

William Osgerby

The filth and the fury

The development and impact of British punk rock

In onderstaand artikel schetst Bill Osgerby de ontwikkeling van punk in het Londen van de jaren zeventig. Osgerby laat zien hoe punk zich van een, oorspronkelijk New Yorkse, subcultuur ontwikkelde tot de overheersende muziek- en cultuurstroming van de late jaren zeventig.

Anarchy in the UK: the birth of British punk

When Sex Pistols guitarist, Steve Jones, called television presenter Bill Grundy a ‘fucking rotter’ on live TV, he sparked one of Britain’s biggest media furores of the 1970s. In December 1976 the Sex Pistols were still a virtually unknown band, but luck had come their way when rock superstars Queen cancelled a TV appearance on an early evening news show. The Pistols were hastily lined up as replacements, ostensibly promoting their debut single, ‘Anarchy in the UK’. However, baited by Grundy, the TV show’s cantankerous host, the band sneered, swore and made themselves as disruptive as possible. The interview was barely ninety seconds long, and the band’s insults were jokey, but the impact was seismic. The following morning the tabloid press frothed with outrage. A flurry of histrionic headlines – ‘Foul Mouthed Yobs’, ‘The Filth And The Fury’¹ – cast the Pistols as social pariahs, while promoters cancelled their concerts, radio stations blacklisted their single and the band were unceremoniously dropped by their record company, EMI.

Paradoxically, rather than prematurely aborting the Sex Pistols’ career, the debacle threw the band into a media spotlight that sustained both their success and their notoriety. Signed to Virgin Records by an enterprising Richard Branson, the Pistols’ second single, ‘God Save the Queen’, fuelled further press uproar. With its scornful chorus of ‘No future for you’, the song was an anthem to angry disaffection. And, released to coincide with

1 *Daily Mirror* (2 December 1976).

Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee celebrations in May 1977, the record was denounced as scandalously disrespectful. Nevertheless, despite being banned by the BBC's Radio One (which then dominated British music broadcasting), the song shot to Number One in the *New Musical Express* singles chart, and Number Two in



The Sex Pistols' debut single *Anarchy in the U.K.*

the official UK chart.² Five months later the Pistols' album, *Never Mind the Bollocks*, was another hit as the band drew increasing acclaim and international attention – American rock critic Paul Nelson championing the Pistols for playing 'with an energy and conviction that is positively transcendent in its madness and fever'.³

Alongside the Sex Pistols a retinue of other new bands – the Buzzcocks, the Clash, the Damned, Generation X, Siouxsie and the Banshees – also drew attention for their raw, iconoclastic style, and the media quickly coined the phrase 'punk rock' to describe what was seen as a new youth movement defined by an aesthetic of alienation and revolt. Punk rock bands, shunning the perceived excesses of mainstream 1970s rock, created fast, hard music. Quick, distorted guitar riffs and electronic feedback complemented aggressive, sometimes nihilistic, lyrics in songs that made a virtue of fervent brevity. Punk style also signalled antagonism. Plundering the vaults of subcultural fashion, drape jackets, drainpipe trousers, work-boots and leather jackets all found a place in a ripped and torn collage held together by safety pins, buckles and strategically placed zips. Hair was short, spiky and sometimes dyed. Slogans were stencilled onto shirts and trousers, while the iconography of sexual fetishism – studded leather, PVC, bondage straps, stiletto heels – connoted outrageous transgression.

Punk's defiant postures, together with the moral indignation of its critics, embodied the wider national mood. In the face of rising unemployment, strikes, economic decline, terrorist bombings and inner-city riots, a sense

2 At the time, many suspected the official chart compilation had been rigged to prevent embarrassment during the Queen's Jubilee celebrations. See J. Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London 2005) 364-5.

3 P. Nelson, 'The Sex Pistols Drop the Big One', *Rolling Stone* 259 (23 February 1978) 46.



The Sex Pistols.

of crisis and social polarization had come to characterize Britain during the late 1970s. And the incendiary aura surrounding punk dramatized at a symbolic level the wider collapse of social and political consensus, Dick Hebdige arguing that young punks appropriated ‘the rhetoric of crisis which had filled the airwaves and the editorials throughout the period.’⁴ But the punk phenomenon also held wider significance. Punk represented the zenith of many leading avant garde and radical movements in postwar music, fashion, art and literature; punk drawing together and honing their diverse styles and outlooks. Punk, moreover, was influential in its own right, registering a huge impact across a wide variety of creative fields – from pop music and film to performance art and direct action protest – and subsequently punk imagery and music diffused worldwide to become entwined with an array of local cultural and political sensibilities.

