The Politics of Meaning in Punk Rock

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> Individuals of the rhythmically obedient type are mainly found among the youth - the so-called radio generation. They are most susceptible to a process of masochistic adjustment to authoritarianism.
>
> Theodor Adorno, "On Popular Music"

> Although each differs from the others, the essential character of musical entertainment is not changing.... I believe it ruins the imagination of young people....
>
> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*

Popular music has been both criticized as the scourge and hailed as the saviour of youth. It is worthwhile to pause and think about how music commentary has been built up around popular music in so many contradictory ways. My particular concern is to examine how we locate the cultural politics of punk rock. This paper tries to 'make sense' of how others have 'made sense' of punk rock.

From a political linguistics perspective, making sense of the music--a constant preoccupation in the popular culture literature--involves drawing out the relationship between politics and culture, the social order and symbols. In cultural studies, the assumption is that culture is not only a reflection

of social setting or psychological predisposition, but also a site of the production of meaning. I am interested not so much in providing yet another personal interpretation of punk rock and popular music (an account of what punk "means"), but in establishing the interpretive routes through which punk rock, and by extension, all cultural objects, are legitimated. We might then think of the ways in which the various approaches that have attempted to explain the meaning of punk rock have themselves been political.

Music and Communication

Modleski argues that the central political question of rock and roll is: "Who creates the meaning of the music?" (Modleski, 1986: xiii). From a political linguistics approach, this preoccupation with meaning raises a considerable problem for the study of popular music. The mass mediated nature of the music industry throws into doubt the assumption that communication is, or can be, about shared experience or that those shared understandings can have fixed meanings. Moreover, music lacks the context specificity we normally associate with other personal forms of verbal or written communication. We accept music in the wide ranging and diverse contexts of everyday life, any place from performances to alarm clocks to elevator music. In many instances we would not even consider music as a form of communication. Under the weight of these many contexts, the communicative value of popular culture in general, and punk rock, in particular, might be considered trivial at best.

And yet, the relationship between meaning and music remains the central issue for many cultural theorists, sociologists and musicologists. Certainly there are legitimate questions to be raised about popular music without being hysterical about its alleged attributes. For cultural theorists, music in our everyday culture is an example of the participatory process of making sense and meaning in ordinary social life, using whatever material is at hand. For most of us, this process involves creative effort to express ourselves.

When these practices are recognized as culture, we tend to name them: music, pottery, painting, etc. But while we all 'participate' in culture, we also consume culture, and in the age of mass produced and mass consumed culture much of 'our' culture tends to be named for us.

The politics of this 'naming' reveals the applicability of political linguistics to popular music. Our popular preoccupation with what a 'song is about', often poses the meaning of a song to the exclusion of everything else, reifying the song as an object, and in turn reifying language as a concrete set of terms with set definitions. In the first instance, music is difficult to write about. Although music does share with speech both sound and a mode of producing meaning that unfolds over time, other aspects of music vary considerably from spoken or written language. For example, music relies on events and inflection at many different levels simultaneously (melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, etc.) each with a syntactical dimension.

The predominant approach to explaining this ambiguity relies on the use of literary metaphors. For many of us, we relate fairly directly to the lyrics of popular music and they 'speak' to us. This interpretation draws on the notion of artistic 'work', implying a symbolic whole sealed by the author. In popular music, the meaning of the song is 'authentic' if it is considered real and truthful, expressed by a singer possessed by a form of self-consciousness. The form of address is a monologue; premised on the belief that there is a content beyond the conventions of the song. In this sense we retain a standard idea about authorship -- the songwriter/ performer creates meaning. Moreover, this "reading" of music often implies an immanent theory of meaning; namely, all words have equal meaning and that meaning is transparent in the text. Such 'lyrical realism' asserts a direct relationship between a lyric and the social/emotional condition it describes or represents (Frith, 1988: 112).

