices of the body.

3.1. Reconstruction of the semiotic system

The rock visual style of the 1960s and 1970s constructed a rebellious aesthetic language through the deconstruction and recombination of daily visual symbols. Roland Barthes pointed out that the existing discourse system often disguised historically constructed social structures as natural order through the method of "naturalization", making cultural meanings appear unquestionable [2]. Rock visual style broke the inherent connection between symbols and their "natural" meanings, separating daily visual language from its original context and endowing it with new cultural significance. This reconstruction was generally achieved through "the juxtaposition of two more or less unrelated realities", placing seemingly irrelevant visual elements in the same picture and breaking the original coherence of meaning. This was not merely the replacement of the meaning of individual symbols, but the disruption of the entire set of cultural discourse systems—it subverted common sense, dismantled the logical categories of the mainstream, and thus generated a rebellious visual language [4].

Take the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* by The Beatles as an example (Table 2). The design adopted the configuration of a "group photo after the performance", placing The Beatles alongside 57 celebrity portraits and 9 wax figures on the same visual plane. Symbols such as military uniforms, celebrity portraits, religious deities and commemorative rituals each had distinct signifieds, yet when these symbols were incorporated into the same album cover image, they generated a dislocation from their original meanings: figures such as Marx, Jung, Monroe and Buddha were arranged in equal size to form a backdrop, flattening the traditional cultural hierarchies of high-brow vs. low-brow, sacred vs. secular, and knowledge vs. entertainment; the juxtaposition of the wax figures of The Beatles from the early "Beatlemania" era with the current members symbolized the deconstruction of their own old image, an act of actively ending their "myth of the pop idol era". All symbols here were stripped of their daily contexts, becoming freely combinable visual materials that constituted a cross-cultural collage landscape. Inglis Ian pointed out that the album cover demonstrated the trend of democratization in the cultural landscape of the 1960s, where the traditional boundaries between high culture and popular culture were significantly eroded [5].

Table 2. Semiotic analysis of the Sgt. Pepper's lonely hearts club band album cover











Type	Graphic Symbols	Signifier	Signified
		Karl Marx	Knowledge, Revolutionary Nature
		Paramahansa Yogananda	Spirituality, Religion
		Marilyn Monroe	Popular Culture

Table 2. Continued

Individual Symbols		Robert Peel	Authority, Elitism, High Culture
		Bob Dylan	Counterculture
		Wax Figures of the Early Beatles	Preservation, Becoming a Thing of the Past
		The Beatles at the Time	The Present, The New
Juxtaposed Symbols		Juxtaposition of the Early Beatles Wax Figures and the Current Beatles	The deconstruction of their own old image, an act of actively ending their "myth of the pop idol era"
		Juxtaposition of All Figures	The collapse of cultural hierarchies; popular culture becomes an open space that can accommodate multiple identities, histories, authorities and sacred symbols
Album Cover		Group Photo of the Band and Fans	The disruption of cultural structures; the traditional boundaries between high culture and popular culture are significantly eroded here

3.2. "Disorder" of visual signification structures

The resistance of rock visual style was also reflected in the "disordered" signification structures within its semiotic system. Unlike the relatively clear correspondence between symbols and meanings in mainstream visual culture, rock visual symbols, especially those in punk culture, exhibited a rupture and dissociation between the signifier and the signified. These visual symbols no longer pointed to fixed meanings, but existed in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. All visual language was a temporary collage, and all symbols could potentially shift to opposite meanings. The most prominent feature of such visual symbols was the active evaporation of meaning: symbols were used but not defined; images were collaged but did not generate narratives, representing a thorough expression of nihilism.

The costumes designed by Vivienne Westwood were typical representatives of punk style: T-shirts printed with political symbols, underwear worn outside, and rubber materials used in daily clothing. These designs incorporated various symbols into visual styling, where the signifier of each symbol no longer pointed to its specific signified, but instead created visual conflicts in a radical way. Pamela Rooke sported bleached

platinum bouffant hair paired with dark raccoon-eye makeup, often wearing outfits composed of torn lace, leather and military elements (Figure 1). These elements did not coordinate with each other, together forming a visual expression of meaning defocus. Their styling did not serve a single position, but continuously created obstacles to viewing, constituting a bizarre visual experience.



Figure 1. Pamela Rooke

3.3. Mediated resistance of the body

The existing discourse operated not only through laws or institutions, but also permeated daily bodily practices [6]. Seemingly mundane choices such as dressing style, body posture and behavior were actually related to specific value systems, constituting personal value statements. Using the body as a medium for resistance was an active rebellion against the "disciplined body"; the body, a field where power was exercised, was transformed into a symbol of resistance in the context of rock and roll. In the 1960s and 1970s, young people used body style to express their rejection of the established order. This form of semiotic resistance mediated by the body was mainly reflected in the juxtaposition of symbols through clothing and makeup, challenging mainstream aesthetics.

