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The Punk Discourse: From Subculture To Lifestyle

Abstract

As a visible entity punk was galvanized into being under its own name in New York and London in the middle seventies during the Cold War. On the one hand it is seen as a manifestation of postmodernism, on the other hand it is about an underground youth culture that expressed its revolutionary attitude mainly through music (the *punk rock* genre) and an outrageous, collage-like clothing style rebelling against conformity, authority, the establishment, class hierarchy and celebrating the collapse of traditional forms of meaning. However, Birmingham scholars argued that culture industries destroyed the authenticity of the subculture without adequately considering either the ideological underpinnings of the subcultures in question (i.e. punk), nor the concept of authentic identity. Hence, this paper attempts to unmask these ideological underpinnings and their authenticity in relation to punk, its signifying practices and intractably subversive features that can also be linked to its predecessor counterculture movements. This will shed new light on punk as a complex historical and cultural phenomenon and on the evolution and refashioning of the “anarchic” discourse.

Besides tracing the punk ideology and aesthetics back to the movers and shakers of the art and literary world of the 20th century (Dada, Situationists, Beat movement, Andy Warhol), I will also consider how the original punk movement, short-lived and nihilistic, marked the beginning of a phase of ideological struggle within popular music itself. Its broad cultural influence started with the postpunk (1979-1984) trying to build an authentic alternative culture with its own independent infrastructure of labels, distribution and records stores and releasing small magazines and fanzines taking on the role of an alternative media. This do-it-yourself concept i.e. punk ethos proliferated like a virus with the global expansion of electronic music nevertheless finding always new ways to remain detached from the dominant culture. In conclusion, the paper discusses that the punk’s appeal doesn’t lie in Hebdige’s semiotic flux but rather the punk’s formal stability with its clear ideological and formal elements. Perhaps only fragmented, these ideological and formal elements of punk resonate unchanged in current alternative lifestyles permeating the music, theory and art either produced or consumed. These discourses form part of the unconstrained self-expression of punk and it’s oppositional point of view in the world.

Key words: punk, ideology, subculture, postpunk, authenticity, lifestyle, punk discourse

*little man wants to cross the line
but he doesn't dare*

*he's had enough of prescribed norms
across the line is where he belongs*

Šarlo Akrobata¹

If one was to determine the itinerary of punk, the starting point is assumed to be within the realm of popular culture. As a matter of fact, punk rock² was galvanized into being as a visible entity under its own name in New York and London in the middle seventies during the Cold War. It appeared as an explosion, a hysterical outburst of the individual against everything and everyone: a few bands (The New York Dolls, The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, just to name a few) converging around fanzines (PUNK, Sniffin' Glue), fashion shops (Sex) or music venues (CBGB), demonstrating their opposition to the conventionalism of the music industry, fashion, and the socio-political contexts by making refusal, noise, lack of responsibility and speed their *leitmotiv*. Punk was also a reaction to the crisis of the *hippie* dream (a mirror image of the crisis of Modernity itself); entangled in the rising of terror and terrorism as political action; the economic crisis brought about the end of the dream of progress and a generation consigned to unemployment; all of this spiced up with the return of political conservatism, signaled by the emergence of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Punk manifested a furious dissatisfaction with a no-future situation, which soon caught on and expanded geographically (Ex-Yugoslavia, Spain, Iceland etc.).

At first this revolutionary attitude manifested itself predominantly in riotous music, edgy lyrics and an outrageous, collage-like clothing style rebelling against conformity, authority, the establishment, class hierarchy and celebrating the collapse of traditional forms of meaning. So far, this was what the New York and London punk scenes as the initiators had in common, however, their subtle differences cannot be overlooked due to the different ideological patterns involved. In NYC punk was strongly linked to art schools and the postmodern concept of art based on an ironical and playful treatment of a fragmented subject, the removal of boundaries between high and low art

¹ Ex-Yu postpunk band from Belgrade. Years active 1980-1981. Whereas punk was the opponent of capitalism in the West, this music trend developed in Yugoslavia as the criticism of socialism.