‘Dole queue rock’?: the origins of British punk

‘Punk rock’ is a notoriously nebulous concept and, like all subcultural styles, ‘punk’ has been a dynamic, constantly shifting fusion of influences and factions. Initially, some commentators understood British punk as ‘dole

4 D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London 1979) 87.

queue rock⁵ – the expression of a desolate and dispossessed generation – but closer scrutiny reveals that punk's origins were somewhat less lumpen. Certainly, there were individual punk musicians with working-class (even petty criminal) backgrounds, but the bulk of those who frequented early punk clubs like the Roxy and the Vortex tended to be art students and middle-class youngsters from London's commuter-belt. A retinue of the Sex Pistols' earliest followers, for example, were known as the 'Bromley Contingent', their members hailing from this leafy, south London suburb. Indeed, Simon Frith argues that British punk can be located in a long-established 'suburban pop sensibility', a provincial melancholia born of frustration with small-town tedium and fantasies of escape and transformation.⁶

Frith also highlights punk's bohemian lineage and its place in the traditions of radical art,⁷ while authors such as Greil Marcus have perceived a direct link between 1970s British punk and the ideas of European avant-garde movements such as Dada, Lettrisme and Situationism.⁸ Others, however, have been unimpressed by attempts to bracket punk with the artistic avant-garde, John Lydon (former singer with the Sex Pistols) quipping that if this was punk's secret history, 'then it was so secret that nobody told us.'⁹ Nevertheless, many members of early punk bands were certainly art students, while the punk scene gestated largely around London's art schools and colleges. Moreover, during the early 1970s the Sex Pistols' canny manager, Malcolm McLaren, had been involved with King Mob, a Situationist-inspired group that explored the possibilities of radical subversion through the manipulation of the media and popular culture.

McLaren was especially captivated by the rebellious potential of youth subcultures. In 1971, working with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood (who he met at Harrow School of Art in 1965), McLaren had opened a shop – 'Let It Rock' – in London's King's Road, selling 1950s clothes and memorabilia. Visiting New York three years later, McLaren was impressed by the energy of an art/music scene developing around sleazy rock band the New York Dolls and, on return to London, he revamped his operations.

5 P. Marsh, 'Dole-Queue Rock', *New Society*, 746 (38) (20 January) 112-4.

6 S. Frith, 'The Suburban Sensibility in British Rock and Pop', in R. Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London 1997) 269-79.

7 S. Frith, 'The Punk Bohemians', *New Society*, 805 (43) (9 March 1978) 535-6; S. Frith and H. Horne, *Art into Pop* (London 1987) 123-156.

8 G. Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1989).

9 J. Pecorelli, 'Hide Your Grandmothers: It's the Sex Pistols!', *Alternative Press* (1996) 60.



The New York Dolls

Renamed 'SEX', his shop began specialising in rubber and leather fashions inspired by the subterranean world of sexual fetishism, reflecting McLaren and Westwood's enthusiasm for style as a strategy for subversion. A further visit to America saw McLaren manage the New York Dolls for the final six months of their career then, back in London, he began preparing a similar project by encouraging the musical aspirations of four youngsters who had gravitated to his shop, intrigued by its audacious clothes designs. With

McLaren at the managerial helm, the foursome (John Lydon, Glen Matlock, Steve Jones and Paul Cook) began rehearsing as the Sex Pistols, the band's name inspired by McLaren's emporium. McLaren also recruited former King Mob co-conspirators to produce promotional material for the band. Most notably, artist Jamie Reid deployed Situationist strategies of *détournement* (the appropriation of symbols, images and texts, which are reworked to take on new, subversive meanings) in distinctive Sex Pistols posters, record sleeve and tee-shirt designs featuring defaced pictures of the Queen, mutilated British flags and letters cut from newspaper headlines in the style of a ransom note.