Poly Styrene, the lead singer of X-Ray Spex, demonstrated her rebellious spirit through her body style. She was famous for her iconic and unique look: messy curly hair, metal braces, fluorescent-colored, plastic-textured clothing, and wild DIY prints on her outfits (Figure 2). She neither conformed to the mainstream media's stereotypical portrayal of "sexy women" nor imitated the masculinity of male punk idols. This style was not only a way for her to showcase her creativity, but also a firm feminist statement. The New York Dolls often wore high heels, silk stockings and feather boas, paired with vibrant makeup (Figure 3). This "cross-

dressings" was a satirical performance; by deliberately amplifying the dislocation of gender characteristics, they made gender appear to be something that could be performed and recombined at any time. It broke the traditional relationship between gender and the body, and also challenged the expectations of masculinity for male rock artists at that time.



Figure 2. Poly Styrene



Figure 3. The New York Dolls

4. The pursuit of identity: from semiotic resistance to self-construction

The Birmingham School pointed out that the semiotic "resistance" of subcultural youth could be regarded as a pursuit of "identity". Hall and others argued that popular music subcultures could help young people establish a sense of identity [7]. Style not only presented the attitudes and emotions already existing among young people, but also provided them with a field and semiotic system to express these emotions, allowing these feelings to be projected outward. Through specific dressing styles, particular looks, or the way certain typical emotions were depicted in pictures, emotional expression was materialized. Young people's pursuit of such "style" was actually part of a deeper exploration of "life meaning" and "visible lifestyle", which was also a form of their identity exploration [8]. Under the interaction between visual symbols and socio-cultural backgrounds, style promoted the formation of group identity among rock cultural groups. From the perspective of social identity theory, "identity" contained two basic dimensions: first, categorization; second, identification [9]. To obtain self-esteem and positive self-evaluation, individuals would classify themselves into a certain group and accept the typical characteristics of that group as their own self-traits. The social identity theory proposed by Henri Tajfel pointed out that the construction of social identity went through three processes: Categorization, Identification and Comparison. Categorization enabled individuals to classify themselves into a specific group; Identification referred to the belief that one possessed the universal characteristics of that group; Comparison meant that after the formation of identity, individuals developed a sense of "in-group" and "out-group", and exaggerated the advantageous traits of the in-group [10]. The mechanism of how rock visual style acted on the process of young people forming group identity is shown in Figure 4.

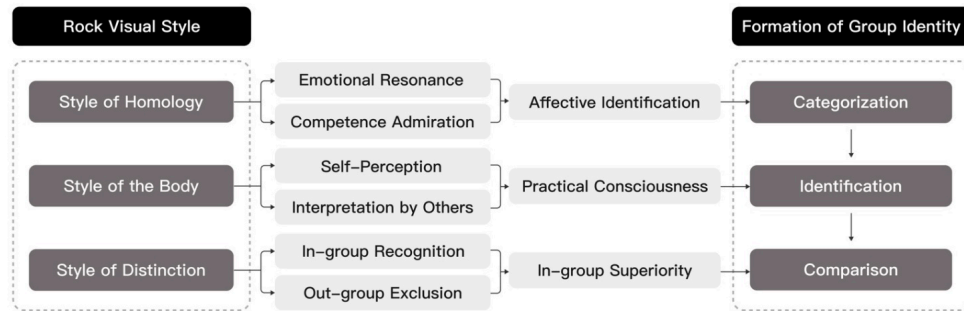


Figure 4. The mechanism of rock visual style on the process of young people forming group identity (self-drawn by the author)

4.1. Categorization—the "isomorphic" practice of style

In subculture research, "isomorphism" was used to describe the consistency between group values and the lifestyle of that group in terms of symbols. Rock visual style accurately reflected the emotional experiences and social situations of the group. For example, elements of punk style such as worn leather jackets, safety pins and hand-painted graffiti originated from affordable daily items of the working class; their rough, unpolished texture mapped the living reality of working-class youth. From a psychological perspective, the formation of emotional identity relied on two experiences: emotional resonance and competence identification [11]. When visual style corresponded to the life and emotional experiences of young groups, it could evoke a sense of emotional closeness. Meanwhile, the stylized images presented by rock idols strengthened the positive traits within the group, enabling young people to regard them as idealized self-projections and gain projection and identification at the competence level. Young people gradually classified themselves as members of the rock subculture, and "categorization" thus occurred.