But forms of musical representation are not entirely constitutive of reality. As Goodall argues, this is a misguided understanding of rock and roll's place in popular culture. It is

a decidedly incomplete reading:

> to limit the study of rock and roll to its status as a producible consumable commodity, or to discuss its cultural relevance solely in terms of hegemonic and economic concerns, or even to approach rock-n-roll as the embodiment of 'youth' or as some sort of master trope... (Goodall, 1991: 5).

The use of the term 'text,' illustrates Goodall's appeal for a multidimensional 'space' within which we can consider music, thereby releasing signifiers and the sign. Music might therefore be an excellent example of meanings that lack 'fixity'. Few artists trade in unmediated expression. But the paradox remains; because music is a type of representation that asserts the presence of the artist, it seems to create its effects directly, without any mediation.

In a textual formulation, the author disappears to the extent that meaning is not determined by some spontaneous attribution of creativity to the text's creator, but through a process of complex mediation involving context, performance, listening, etc. We may refer to this process as connotation, the mechanism whereby extra-musical associations are made, and these are frequently culturally-defined rather than inherent in the musical structures or lyrics (Laing, 1985: x). Specific musical elements are usually less firmly embedded in particular syntactic and semantic structures than are, for example, words, and those conventions of meaning and syntax which do exist are less precise, leaving greater freedom to make specific orientations in specific contexts (Middleton, 1985: 40).

Approaches to Punk Rock

This tension between the modernist notion of authorship and a more textual approach is a useful framing device for an overview of the approaches to punk rock. I have selected what appear to be the three main approaches: subculture, audience analysis and rock as art. Once we establish the range of explanations we can then explore how they contribute to the politics of naming.

1. Subculture

The starting point of a subcultural approach is the observation that in a fragmented, differentiated world the individual comes into contact with some perspectives or subjects that have more influence than others (Brake, 1980: 2). Such sociological and psychological explanations rely on the conditions of socialization and the norms, and values of a social stratum to account for the emergence of a punk culture. Subculture also tends to confine itself to explanations that are contingent on a particular age cohort if the phenomenon is to be generalized across time and societies. In so far as subcultural explanations are generalizable they must do so without relying on an expressive and symbolic totality. In general terms, the subculture argument rests on the assumption that mass society breaks down traditional social bonds and that this "loss" of identity explains the radicalization of urban youth (Hebdige, 1979). The sociological judgements commonly applied to punk, such as alienation and rejection, are thus themselves reflective of the disintegrative effects of the wider social matrix of mass culture.

So what was the punk "style"? A few brief qualities may be listed to give a sense of punk. First, the punk attitude rejected the contemporary ideal of virtuosity in musical performance. The music was characterized by angry lyrics, a heavy drum rhythm, fast and chorded lead guitar and compact songs without any extensive instrumental solos. The increase in volume and the subsequent loss in importance of singing also contributed to observers' conclusions that punk was demystifying recording, embracing an aesthetic of amateurism and expressing authentic outrage at the world. Second, band names tried to express the shock value that was one of punk's goals: Throbbing Gristle, The Stranglers, The Buzzcocks, The Slits, The Damned, Stiff Little Fingers and The Sex Pistols. Third, punk lyrics were still driven by individual feelings but stressed denunciation of collective

addressees ("Your future dream is a shopping scheme"). And fourth, punk fashion frequently drew on Nazi symbols, body piercing, torn clothing, S&M gear and leather.

From a subcultural point of view, punk's moral outrage was interpreted as white working-class youth's expression of alienation. Punk obscenities (spitting at audiences, swearing on BBC television appearances, etc.) were justified as testing the boundaries of what society defined as socially acceptable. In this sense punk was deemed unusually political for the rock genre in terms of its lyric themes, song structures, sub-cultural style and aesthetic of boredom in mass society (Laing, 1985:125). As punk undermined the discourse of popular rock, it simultaneously sought to establish its own. Marcus uses the image of a 'secret' to emphasize the separation of punk's audience from the older generations (Marcus, 1989).