² Punk's music genre was initially referred to as punk rock

and music. To be a punk meant to be a bohemian experimenting with new forms of sophistication in a daring and uncanny way. On the other hand, in Britain, punk was a tool for social justice in a more problematic socio-political context stirred by economic crisis. It was brought along from overseas (NYC) to London by the creator and manager of the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren, an art student himself, who attended a number of British art colleges and adopted the stance of the social rebel in the style of French revolutionaries, the Situationists³. Often called the inventor of British punk next to fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, he understood how to commercialize it turning its music and fashion into a product and also a release valve for the working-class urban and essentially deprived youth.⁴ From this moment onwards, little by little, punk has started evolving into a number of different styles (postpunk, no wave, house music, cyber-punk etc.) changing shape (visual art, literature, film etc.) and spreading around the globe (e.g. Jakarta⁵). Moreover, today when we speak of the punk culture centered around a set of styles distinct from those of popular culture and other subcultures this implies that punk transcended the discourse of subculture to a considerable degree. It has negotiated spaces and gaps that ironically developed within and alongside the dominant culture never digressing from its value system related to following key words and notions: anarchy, nihilism, do-it-yourself, non-conformism, criticism, rejection, individuality and the pursuit of an authentic existence. Although Birmingham scholars argued that culture industries destroyed authenticity in every respect, followers of the punk ideology managed to establish a network of underground media as an expression of artistic sincerity and independence from the allegedly corrupting influences of commerce. This suggests that punks have constructed their own concept of authenticity that relies on ideological commitment and framed subcultural participation as part of a larger life project that is independent of external influences i.e. mainstream culture. Even today they

³ The intellectual foundations of the Situationist International (SI) formed in 1957 and were derived primarily from anti-authoritarian Marxism and the avant-garde art movements of the early 20th century, particularly Dada and Surrealism. The Situationists, or Sitos, were the first revolutionary group to analyse capitalism in its current consumerist form. They argued that increased material wealth of workers was not enough to stop class struggle and ensure capitalism's perpetual existence, as many on the left argued at the time, since authentic human desires would be always in conflict with alienating capitalist society. Their tactics included attempting to create "situations" where humans would interact together as people, not mediated by commodities. They saw in moments of true community the possibility of a future, joyful and un-alienated society.

⁴ Catherine McDermott, *Design: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, 2007, p. 189.

⁵ Jeremy Wallach (2008): *Living the Punk Lifestyle in Jakarta*,

<http://www.jeremywallach.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Living%20the%20Punk%20Lifestyle%20i.pdf>

still embrace the do-it-yourself ethic of creation, originality and self-reliance just to subvert consumer capitalism. By engaging in cultural practices and creating their own symbolic space they reflect their intrinsic qualities and experience “real selves” subjectively.⁶ Today, however, adopting the punk style i.e. fashion doesn’t still mean that its belief system has been internalized thus implying that style as an external manifestation cannot be the starting point if it lacks the oppositional attitude.

Both punk and its genealogy and precedents have been subject to study and analysis. In *Lipstick Traces*,⁷ the most significant and iconic essay on its repercussions, Greil Marcus traced, for the first time, an itinerary through the antecedents of punk and proved that its emergence was actually only an intermediate stop within the history of anarchic discourse. The crucial influences on punk or punk rock in the 20th century can be traced back to Dada, the Situationists, the Beat Movement and Andy Warhol, and the following analogies drawn respectively:

The program of Dada, an art movement that emerged around the World War I, was to have no program and to ridicule the supposed meaninglessness of the modern world and repudiate and mock artistic and social conventions emphasizing the illogical and absurd. If being a Dadaist meant to assault high culture, punk was rooted in a contempt for the values of ‘the popular’ and also paradoxically a snob’s revenge from on high. In addition, situationism and punk were essentially anguished redeployments of the romantic ethos at the heart of consumer culture wanting to destroy the division between order-givers and order-takers. Both located themselves within but against culture pursuing an anti-aesthetic orientation and the style of negation that became a prominent feature in punk fashion – a sign of liberation and the expression of authentic desires. If McLaren had a situationist pedigree, Patti Smith, “punk poet laureate” from NYC, was outspoken in her admiration of the Beat Generation, a literary movement originating in the 1950s, whereby authors strove to make every day life a social statement and an art form. They were not social reformers, but did want the examples of their lived lives to make Americans question their accepted values. They cherished “spontaneous prose”, taking an approach to writing that frowned on revisions and held the first expression of a thought or