Take psychedelic rock as an example; its main audience was the young groups who participated in anti-war, civil rights and sexual liberation movements in the 1960s. They questioned authority and pursued spiritual expansion and collective lifestyles. They reflected on reality through psychedelic drug experiences and the absorption of Eastern philosophical ideas. In psychedelic rock posters, the concert poster designed by Wes Wilson for Jefferson Airplane in 1966 (Figure 5) distorted fonts and graphics, transforming letters into indistinguishable flowing shapes. This typographic approach echoed the non-linear structure of psychedelic rock music, and also reflected the blurring of visual boundaries in psychedelic experiences. Swirling graphics and fluorescent colors were difficult to read, yet these posters were targeted at an audience that could "decode" them: for this group, such visual language became a symbol of specific music and events. In terms of clothing style, many band members wore outfits adorned with Eastern patterns, shiny fabrics and tassels, paired with feathers and beaded necklaces. Janis Lyn Joplin was a typical representative of this style (Figure 6), embodying the pursuit of naturalism, the yearning for Eastern religion and spirituality, etc. It not only projected individual emotional experiences and value judgments, but also brought about competence identification through the powerful external image of rock idols. Driven by both emotional resonance and competence identification, young people in similar situations regarded themselves as members of the psychedelic rock subculture.

4.2. Identification—stylistic construction of the body

In social identity theory, "identification" refers to the process by which individuals internalize the positive characteristics of a group into their own self-traits, so as to establish internal self-esteem and a sense of belonging. In the context of modernity, self-identity is a reflexive project that requires continuous maintenance; individuals need to generate practical consciousness through the continuous selection of lifestyles, and confirm and construct the self in this process [12]. As an important carrier of self-cognition, the external style of the body—such as clothing, hairstyle and decorations—was both perceived by the individual and interpreted by others, becoming an important clue for defining identity. Teenagers expressed the characteristics and emotional positions of the rock group through the clothing and makeup of their bodies, confirmed their own group traits in bodily practices, and consolidated subcultural identity.

Hippies who loved psychedelic rock advocated a gentle, non-dogmatic value system, emphasizing peace, love and personal freedom. They practiced their philosophy through body style, cognized themselves through dressing practices, and made it easy for hippies to identify each other, completing self-cognition through stylistic interaction. Hippies often wore brightly colored, non-traditional clothing, such as hand-dyed T-shirts, garments with African or Asian ethnic patterns, robes and flower wreaths, extending the musical stage style into a daily lifestyle. Many hippie clothes were homemade or purchased from second-hand stores, reflecting their rejection of commercial fashion. Their appearance also broke the conventional expectations of gender roles at that time: both men and women wore jeans, had long hair, and wore sandals, moccasins or went barefoot. Men grew beards, while women rarely wore makeup, using a natural appearance to resist traditional gender expectations. The choice of these visual elements constituted a stable and identifiable system of identity expression for individuals, enabling group traits to be continuously confirmed in the bodily practices of individuals.



Figure 5. Concert poster designed by Wes Wilson for Jefferson Airplane



Figure 6. Janis Lyn Joplin

4.3. Comparison—the "distinction" function of style

Social comparison refers to the process in which after the formation of group identity, individuals develop a sense of in-group and out-group, and enhance positive identity and self-esteem by enlarging the differences from the out-group in positive dimensions [13]. Young groups have a stronger emotional need for this sense of distinction. Donald Woods Winnicott pointed out that during this stage, young people did not truly desire to be understood [8]. Cultural texts related to pop songs continuously emphasized the sense of isolation from the mainstream world, making group distinction an important part of youth culture. As a visual practice, style itself has a "distinction" function; it separates different groups with recognizable symbols, transforming cultural preferences into visible visual boundaries. Rock visual style provided young people with a way to dramatically present their feelings of isolation at the time of their most confused and intense emotions. During the unstable stage of identity formation, young people confirmed their belonging and widened differences through style, gaining self-esteem and identity through social comparison.

After hippie youth internalized group characteristics into their own self-traits, they amplified the positive values they identified with through the distinction between the in-group and the out-group. In the book *The Hippies and American Values*, the hippie spirit was described as a "religious movement" [14], whose core values were love, peace, freedom and spiritual liberation, forming a sharp contrast with materialism and technological rationality. Style became an important way to achieve this distinction; their body style not only symbolized naturalism and an anti-consumerist stance, but also clearly demarcated group boundaries at the visual level. For hippies, being able to read the symbols of psychedelic posters, wear specific clothing, participate in collective living, etc., was not only a way of cultural participation, but also a practice of confirming their own positive characteristics. It prompted young people to achieve self-verification through comparison and distinction, and further consolidated their psychedelic subcultural identity.