Some subcultural arguments therefore try to make a causal link between popular music and social activity. Once linked to subcultures, rock music becomes a mass medium credited with the circulation of cultural values and meanings through which social experiences are passed on and reach far beyond the material nature of the music. There is, however, also a tendency in the subcultural aspects of the work of Marcus and others to make causal claims for punk that rely on an essentialist sociological reading of youth, alienation and popular music.

By contrast, Hebdige's attempt to combine semiology and sociology to recast punk as a "stylistic ensemble" situates punk in a way that does not rely on punk as an expression of either underlying economic determinants or a secret artistic lineage. Instead his notion of "stylistic ensemble" tries to capture the set of social practices that characterize both the creation and the consumption of punk rock in the broad sense of styles of dress, modes of behaviour, etc. Meanings can be linked in non-traditional ways, leaving the conventional coding of social life open to appropriation and change.

In this sense, the politics of punk are not to be found in a rational model of institutional organization; resistance is organized only in the "opting out" of mainstream life through style (O'Connor, 1992: 33-36). These cultural sources of meaning escape our view if we concentrate exclusively on formal political expression. Instead, punk used existing institutional and public spaces and modes of communication to 'recode' their previous meanings, thereby allowing a large number of people to come together under the roof of legitimacy.

But attention to subculture also invites the danger of imposing a correspondence between identity and a single style. Such reification of style and subculture therefore runs the risk of transforming the practices of everyday social life into artifacts. However, Hebdige invoked the notion of style precisely to avoid reducing the meaning and effect of popular music to only class struggle or social conditions. There is much of value in Hebdige's understanding of subculture. As Hebdige argues, because subculture allows "an expression of identity through a deliberate projection of a self-image" its use as a framing device does not preclude appreciating multiple and contradictory subjective identities. From a communications perspective, punk culture therefore becomes a means of organizing social life. And yet we have to recognize that the context-specific reasons for punk's appearance in the particular form it took in Britain are not themselves easily imported to other contexts. If punk music really was about alienated youth in the face of British capitalism's failure to reproduce itself (a grand linkage) what are we to make of the dispersed and popular quality of punk's "audience", in the sense that punks are to be found in many countries long after the late 70s?

2. Audiences

In a sense, the subcultural approach portrayed punk as a set of representational practices that could be explained on the basis of traditional sociological arguments. An alternative emphasis on the specific dynamics of the audience tries to explain the dispersed qualities that make popular music

successful. This approach claims to challenge the effectivity of socialization implicit in the subcultural approach, arguing that attention to audiences negates any straightforward one-to-one congruence between signification and the 'real', instead providing an enabling and active role for the consumers of rock and roll.

In this vein, Grossberg rejects any totalizing understanding of culture (Grossberg, 1984). Instead, he argues for an understanding of meaning that allows for a more creative role for the consumers of rock and roll. He calls this role the audience, one that participates in rock and roll as a set of practices of strategic "empowerment" (Grossberg, 1987: 180). Grossberg wants to counter the notion that rock and roll is solely an ideological construction consumed by a passive audience or even that its main context is sociological / subcultural.

The audience produces identity and meaning through what Grossberg calls the "affective economy of the rock and roll apparatus." The apparatus refers to the range of musical texts and practices available to the performers, producers, etc. "Apparatus" rather than "text" because music cannot be read off from a single reference or location. "Affective" refers to the most general plane at which music produces identity, an identity which is composed of not just meanings but also moods, feelings, desires, etc. In short, Grossberg is proposing a 'relative autonomy' of rock, one that frees the consumption and criticism of rock music from its productive relations.

Grossberg's formulation therefore represents a challenge to the traditional correspondence of meanings and the commodity form of the product. He wants to assign importance to the **social** meanings of rock's artistic form. Audience analysis therefore suggests that we can, as members of an audience, interpret media texts and negotiate meaning. While such expression is at times individual, it is also social and relational. Moreover, media experience is part of the stock of common experience that enables social interaction, we can share media experiences that range from the daily news to the newest ad campaign for Nike. But Grossberg

takes this one step further and makes the provocative claim that audience response is a form of empowerment.