McLaren's earlier involvement with the New York Dolls points to the impact of American music and style on British punk. The roots of punk's disdain for musical complexity and its 'do-it-yourself' ethos lie in the 'proto-punk' or 'garage' bands that proliferated in the US during the mid 1960s. Often young and amateurish, American garage bands played hard, fast, blues-based rock influenced by 'British Invasion' groups such as the Rolling Stones and the Who. Few garage bands enjoyed commercial success, but they established a blueprint for the kind of basic, stripped-down rock 'n' roll that punk revived during the 1970s.¹⁰

10 Among the most successful were bands such as The Wailers and The Kingsmen, whose raucous single 'Louie Louie' became a live staple for many punk bands during the 1970s. The garage band sound is chronicled on the 'Nuggets' series of compilation records originally compiled in 1972 by record boss Jac Holzman and musician and Lenny Kaye. The liner notes, penned by Kaye, contained what is commonly regarded as one of the first uses of the term 'punk rock'.

Another precursor to punk was what Clinton Heylin has termed America's 'post-Pepper underground' – the music/art projects of the Velvet Underground, together with the jagged guitar sounds of the MC5, the Stooges, the Modern Lovers and the New York Dolls.¹¹ For music journalist Lester Bangs, these groups were linked by an attempt to redefine rock as 'a raw wail from the bottom of the guts', bands experimenting with fuzz, distortion and feedback so that 'rock [was] honed down to its rawest elements' – an attitude and approach that became central features to 1970s punk rock. But British punk drew its most immediate inspiration from New York's underground music scene of the mid 1970s. Here, downtown clubs such as CBGBs and Max's Kansas City were the hub to a milieu that encompassed both an artistic avant-garde led by Patti Smith, Television, Talking Heads and Suicide; and groups such as Blondie, the Dead Boys and the Ramones, whose power pop minimalism was a fundamental influence on British punk bands.

Home-grown genres of the early 1970s also contributed to the development of British punk. The raunchy guitars and swaggering theatrics of glam rockers such as the Sweet, Slade and Gary Glitter were a clear influence, while inspiration also came from the stylishness and provocative camp of more androgynous glam performers like David Bowie, Marc Bolan and Roxy Music. Punk's rejection of mainstream rock's increasing musical complexity and technological sophistication was also anticipated by the vigorous, pared-down rock 'n' roll of 'pub rock' bands such as Eddie and the Hot Rods, Dr. Feelgood and the 101ers, while the success of independent 'pub rock' record labels like Chiswick and Stiff demonstrated to future punk entrepreneurs the financial viability of small production runs of individual records.¹²

British punk rock, then, was informed by a wide variety of genres, styles and ideas which converged, Roger Sabin argues, not in any 'set agenda', but in a general attitude distinguished by 'an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with a stress on "working-class credibility"); and a belief in spontaneity and "doing it yourself"'.¹³ But cultural phenomena are also forged by their historical

11 C. Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (Harmondsworth 1993) xi.

12 D. Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes 1985) 10.

13 R. Sabin, 'Introduction' in: R. Sabin ed., *Punk Rock: So What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London 1999) 2-3.

context, and the rise of British punk was inextricably linked to the broader political and social upheavals of the late 1970s.

'No future': the social and political context of British punk

Although the American variant of punk rock emerged before its British cousin, and several bands from the US punk scene (for example, Blondie and Talking Heads) later enjoyed major commercial success, during the late 1970s American punk remained a relatively obscure cult confined to underground scenes in a handful of US cities. In Britain, on the other hand, punk had a major impact. Following the lead of London-based punk bands like the Sex Pistols, the Damned and the Clash, and inspired by punk's 'do-it-yourself' credo, punk scenes developed nationwide. Throughout Britain a legion of new punk bands, clubs, fanzines and independent record labels were established. In Liverpool, for example, a club unassumingly named 'Eric's' hosted gigs by the likes of the Sex Pistols and the Clash, and became the centre to a budding local punk network. In Manchester, meanwhile, venues such as the Lesser Free Trade Hall and the Electric Circus (a crumbling former bingo hall) played host not only to punk bands from London, but also a growing number of local bands including the Buzzcocks, Slaughter and the Dogs, the Fall and Joy Division.¹⁴ Punk also attracted the attention of Britain's news media throughout the late 1970s, with sensationalist stories in the tabloid press depicting punk as a baleful index of the nation's general descent into lawlessness and cultural malaise.