⁶ Philip Levin and J. Patrick Williams, “The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture”, *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society*, Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT : Ashgate Pub., 2009, p. 79.

⁷ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, Rowohlt, 1996.

an emotion to be the most authentic. Like the Beats, punk rockers believed unmediated artistic expression were more valuable than highly edited and manipulated works. So, for example, many punk groups wanted studio recordings to reflect the “spontaneity of the band” rather than a sound engineer’s skill at producing sound and thus were recorded as quickly as possible. However, punks took the Beat view of every day life as art a step further by embracing play as an opportunity for creativity and self-actualization.⁸ The last pivotal influence on punk here to be mentioned was Andy Warhol who set off as an artist at his Factory Studio in the 1960s. He played a major role in setting up what would become the NYC punk scene and saw that the future of art lay in using a variety of non-traditional media. By also working with film and music, Warhol was in many ways predicting the future of punk as a multimedia art form.⁹ In short, all these movements throughout the 20th Century echoed throughout punk and are credited with keeping the anarchic ideas alive, having contributed to their conversion into punk itself.

The punk discourse does not only build on the echoes of the past but also on the traces up to the present. When the image of rebellion threatened to become one of the most dominant narratives of the corporate capitalist landscape i.e. a hegemonic normality, classical punk subculture seemingly died only to resurrect out of the ashes and strike back again. The revival movement of postpunk, the extension of punk, refers to a great diversity of musical styles influences of which are wide-ranging. A high proportion of postpunk musicians (in America and Britain) had art school backgrounds and/or huge interest in poetry and literature showing historical and political awareness.

Although the postpunk scene had so many different facets brought along by new bands who have modeled themselves on its subgenres like new wave, no wave, punk funk, mutant disco and industrial, everybody kept rejecting and criticising same things: consumerism, conventional institutions and systems of meaning. Its vanguard – bands such as Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle etc. – dedicated themselves to fulfilling punk’s uncompleted (musical) revolution, exploring new possibilities by embracing electronics, noise, jazz and the classical avant-garde, and the production

⁸ Mary Montgomery Wolf, “*We Accept You, One of Us?*”, *Punk Rock Community and Individualism in an Uncertain Era, 1974-1985*, University of North Carolina, 2007, p. 37, 38.

⁹ Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan, *Punk*, Cassel&Co, 2001, p. 18.

techniques of dub reggae and disco.¹⁰ In response of the conservative politics of Thatcher and Reagan, postpunk tried to build an alternative culture with its own independent infrastructure of labels, distribution and record stores which led to the birth of pioneering independent labels such as Rough Trade, Mute, Factory etc. They represented a sort of anticorporate microcapitalism based on the ideological mechanisms of the do-it-yourself ethos.¹¹ One could take this as an example of punk's sense of irony as it formed a subculture operating within parts of the so established discourse, and yet it also is subculture partly dedicated to opposing what the discourse of subculture has become, or not.

The radically experimental spirit and innovating strategies that the postpunk era entailed proliferated like a virus with the global expansion of electronic music. The pervasive elements of punk's ideology revealed its transformative power with the onset of globalization and the rise of rave culture¹² packed with old punks embracing new technology like e.g. Björk, Underworld, Daft Punk etc. It started as an underground movement that soon immersed into societal mainstream so that the concept of subculture as the unifying force was less likely to offer a proper explanation for contemporary social structures. Consequently, the concept of subculture got replaced by the concept of lifestyle since the contemporary society has been overwhelmingly the society of individuals. In short, rave culture, influenced by punk through postpunk, has developed with an alternative lifestyle resisting mainstream conventions which proves punk's formal stability with its clear ideological and formal elements still at work.