No audience can so completely revamp the reception of the music it consumes -- music does not function as an alien object which is interpreted completely independently of the cultural and material forces which produce it (Gendron, 1986: 36). Gendron retains some of Adorno's scepticism of the standardized form of popular music, arguing that we should not exaggerate the semantic creativity of consuming cultures. For example, a focus on audience empowerment ignores the fact that music products are at least partially a result of decisions made by the producers and distributors of music. This dialectic raises questions about the subject because it establishes the dual status of agent and object for the audience: the audience occupies a contradictory site of active creation and passive consumption.

Modleski rightly condemns Grossberg's emphasis on the audience as an apologia for the ideology of mass culture which affirms the consumer's right to choice and argues that he loses sight of any critical framework in the process (Modleski, 1986: xii). Instead he is content to slip from an expressionist theory of music to one that assumes we can express ourselves through the objects we chose to consume. Nor does Grossberg explore how the **delinking** of meaning from the sign is also a property of commodification and may be experienced as a form of domination. Despite the promise of empowerment, Grossberg must consider the sociological concern that 'participation' in popular music as consumption also operates as an agent of socialization. While an emphasis on the social uses of the media might help to explain how punk rock can work in contexts other than that of British working class subculture Grossberg's use of "creative consumption" fails to overcome his commitments to the sovereignty of the consumer.

3. Art Movement

A return to the "rock as art" argument offers an

alternative set of explanations of the transcendental/transnational consumption of popular culture. Punk in particular tends to be treated as subversive pop art. As Marcus contends: "The Sex Pistols were a commercial proposition and a cultural conspiracy launched to change the music industry and make money off the change..."(Marcus, 1989:2). Various studies do point to art school and art movement connections in punk's background (Frith and Horne, 1987, and Fryer, 1986). For example: many members of punk bands attended art schools, most of the early performances were staged at the art schools, Malcolm McClaren (The Sex Pistols' manager) claims to have launched the band as a Situationist project, punk performance was informed by such avant-garde devices as shock value, multi-media, montage and deconstruction.

Marcus places great stock in McClaren's attempts to execute Situationist projects. According to Marcus, as an art movement and cultural critique, Situationism emerges from obscure Left Bank origins to settle among a wide and diverse art set in London in the early 70s. Without retelling Marcus's own "Secret History", situationism was all about creating situations through the use of irony, wit and play that would reveal art and culture as a commodity. For example, the Sex Pistols released their single "God Save the Queen" and had a poster produced that depicted the Queen with a safety pin through her lip (1977 was the Queen's diamond jubilee). Whatever the Situationist roots of this activity, in Marcus' case, it is all too easy to slide into a pompous vagueness of the underground art geography that 'explains' the music. By contrast, Savage points to more material conditions that explain how and why punk emerged when and where it did. Cheap rent, good book stores, squats and record shops point to the less mysterious reasons why art scenes arise where they do (Savage, 1992: 42).

More important, for our own archaeology of punk's 'meaning' is how the art movement argument explains the music. From the art movement approach the construction of meaning in punk rock becomes a legitimate expression of art,

blatantly troublesome and commercial, but accorded art's respect nevertheless. If we accord significance to Situationism, subculture's emphasis on punk's working class alienation becomes recast on the higher plane of **conscious** manipulation of the market relation of consumer and commodity, drawing on a reservoir of disenchantment among youth. Punk street fashion is now understood as the use of unconventional found objects or "low pop" to make high art statements about the way in which fashion's use of elements of conformity and novelty works as sign language (Frith and Horne, 1987: 138).