The profound impact of punk rock in Britain was indebted to punk's resonance with a wider climate of crisis. Punk rock's eruption in the late 1970s coincided with a dramatic shift in the tectonic plates of British political life. Since the Second World War a broad social-democratic consensus had prevailed that saw Labour and Conservative governments operate within a framework of shared assumptions – a commitment to the provision of the Welfare State, the maintenance of high levels of employment and an acknowledgement of the State's general responsibility for the management of an economy that combined both state and private ownership of industry. By the early 1970s, however, the sense of social cohesion crumbled as inflation and unemployment rose, industrial relations deteriorated and the

14 M. Middles, *From Joy Division to New Order: the Factory Story* (London 1996) 11-73.

country faced successive balance of payments crises. As a consequence, a more abrasive, confrontational system of political relations took shape.¹⁵

Responding to Britain's economic problems, successive Labour and Conservative governments instituted cuts in state spending and wage controls. Edward Heath's Conservative government of 1970-1974, for instance, instituted widespread cuts in public expenditure and monetary restrictions, but these failed to reverse economic stagnation. Unemployment and inflation continued to rise and industry was hit by a series of acrimonious strikes. Britain's economic plight continued under the subsequent Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan and by 1976 – the year of punk's ferment – unemployment had risen to 1.2 million, interest rates had reached a record high and the government announced spending cuts of £3 billion.¹⁶ Conflict also escalated in Northern Ireland. In 1971 internment without trial was introduced in a failed attempt to halt the Provisional IRA's campaign for a united Ireland. In 1972 the devolved Ulster Unionist government was abandoned in favour of direct rule by Westminster, and in the mid 1970s the IRA extended its terrorist attacks to the British mainland with a series of bombings and assassinations. At the same time racial tensions also intensified. Extreme right-wing groups such as the National Front and the British Movement began to attract increased support, and clashed violently with left-wing opponents. Many black youngsters, meanwhile, felt alienated from a society they perceived as inherently racist and in 1976 anger boiled over at the Notting Hill Carnival as local black youths fought running street battles with the police.

The sound, style and attitude of punk seemed to crystallise the wider mood of social antagonism and political turbulence. As Joe Austin and Michael Willard argue, 'public debates surrounding "youth"' often function as 'a metaphor for perceived social change and its projected consequences'¹⁷ and, in the year of the Queen's Jubilee (an event intended to draw the country together in a festival of national unity), the new phenomenon of punk rock seemed to embody Britain's division and decline, Mary Harron noting how the media 'diagnosed [punk] not as a new musical style but

15 D. Dutton, *British Politics Since 1945* (Oxford 1997) 63-76.

16 A. Sked and C. Cook, *Post-war Britain: A Political History, 1945-92* (London 1993) 130-152 and D. Childs, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History* (London 2006) 243-286.

17 J. Austin and M. Willard, 'Angels of History, Demons of Culture' in: J. Austin and M. Willard ed., *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York 1988) 1.

as a social problem.¹⁸ Not everyone, however, shared the antipathy voiced by the tabloids and moral crusaders. As Jon Savage notes, there was also a significant minority who identified with the disaffection and alienation that punk embodied:

‘The Sex Pistols appeared with all the force of a hand-grenade tossed into an arrangement of gladioli. ‘God Save the Queen’ was the only serious anti-Jubilee protest, the only rallying call for those who didn’t agree with the Jubilee because they didn’t like the Queen, either because like John Lydon, they were Irish, or, much more to the point, because they resented being steamrollered by such sickening hype, by a view of England which had not the remotest bearing on their everyday experience’.¹⁹