Not only does the punk discourse resonate in alternative music and contemporary lifestyles but it is also scattered across fields and disciplines, e.g. feminist and queer theory, ecocriticism, contemporary art etc. The following examples will provide a brief illustration:

¹⁰ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again. Postpunk 1978-1984*, Penguin, 2005, p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 8.

¹² Rave culture or raves have historically referred to grass-roots organized, anti-establishment and unlicensed all night dance parties, featuring electronically-produced dance music (EDM), such as techno, house, trance and drum and bass. It began in the early 1990s and responded to cultural tensions of conservatism and liberalism.

Patti Smith's image – androgynous and aloof – was probably more influential than her music or her Beat poet-like lyrics, inspiring an influx of feminist ideas and feminist musicians and artists.¹³

Genesis P-Orridge, past member from postpunk band Throbbing Gristle, reintroduced h/herself as a groundbreaking performance artist, offering a critique of the sacralisation of the notion of 'nature' in modern scientific discourse and questioning the normative use of sexual differences through his/her work.

Another nature-related contemporary author, this time covering a different aspect, namely ecology, is the philosopher Timothy Morton, who offers a radical reconceptualization of the notion of nature in his work *Ecology Without Nature*.¹⁴ He argues that nature is an arbitrary rhetorical concept whose modern origins can be traced to Romanticism during the Industrial Revolution. He came up with the term “dark ecology”, detaching himself this way from the ecocriticism that fetishised nature claiming that we must relinquish the idea of nature for once and for all. Since Morton's work lays the groundwork for new directions in ecocriticism, it has the potential to be the punk rock of ecological thinking.

The most recent exhibition¹⁵ on punk in Madrid features works by more than 50 Spanish and international artists, such as: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Nan Goldin, Jamie Reid, Douglas Gordon, Jonathan Meese, just to name a few, and others. In the exhibition, punk appears as an explicit reference in many artists. They use elements such as noise, cut-out typography, anti-design, and intentional ugliness or include explicit musical references to punk bands. But what is also shown is the trace of punk as an attitude: the refusal, opposition and destruction, the do-it-yourself, the reference to fear and terror in a society which alienates individuals, that very alienation which causes states of psychosis, valuing whatever escapes the norm, nihilism, criticism of the economic system and anarchy, or the reclamation of one's own sexual freedom, of the body as a battleground.

In the case of Paul B. Preciado, contemporary writer, philosopher, curator and professor of biopolitics, gender theory and history of performance at Université Paris

¹³ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, Faber and Faber, 2011, p. 258.

¹⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹⁵ PUNK. Its traces in contemporary art, Curator David G. Torres, The Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, March 25th – October 4th.

VIII, the body is also used as a radically experimental ground. H/er unclassifiable essay *Testo Junkie*,¹⁶ first published in Spanish in 2008, then in English in 2013, turned the academic world upside down and placed h/er as an international reference on what happens when you take testosterone outside a medical protocol or even outside a gender re-assignment protocol. S/he tests this thesis by using self-managed testosterone intake as a tool of "gender-hacking"—breaking into the gender codes that prescribe our social identities. *Testo Junkie*, tinged with the punk discourse noticeably, thus opens a new branch of philosophical practice within “a new type of hot, psychotropic punk capitalism.”

On the one hand, this statement from *Testo Junkie* suggests that capitalism itself has to apply the punk tactics in order to keep its exploitative, rule-based and oppressive system stable. On the other, it also means that the punk ideology makes such a system considerably transparent by offering new strategies, either covert or overt, to question the limits of capitalism and thus try to overpower it once more.

¹⁶ Paul Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Feminist Press NYC University, 2013.

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Snežana Mocović was born in 1976 in Stuttgart. She graduated from the Department of English Studies and German Studies, University of Stuttgart, in 2005. She earned her Master's degree in German linguistics from the same university in 2006. She has been

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