What is most interesting about the art movement perspective is how the language used to describe punk rock, once taken into the realm of art, accords it a new legitimacy from its labelling as art rather than popular music. Moreover, this line of argument also begins to point us to a reading of punk rock as a self-reflexive parody of mass media and mass culture. The 'creators' of punk rock are understood as active and self-aware, albeit with a cynical awareness of the temporary and mass produced nature of much popular culture. In this sense, Johnny Rotten's "I am an Anti-Christ" can take on new meaning, a realization of the impossibility of an individual heroic narrative.

The Politics of Music Communication

Even so, how do we make sense of music as communication? How do we go about defining the political on the basis of the search for the meaning in the music? At a superficial level, music is political, "when its lyrics or melody evoke or reflect a political judgement by the listener" (Dunaway, 1987: 37). In this sense, much punk rock was certainly political from the standpoint of personalized lyrical content. Topics included commentary on: royalty, the USA, dead-end jobs, sexual hypocrisy, record companies, anarchy, race riots, boredom, television, etc. Punk lyrics therefore emphasized social and political comment and cast their oppositional stance with outright denunciation.

Individualistic rebellion is constantly validated in our society and it offered an easy model for social and political opposition.

In the standard rock formation, lead singers are front and centre, both the physical focal point of the band on stage as well as the auditory centre of recorded music when lead vocals are mixed up front. This practice reflects how the status of individualism and stardom therefore work themselves out as the mode through which private feelings can be expressed in lyrics. Some punk performance sought to avoid this 'star quality' with lower quality mixes, and oppositional lyrics. Punk dancing was rough and tumble with a great deal of physical contact (proverbial slam-dancing) while stage dives enabled the audience to mount the stage and cross the physical barrier of stage and floor.

The subcultural approach interprets this behaviour in sociological terms: mass society produces dislocating effects in terms of meaning and identity. The alleged working class youths of punk therefore herald anarchy and alienation. As agents, or audience, youth are depicted as both the victims and the visionaries of social change. Even though youth have no political organizations to represent their interests, punk youth are frequently presented as politically and culturally emancipated, the potential vanguard of social change. As Hall argues, every social change is not simply projected in youth, but magnified in a way that makes youth not only the inheritors of the welfare state, but the vanguard of the new materialism, the new hedonism (Hall, 1978: 234).

One outcome of such thinking is the presupposition of community in both non-materialist and materialist accounts. Grossberg's optimistic notion of audience rather than fan culture credits youth with autonomy and freedom in social life. However, the logic of such thinking, Frith argues, is that when rock and roll listeners are constituted as a community and the music itself is alleged to express a 'way of life', rock and roll assumes a distinctive political edge (Frith, 1981: 159). While Frith argues that we should be wary of claims about youth community and subculture, he does try to

provide his own materialist explanation of how he considers the claims for a punk community to be political (Frith, 1983: 158). First, punk reflected the criticisms and experiences of working class youth. Second, punk challenged capitalist control of the music industry by rejecting capital intensive production and embracing small-scale, independent labels. Third, it questioned established musical forms with new approaches and a stripped down sound.

By contrast, Fryer is also dismissive of the idea of a community in punk rock, but he rejects the working-class explanation. He argues that "its pose was no more than a traditional rock attachment to a second-hand perception of working-class culture, with its expected honesty, community and rejection of the values of the 'rat race'. Rock has always worked as a voice for middle class adults to express temporary dissatisfaction" (Fryer, 1986: 13).

Attempts at a straightforward materialist reading of punk are obviously contentious. While much of its following, lyrics and performers reflected what might be construed as a working class indictment of mass capitalist society, as a whole punk never waged a wholesale assault on capitalism. To be sure, we can identify sincere and sophisticated class politics in punk, but that does not mean that we can simply read off a working class agenda from popular culture in an unproblematic manner. Moreover, punk bands certainly participated in the established industry through major labels, studios, television appearances, radio airplay, record promotion, etc. In capitalist terms, rock and roll is always a commodity, punk remained 'confined' to the particular organization of pleasure through the commodification. Finally, punk remained within the rock and roll genre, still heavily rhythmic, guitar-based chorded music with mostly white rock intonation, etc.