Ripped and torn: the aesthetics of British punk

1977 saw the high tide of British punk. Record companies scurried to sign new punk bands as first generation groups such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned began achieving commercial success. The burgeoning legion of new punk bands saw themselves as a bold, energetic challenge to a mainstream rock establishment grown tired and flabby. Some punk bands were skilled musicians, but punk’s spirit of amateurism meant overt displays of virtuosity were frowned upon and songs were kept short, fast and simple. Melodies were basic, and guitar chords often ‘bled’ into one another to create a loud, ‘buzz saw’ drone. Lyrics eschewed the romantic themes of typical pop songs and instead articulated angry cynicism (such as the Sex Pistols’ ‘God Save the Queen’), political rage (such as the Clash’s ‘White Riot’) or general disenchantment (such as the Buzzcock’s ‘Boredom’). Vocals, meanwhile, were often shouted or spat out in energetic bursts of venom or sneering humour, with emphasis on working-class accents and streetwise authenticity. Above all, British punk eschewed the elitism and polish associated with the mainstream rock industry. Instead, performers and audience were regarded as equals, with an ethic of rough-and-ready accessibility that encouraged everyone to be active participants. Indeed, in 1976 an early punk fanzine famously printed diagrams of three basic guitar chords alongside the entreaty ‘This is a chord ... this is another ... this is a third ... Now form a band’.²⁰

18 M. Harron, ‘McRock: Pop as a Commodity’ in: S. Frith ed., *Facing the Music: Essays on Pop, Rock and Culture* (London 1988) 199.

19 Savage, *England’s Dreaming* 352-353.

20 *Sideburns* (December 1976).

Crudely typed, photocopied and stapled together by enthusiastic amateurs, fanzines embodied punk's 'DIY' philosophy. In New York, Legs McNeil and John Holmstrom launched *Punk* in 1976, conceiving it as a magazine devoted to 'rock & roll, like the Stooges and garage-rock, basically any hard rock & roll', Holmstrom recalling they chose the name 'Punk' (meaning literally 'worthless' or a young homosexual) for its shock potential – 'Punk was a dirty word at the time. Us putting Punk on the cover was like putting the word fuck on the cover. People were very upset. It was controversial'.²¹ In Britain, meanwhile, an army of punk fanzines – including *Sniffin' Glue*, *Out There* and *Ripped and Torn* – not only disseminated information and viewpoints about the developing punk scene, but also established a distinctive design aesthetic through their 'cut-n-paste' letterforms, photocopied and collaged images, and hand-scrawled and typewritten text.²²

Independent record labels also thrived on punk's success. Established 'pub rock' labels like Stiff extended their repertoire by signing punk groups such as the Damned. Other enterprising punk bands released records themselves, establishing their own record labels and often securing distribution through Rough Trade, London's leading independent record shop and label established by Geoff Travis in 1976. As Dave Lang observes, then, punk's independent record labels were 'a vinyl equivalent to the fanzines' – 'Just as the fanzines demystified the process of producing and publishing the written word, so the early punk labels demonstrated the simplicity with which anyone could become a recording artist'.²³

Punk's musical dissonance had its equivalent in a strident sartorial style. In New York as early as 1974 the art/punk band Television, and especially front-man Richard Hell, had developed an embryonic punk 'look' deftly described by Savage:

'... large fifties shades, leather jackets, torn T-shirts and short, ragamuffin hair. This was a severe aesthetic that carried a series of meanings: the existential freedom of the fifties beat, the blazing, beautiful self-destruction of the *poète maudit*, and the razor-sharpness of the sixties Mod. It spelt danger and refusal, just as the torn T-shirt spoke of sexuality and violence. If such a thing is possible to identify, it was the origin of what would become the Punk style.'²⁴

21 Cited in Heylin, *From the Velvets*, 242.

22 T. Trigs, 'Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic', *Journal of Design History* 19 (2006) 69-83.

23 Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 16-17.

24 Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 89.

The filth and the fury



The Clash.

Elements of this American style filtered into the imagery of British punk, along with the clothes designs developed by McLaren and Westwood in their London boutique. These included bondage trousers (festooned with zips and straps), loosely knitted mohair sweaters, muslin shirts, high leather boots and tee-shirts emblazoned with Jamie Reid's provocative graphics.²⁵ Worn by the Sex Pistols, these designs were influential, but The Clash also had a strong

visual image. Their initial style consisted of Jackson Pollock-influenced paint spattered clothes adorned with stencilled slogans, but later art students Alex Michon and Krystyna Kolowska provided the band with a more militaristic image in the form of multi-zippered drill jackets and heavy duty, combat-style trousers.²⁶

