

JENNIFER CYPHER

Ruder Than You: Punk's Postmodern Aesthetic

I originally wrote this piece in 1991, for a course on women and popular culture. I chose to write about punk subculture because of my own varying degrees of involvement with it; I had been trying for some time to articulate some of my experiences within punk and jumped at the opportunity to read and write about punk for, of all things, credit. What could be more ironic and contradictory?

The process of researching and writing just about pushed me over the edge. In researching punk I was, to a large extent, looking at my own experiences; I was the subject being scrutinized; consequently I was investigating, not only my research material, but myself. An almost forgotten part of myself surfaced, railing at the misunderstandings of punk that I perceived in the works of "scholars," the injustices done by them to punk as a movement. Then my university-trained, more "critical" self would jump in and temper my reactions, allowing me another window onto the material and myself. This was helpful, but also made me feel schizophrenic.

When I began to pull all of this material together in order to write, I could not reconcile the two selves that had become part of this process. My instructor, Janice Williamson, suggested that I utilize these two voices, as well as integrate visual images of my punk self. The resulting work relies on time and memory as two of its combining forces and takes on an unusual form. One of my previous introductions to this paper puts it this way: Because my account of punk spans time and varying degrees of involvement, I engage this work as two integrated subjects, my punk self and my present (postpunk) self. In order to give both of these perspectives expression, I have chosen to give them distinct places from which to speak. The work of other writers has also been presented in its own textual place. The voices that I bring to this paper are very personal ones, and one of them is accessed by memory. Memory, being highly subjective, is easily "distorted by present-day value judgements" (Haug 71). This makes it important for me to acknowledge that it is my present self which is constructing this text, and that all information is filtered through and interpreted by this present self; I have made no attempt to cleanse my memories of my present subjectivity.

This piece is divided into three distinct sections, each voice being the catalyst for the others, a sort of textual call and response. The left column of text represents the "voice of the critics," the right, my punk self. My present self is placed in the central column. The text can be read as a kind of conversation between perspectives, or as responses to the critical commentary. What I hope I have created is a kind of antiphony, in which there remains space for the expressions of the reader, for it is these thoughts and ideas which will truly complete the piece.

Punk occurred at a point when "traditional distinctions embedded in the oppositions of high art and popular culture began to be broken down" (Stratton 47). According to Jim Collins, it has taken the combined efforts of postmodernism and popular culture to facilitate this break in the opposition. An important technique used to bring about this change is intertextuality, the "simultaneous presence of traditionally contradictory discourses" (Collins 64). In using intertextuality, an attempt is made to decentre High Art, to show up "the highly discursive nature of contemporary culture" (Collins 64).

A purpose of intertextuality is to first confuse, and then to change, meaning. As part of its stylistic and ultimately political, program, punk made use of contradictions in a deliberate attempt to subvert meaning.

Like wearing make-up
with combat
boots.

The need to see a new aesthetic category of experience is obvious. Punk created a new aesthetic framework (Stratton 54).

Yeah, it's style that
sets punks apart, the
obscenity of the way
we look, the extremes,
the excess.

The use of intertextuality
in a specific political
context.

Punk's publicly proclaimed
political stands were nihilism,
anarchy and chaos (Brake 78).

Anarchy now!

The uncritical acceptance of chaos as a "punk manifesto" begins to crumble when punk is placed in relation to postmodernism. Postmodern and consumer culture adopted punk. For punk to subvert cultural meanings, it needed to continually confront its audience with the unexpected. But punk became more and more acceptable. Real anarchy puts people at odds with society and culture at large, and clears a space free from societal expectations; a space where new images and meanings can be created.

The Sex Pistols' use of the media was a "deliberate artistic exploitation of the media's own symbolic and visual language.... What's going on here is not the spontaneous confirmation of subcultural theory, but the deliberate use of subcultural ideology" (Frith 1978, 50, 51).

A critical grasp of the meanings to be subverted can push a movement further than chaos. In this case, critical awareness connected punk to a range of possible activities from which to provoke change. It made the blurring of categories understandable, and indicated a serious attempt at an organization of cultural knowledge.

But leaves out chaos.
This makes guys like
Malcolm McLaren¹
look pretty
calculating.
Chaos is much more
attractive to
a 13 year old than a
subversive plan.