But even with all of these qualifications are we to accept Adorno's argument, that popular music is really just a commodity produced according to a standardized musical form, bland and escapist, its consumers passive? Adorno or revolution? I do not think so. While the commodity status of popular music might constrain its meanings it does not

determine them. Of course punk bands participated in the existing industry. And of course many bands remained in the rock and roll tradition of rebellion. To pose the choice this way is wrong-headed. It is also wrong-headed to seek a substantive political ideology of social change in punk rock. The politics of popular culture are not waiting for us to read like dogma tacked to the wall.

There is a certain appeal to the feeling that punk was the celebration of boredom as the experience of hegemonic reality. But when punk rock's 'assault' on musical content and the mode of music production and performance is used as the definition of punk we once again experience an attempt to fix the meaning of punk (in this case as opposition\confrontation). This practice closes off the potential for the listeners' interpretive autonomy as well as any attempts to construct meaning in the production of the music. And it is here where I think the most interesting politics are to be found: in the search for and construction of meaning.

Even if the Sex Pistols or any other punk band was sincerely trying to communicate a political message about anarchy such a focus does not exhaust the political. The politics of punk also lie in the way in which its meanings are derived through mediated experience. According to Street: "Popular music introduces uncertainty into the authorities' world, an uncertainty that sets limits to state control by establishing an arena of popular sovereignty in an area deemed politically important" (Street, 1986:42).

Power of Naming

The manner in which the linking and delinking of meanings inform that uncertainty underscores the treatment of punk rock in this paper. Looking back over the last fifteen years it becomes clear that there has been little consensus on the politics of punk. The music has 'meant' many things to many people. Frith points to the constructed nature of popular music's political meanings. Herein lie the politics.

For example, the initial resistance to punk rock as an acceptable form of music shifts our attention to an altogether different plane than simply the focus on the oppositional politics offered in punk lyrics and style. Foster argues that the positioning of the political in art is not to be conceived solely as a representation of class subjects or as an instrument of revolutionary change but as the cultural constitution of subjectivity (Foster, 1985: 143).

Are the politics of punk the politics of social difference? Punk itself, as a phenomenon, was defined, and came to define itself, through its anti-social image and its anti-orthodoxy. Punk was a response to the power of social consent. For example, the Sex Pistols first had to fake their way into performances as the opening band, rarely finishing a set, their records were banned, the band itself was banned from many clubs and they were denounced as deviant and violent. From a subcultural perspective, "it [subculture] is often dismissed as a spectacle of subjection, but this is precisely its tactic: to provoke the major culture to name it and in so doing to name itself" (Foster, 1985: 170). In this sense, Hebdige's term *bricolage* reveals the often arbitrary nature of social/sexual/political divisions in our modes of behaviour, styles of dress and music. Punk can be understood as a deconstructive strategy in this sense, a politics of resistance, or even a resistant mode of political art. In the process, it has attracted sociological attention, a gaze that simultaneously structured and froze its difference.

The mainstream media played a central role in this respect. As Jon Savage writes, "Just like Elvis and the Beatles, the Sex Pistols were made by the media - in particular, television" (Savage, 1992: 40). When they swore on a local BBC show they became not just entertainment news, but the object of news and made national headlines in the U.K. The rock press participated in the attempts to 'fix meaning' by virtue of establishing itself as the communicator and interpreter of the music. Frith writes, "More words are written about rock than about any other mass medium, but most of the them are part of the phenomenon itself, central to the process of music promotion and advertisement and

publicity" (Frith, 1988). The mainstream reaction to punk's 'rebellion', while inflammatory at first, eventually turned the style into a fad or packaged it as a sub-category of music, and rendered it 'safe'.