5. Challenging the order: confrontation with the existing discourse through style

After the establishment of subcultural group identity, it further formed the ultimate symbol of challenging the existing discourse system. Style was a way to express resistance and construct group identity, and more importantly, an important means for marginalized groups to rebel against the existing discourse system and reconstruct meaning. Through the shaping of visual styles such as clothing and images, rock culture

demonstrated stylistic diversity on the surface, and revealed critical intentions towards social issues and traditional gender norms at a deeper level.

5.1. Symbolic criticism of social structure

In a specific social context, different social groups formed a dominant position with extensive influence in social operation through phased alliances. This dominance did not rely merely on coercive means, but more on the formation of negotiation, identification and consensus, making the existing dominant discourse understood as reasonable and legitimate in daily practice [4]. Precisely because it relied on extensive social identification, this dominant relationship was not fixed, but a dynamic balance that must be continuously fought for, reproduced and maintained. Essentially, it was a social relational structure full of tension, constituted by a variety of conflicting or negotiating forces. The criticism of this social order represented by rock visual style did not manifest as direct confrontation, but challenged the existing discourse system in the form of "noise" through the presentation of style.

In album cover design, the cover of *Animals* by Pink Floyd (Figure 7) juxtaposed a cold industrial landscape with floating giant pink pigs. Inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the album compared various social groups to different animal images as described in the novel—such as predatory dogs, ruthless pigs, and compliant sheep. Through metaphor, it criticized social oppression. The cover of Jefferson Airplane's album *Crown of Creation* (Figure 8) presented a visually striking scene: huge explosion clouds surged in the picture, with the band members standing at the center of the flames and shockwaves. In terms of meaning, the design not only symbolized the band's important position in rock culture at that time by placing them at the core of the explosion, but also made a critical response to war through the explosion imagery, turning the album cover into a carrier for conveying anti-war positions and peace ideals.



Figure 7. Animals



Figure 8. Crown of creation

5.2. Self-construction of gender identity

In her gender theory, Judith Butler proposed that gender was constructed through continuous repeated performative acts, rather than an innate natural attribute. "Gender is the stylized repetition of acts through

time, and is instituted as the illusion of substance, of a natural kind of being" [15]. This liberated gender from biological determinism and revealed it as a "performative" social construct. The 1960s to the 1970s saw the almost simultaneous rise of gender liberation movements and rock culture. Many musicians broke traditional gender paradigms through visual style, becoming important mediums for challenging traditional gender roles. The gender fluidity, bodily performativity and challenges to the binary gender system they exhibited constituted an impact on mainstream gender norms.

David Bowie incorporated gender identity into his stage persona. In the Ziggy Stardust image launched in 1972, Bowie adopted a bold bodily styling with fiery red short hair and neon makeup. He created a stage persona of an "alien visitor", freeing his body from the constraints of any real gender category. On the cover of the album *Aladdin Sane* (Figure 9), he styled his hair upwards, lowered his eyes, and painted a distinct lightning bolt totem on his face. His posture was neither masculine nor feminine, conveying uncertain bodily gender characteristics. On the cover of her album *Horses* (Figure 10), Patti Smith wore a men's white shirt and a black suit jacket, paired with naturally messy short hair and an unadorned expression. She broke the visual tradition of women usually appearing in glamorous or delicate poses on album covers, challenging the objectified position of women in the gender order. This was extremely avant-garde at that time and still possesses subversive power to this day.



Figure 9. Aladdin Sane



Figure 10. Horses

6. Conclusion

In summary, in the first-level semiotic system, rock visual style first generated a symbolic rebellious language through the reconstruction of the semiotic system, the disruption of signification structures and the mediated practices of the body. Subsequently, under the interaction between visual symbols and socio-cultural backgrounds, style promoted the formation of group identity among rock cultural groups, carrying the social identity process of "categorization-identification-comparison": the "isomorphic" characteristics of style facilitated categorization; the embodied practices of style enabled individuals to internalize group traits; the "distinction" function of style helped form the consciousness of in-group and out-group, and amplified the

advantages of the in-group, thus completing the three stages of identity. After the establishment of subcultural group identity, it further formed the ultimate symbol of challenging the existing discourse system, launching symbolic criticism of social structures and gender norms. Rock visual style was not a fixed and immutable form, but a cultural resource that could be continuously reinterpreted and recoded. In contemporary times, rock visual style still possesses the cross-era potential to inspire identity. It helps inspire young people to express and shape themselves through visual style, explore innovative cultural expressions suitable for modern needs, and promote the continuous generation of the meaning of "rock and roll".

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