"The postmodernist aesthetic, operating within a concern with emotion and involvement, is based on excess" (Stratton 54).

Showing up the
excesses of society

This idea of excess relates to Roland Barthes' notion of *jouissance*; excess at the site of reason in the site of commodification. *Jouissance* contains elements which form the groundwork of the postmodern aesthetic. Reason plus affect, the "internalization of production: capitalism's Other as the basis of the postmodern aesthetic" (Stratton 52).

But this "internalized Other" becomes inherently nihilistic when placed within the context of punk politics. Like earlier avant-garde movements, punk had its own destruction sewn up within itself in its desire to be both reactive and proactive. The cultural meanings that punk meant to subvert were being moved by other forces; instead of a perpetual revolution in meaning, punk and its projects were carried along by the ever-quickenning pace of consumerism.

"We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces/ reinforces the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic" (Jameson 125).

1 Manager of The Sex Pistols, a seminal British band.

Does punk resist by turning garbage into fashion? Do female punks resist by wearing the uniform of pornography in public, on the street?

Simon Frith sees the connection with the art school crowd as shaping punk's relation to consumption, another "strident expression of the traditional bohemian challenge to orderly consumption" (Frith 1978, 51).

The punk "look" is about constructing an identity and is carefully designed to shock, scare, and break accepted codes of attractiveness and beauty. It is a deliberate and self-conscious use of intertextuality.

The look is a radical statement. Punk is an attitude, not just a style.

Does the eventual co-optation of punk style into mainstream fashion reflect that it is not possible for fashion to ever be truly subversive? (Emberley 49).

But the creation of style involves, at some point, consumption.

But punk is anti-consumerism. Especially the ideas which, consumer-style, have been offered to women: the natural look which has to be applied with make-up. Why pretend to look natural in the first place? We just don't buy into all of that crap.

Eventually fashion bought into us. It is quite naive not to see the commercial potential of punk, to overlook its possible attractions in the intensity of involvement.

Is consumption action? What did happen to my immediate involvement, my statement?

Punk is about leisure, not work, and consumption is equated with that leisure. These concerns, not the issues faced by unemployed youth, are the source of punk politics (Frith 1978, 52).

Is make-up that makes me look dead about leisure or work? Consumption, yeah, but it pushes the limits that are set about how to consume. And it is this form of consumption that makes me so unattractive as to be voluntarily unemployable.

Cynicism, "reinscribing violence onto the body" by actual acts (body piercing, tattoos) or violent imagery (bondage gear, swastikas) (Emberley 49).

"...flirt with masculine curiosity but refuse to submit to the masterful gaze. These girls turn being looked at into an aggressive act" (Hebdige 1988, 28, 29).

The shared desire to overturn accepted ideas about femininity "indicates...a mysterious symbiosis between aspects of subcultural life and style ... and aspects of a 'new' left and even feminist culture" (McRobbie 152).

"... parodying the conventional iconography of fallen womanhood" (Hebdige 1988, 28).

Which became Madonna's big selling point.

Madonna as parody?

Madonna's sense of humour is often lost in the frenzy of mass-market image overload that she creates around herself. Is her ability to subvert imagery and its meaning weakened by her very use of the "iconography of fallen womanhood;" images which are so readily accepted by the public without question? Her potential for parody may be engulfed by the enormity of accepted meaning and simply-rendered pastiche.

"Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour" (Jameson 114).

"... a clash of identifiable styles can also be read as a style war against the very notion of identity and the final closures that are placed on the urban subject" (Emberley 49, 50).

This clash had an interesting effect, as it was both constructive, constituting a new subculture, and destructive, in that ultimate of closures, death.

When Sid Vicious,
monarch of punk
excess,² died, punk
was dead too.

Death as the ultimate consumption.

You can only light
yourself on fire
once. And you can't
have rich punk
rockers.

The chosen mediums of fashion
and music as places of resistance
for punk were too inextricably
commercial; with punk's popularity
also came its downfall. While this
may at first seem to parallel the
demise of many avant-garde
movements, what sets punk apart
as postmodern are its sites of
resistance: the commercial,
the popular, the sacredness of
pleasure, and the supposed
predictability of the popular.

University of Alberta

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