The popular music press continues to claim explanations for how some music 'works' and succeeds while other music 'fails.' It is impossible to generalize about all the music press but a few characteristics are worth citing. Some of the more interpretative writing tries to fix meaning through a different set of sense perceptions than the reading of texts associated with the claim to authorship discussed earlier. Goodall tries to capture the freedom of movement and feeling associated with rock and roll by engaging in its flow, moving freely from writer to participant to observed in his writing style (Goodall, 1991). He literally is part of the narrative. For him, this is the mystery of rock and roll. At its worst it simply reserves a privileged place for the critic, whose categories are known only to him or her. Authors of this approach must claim to be more attuned to the "feeling" of rock and roll when they rely on descriptive phrases such as "they have the same air of seething", "same clenched-gut feeling" or the "they have great energy" to try to fix meaning. However, such attempts to expand the lexicon of rock and roll themselves tend to a mystification of popular music as a system of completely autonomous signifiers - you just have to be able to 'read' them. This kind of insider knowledge is a recurring theme.

The prevailing approach among the rock press is to establish the pedigree of a band's music influences. With the publication of *England's Dreaming: The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, Jon Savage makes the most recent claim to a definitive account of punk (Savage, 1992a). Accordingly, he argues that as far as the music is concerned, The Sex Pistols were influenced by The Stooges, The New York Dolls, MC5 and other precursors. But he also includes the sound engineer and John Lydon's (as Johnny Rotten - the lead singer) own manic vocal executions. The result is a lineage traceable only by insiders, one that is perhaps important only to other

insiders. Savage's expertise enables him to make the claim that, "The Sex Pistols are not just a pop group: They are a social, cultural and political phenomenon" (Savage, 1992b: 41). Can, or should tracing musical influences serve as the basis for transcendent claims about the importance of a particular form of music?

It is obviously difficult to say unequivocally what popular music products are about since they suggest meaning in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Despite the potential for mystification with this approach, it reveals the ambiguities of music and assigns importance to the contextual nature of meaning. The fanzines of the alternative punk press sought to fill this gap left by a mainstream press that either ignored or disparaged punk music. Fanzines are generally acclaimed as challengers to the mainstream media with their anti-glossy, messy, do-it-yourself look and philosophy. They were consistent with the 'politics' of punk or the 'stylistic ensemble.' By the same token, they too wanted to advertise and build community around punk shows. Different style, same function? Was the difference enough?

As Grossberg and Hebdige argue, the productive apparatus is not the sole centre of political power. Difference is constructed through a process of exchange. Alternatively, when punk rock is denounced as "not music" punk must be defined as something else. The issue of skill or competence in musical performance therefore remains ideologically charged. In this sense we can understand how one of the few legitimate discourses available to describe punk rock in positive terms was that of the avant-garde art movement or as truth from the streets. But Foster cautions that there are problems with confusing cultural politics with 'cultural revolution'(Foster, 1985: 170-175). Subcultural practice may "shake the sign, contest the code" but in so doing may only manipulate the signifiers within it rather than pose a revolutionary program of its own that dismantles the logic of the sign. Modleski's criticism of Grossberg shares some of this argument.

In a broader sense, counterculture, subculture and mass

culture are not such tidy divisions, when mainstream qualities such as star status or the appetite for biography have 'intruded' on the punk subculture. But punk also tried to contest those meanings and as Inglis argues, the politics of popular culture lie most directly in such contestation, or interpretation, of the content, form and role of popular culture in contemporary society (Inglis, 1988: 237).

Most popular culture studies continue to theorize punk rock as an attempt to resolve the contradictions of contemporary society without problematizing the implications raised by the 'imposition' of cultural theory on culture. Moreover, this paper similarly adds more grist to the same mill and itself leaves crucial questions unaddressed. Although this preoccupation with meaning has produced some worthwhile interpretations of the relationship between politics and culture, the 'operation of pleasure' remains insufficiently theorized as a vital component of music. Why, after all do we enjoy writing, performing and listening to music? Politics is not only the content of punk rock but also the context of its performance, listeners, interpretation and pleasure. I have tried to acknowledge and evaluate the selectivity and normative commitments that expose the pervasive presence of power in contextual approaches to punk rock.

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