Punk's emphasis on rebellion and accessibility encouraged participation from many women – not only as back-room collaborators and fans, but also as performers in their own right.²⁷ Many women took up instruments and fronted punk bands, while brash female artists like the Slits and Siouxsie Sioux enacted transgressive forms of femininity in their unconventional styles and assertive stage personae. And, as Lauraine Leblanc notes, punk style has subsequently been drawn upon by many young women 'to resist the prescriptions of femininity, [and] to carve out a space where they can define their own sense of self'.²⁸

Punk's embrace of an 'outsider' identity, meanwhile, found affinity in

25 A lavishly illustrated chronicle of the Sex Pistols' image and promotional materials exists in P. Burges and A. Parker, *Satellite – Sex Pistols: A Book of Memorabilia, Locations, Photography and Fashion* (London 1999).

26 P. Gorman, *The Look: Adventures in Rock and Pop Fashion* (London 2006) 152-156.

27 H. Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era* (Aldershot 2007) 1-14.

28 L. Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick 1999) 219-220.

black style and music. In particular, the rebellious stance of Rastafarianism and the thumping rhythms of reggae appealed to many punks who embraced what was perceived as an 'authentic' and politically charged music existing outside the traditions of the white rock establishment. The Clash, for example, added cover versions of reggae numbers to their set. Other bands (for example, the Slits and ATV) dabbled with dub rhythms, and it was common for punk and reggae bands to share the same bill.²⁹ Anti-racist movements like Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League also numbered many young punks among their supporters. It is, though, possible to exaggerate punk's anti-racist sentiments and overlook the fascist views held by some punk bands (for instance, Screwdriver).³⁰ Moreover, there were also marked elements of naivety and romantic essentialism in white punks' lionization of Rastafarianism and reggae as 'authentic' voices of rebellion. Nevertheless, the fact that many punk fans were listening to explicit critiques of 'white' society may still have had radicalizing impetus, while the growing interest in reggae allowed struggling British reggae bands such as Aswad and Steel Pulse to sign to major record companies.³¹

The legacy of 1970s punk

Punk, according to Hebdige's classic analysis, was synonymous with the malaise of British society during the late 1970s. Punk, Hebdige argued, was 'expressive of genuine aggression, frustration and anxiety' – the movement dramatizing the wider sense of social crisis, punks presenting themselves 'as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain'.³² For Hebdige punk style was akin to 'semiotic guerrilla warfare', an exercise in sartorial defiance that, he claimed, transformed the 'naturalized' meanings of everyday cultural artefacts and media texts into something alien, spectacular and threatening.³³ But, Hebdige argued, as punk became more successful – with punk records topping the charts and punk styles filtering into mainstream fashion – its radical edge

29 D. Letts, *Culture Clash: Dread Meets Punk Rockers* (London 2007) 68–88.

30 R. Sabin, "'I Won't Let That Dago By": Rethinking Punk and Racism' in: Sabin ed., *Punk Rock: So What?* 199–218.

31 A. Marks, 'Young Gifted and Black: Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean Music in Britain 1963–88' in: P. Oliver ed., *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (Milton Keynes 1990) 111.

32 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 87.

33 *Ibidem*, 105.

was blunted. For Hebdige, a cycle of 'incorporation' had seen an authentic, meaningful 'street' style exploited and recuperated by a parasitic commercial market, with 'processes of production, packaging and publicity ... inevitably lead[ing] to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power'.³⁴

Hebdige's analysis, however, fundamentally misreads the relation between 1970s punk and the commercial media. Rather than marking a moment of 'recuperation', media intervention was crucial in the definition and dissemination of punk. As Sara Thornton argues, subcultures 'do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious "movements" only to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media, and other cultural industries are there and effective right from the start'.³⁵ A symbiotic relationship, therefore, existed between punk and the commercial media. The media exploited punk – first as a scapegoat for contemporary social problems, then as a pop product to be milked for profit. But the representational power of the media was also crucial in shaping punk's subcultural identity and its members' sense of themselves. Without media intervention, punk would have been a damp squib.³⁶

Highlighting the critical role of the media in the development of British punk, however, does not entail casting young punks as the hapless dupes of commerce. Although 'authentic' subcultures are, in large part, media fabrications, Thornton rightly posits they remain powerful sources of meaning and self-identity for their participants.³⁷ As Frank Cartledge observes, punk style was quickly commodified – sold in high-street shops and via mail order catalogues – but punk dress could still represent 'an assertion of difference' and, like any cultural form, 'punk was a "production", the final product created from a series of possibilities'.³⁸

From the outset, punk was a continually developing fusion of different

34 Ibidem, 95.

35 S. Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (London 1995) 117.

36 In the years since 1976 the Sex Pistols' manager, Malcolm McClaren, has cast himself as an arch manipulator of the media who deliberately orchestrated the furore surrounding punk rock, intending it to be a mischievous, Situationist-inspired spectacle. Whether he had actually possessed this degree of reflexive awareness at the time, however, is moot. The classic narration of this version of events exists in Julian Temple's 1979 film, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*.

37 Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 161.

38 Frank Cartledge, 'Distress to Impress?: Local Punk Fashion and Commodity Exchange' in: Sabin ed., *Punk Rock: So What?*, 151.

factions. And, by the 1980s its diversity became apparent as punk fragmented into a variety of contingents. Punk's more narcissistic elements regrouped at London clubs such as Blitz. The 'new romantics', as they were dubbed, turned their backs on punk's plebeian image and instead championed decadent fantasy – adopting frilly-fronted fencing shirts, braided tunics and pantomime dame chic. The post-punk fallout also spawned a series of 'retro' styles, including a mod revival and a resurgence of ska. Initially focused around Midlands bands such as the Specials, the Selecter and others signed to Jerry Dammers' Two Tone record label, the ska revival quickly became a national phenomenon. Skinhead style also reappeared. More raw than the 1960s original, the new version fused the skinhead image with the ferocity of punk in a music subgenre known as 'Oi' (after the choral refrain common to its songs). Punk's more avant garde contingent, meanwhile, resurfaced in an array of innovatory and experimental 'post-punk' music projects – from synthesiser pop and electronic music to dub reggae and psychedelia.³⁹

The musical and visual style of 1970s British punk, however, has enjoyed considerable longevity and, transported overseas, has become reworked and re-embedded in a wide variety of local contexts. Hilary Pilkington, for example, shows how the Russian punk scene has drawn on the style of British punk but has inscribed it with sensibilities framed by local issues,⁴⁰ while Eric Zolov shows how Mexico City during the 1980s saw the emergence of *los chavos banda* – lumpenproletariat punks who were championed by the radical Left as a voice of angry protest from the barrios.⁴¹ Since the 1980s, meanwhile, a variety of American 'hardcore' scenes have reworked punk aesthetics to address a host of local interests and concerns.⁴²

But punk's legacy extends well beyond style and music. Indeed, Sabin does not stretch a point when he notes that 'it's hard to imagine a modern Europe and America not transformed by punk'.⁴³ As a cultural and political movement, punk's influence has encompassed not only other music genres (for example techno, hip-hop and heavy metal), but fields as diverse

39 S. Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London 2005) xii-xxx.

40 H. Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and Its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed* (London 1994) 228-230.

41 E. Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley 1999) 13; 254-56.

42 S. Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (New York 2001) 34-47.

43 Sabin, 'Introduction' in: Sabin ed., *Punk Rock: So What?*, 5.

as fashion, film, art, comics, literature, television, anarchism and green radicalism. And, thirty years later, the continued fascination with 1970s punk was demonstrated by the plethora of exhibitions, books, newspaper features and TV documentaries marking the anniversary – *The Guardian* newspaper even commemorating punk's cultural importance by publishing a transcript of the Sex Pistols' infamous 1976 TV appearance – in all its foul-mouthed glory – as part of its booklet series honouring the 'Great Interviews of the 20th Century'.⁴⁴

44 *The Guardian, Great Interviews of the 20th Century: Sex Pistols – Bill Grundy 1976* (London 2007).

BELGISCH CAFÉ

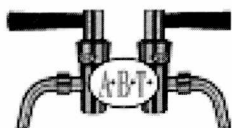


De Pintelier



ANNO 1997

Kleine Kromme Elleboog 9
9712 BK Groningen
tel 050 318 5100



Lid alliantie biertaperijen



Lid jenevergenootschap

Bierproeverijen
12 bieren op tap
60 bieren op fles
52 verschillende jenevers
borrels tot 40 personen

www.pintelier.nl

info@pintelier.nl