

Punk Productions

Unfinished Business



Stacy Thompson

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SUNY series, Interruptions:
Border Testimony(ies) and Critical Discourse/s

Henry A. Giroux, editor

PUNK PRODUCTIONS

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Stacy Thompson

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*This book is dedicated to my parents,
Stacy W. and Sandra R. Thompson*

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My best reader and editor is always Kate Hinnant. My love for her is immense and without end.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

7"	45 or 33 rpm record, 7 inches in diameter
A.C.	Anal Cunt
AEC	Alliance Entertainment Corporation
AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
AOL	American Online
APF	Anarcho-Punk Federation
AT	Alternative Tentacles
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Bee Gees	Brothers Gibb
BGK	Balthasar Gerards Kommando
BMG	Bertelsmann Music Group
<i>BYOFL</i>	<i>Book Your Own Fuckin' Life</i>
C-M-C'	Commodity—money—commodity prime
CBGBs	Country Bluegrass, Blues
CD	Compact Disk
C.O.B.W.	Children of Barren Wasteland
DIY	Do-it-yourself
DJ	Disk jockey
DKs	Dead Kennedys
DVD	Digital versatile disk
ECT	Electroconvulsive therapy
EMP	Experience Music Project
EP	Extended play
GI	Government Issue
H2B	Heavens to Betsy
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IPU	International Pop Underground
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
ITV	Independent Television (U.K.)
KRS	Kill Rock Stars

LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department
LI	Lettrist International
LP	Long playing
M-C-M'	Money—commodity—money prime
MC5	Motor City 5
MDC	varies, for example: Millions of Dead Cops, Millions of Dead Capitalists
MRR	<i>MaximumRockNRoll</i>
MTV	Music Television
NIDA	National Institute of Drug Abuse
NOFX	No Fucking Straight Edge
NYHC	New York Hardcore
NYSE	New York Straight Edge
OMFUG	Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers
PD	Police Department
PE	Profane Existence
R&B	Rhythm & Blues
RAR	Rock Against Racism
RGNY	Riot Grrrl New York City
RIAA	Recording Industry Association of America
RSA	Repressive State Apparatus
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SI	Situationist International
S.O.A.	State of Alert
SST	Solid State Transformers
TRL	Total Request Live
T.S.O.L.	True Sounds of Liberty
VHS	Video Home System
WTO	World Trade Organization
YOT	Youth of Today

introduction

You Are Not What You Own

Jesus was a communist.

—Reagan Youth

ANTI-CAPITALISM

ON JUNE 4, 2000, in Dolores Park in San Francisco, a crowd gathered for Soupstock 2000, a celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of the anarchist collective, Food Not Bombs. The event included a performance by Sleater-Kinney, a punk rock band comprised of three women, which originated in Olympia, Washington, in 1995. Greil Marcus, a longtime commentator on punk, wrote an account of the band's appearance for the first page of the *New York Times's* Arts and Leisure section for Sunday, June 18, 2000. According to Marcus, in "Raising the Stakes in Punk Rock," when Sleater-Kinney plays, "everything is in jeopardy and no destiny is fixed" (29). The lead singer, Corin Tucker's, voice "can be thrilling, confusing, scary, but it's no effect: it's a voice that was discovered, and passed on" (29) by earlier punks, including the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s and the Sex Pistols, a band to which Marcus compares Sleater-Kinney (he notes that Sleater-Kinney "is almost never played on commercial radio, and for good reason—like Sex Pistols music, it is so strong, so quick and far-reaching, it makes everything that today might surround it on the radio feel cowardly" [29]). He concludes by describing what he considers one of the best moments of the San Francisco show: when the band played "Dig Me Out," from their 1997 album of the same name, he notes that "you could in the instant feel buried by . . . whatever you feared was set against you in the world at large" (29). For him, the lyric "Dig me out" transcended its context and was "no longer a line in a song by a punk band but something in the air, a warning, or a promise, or an event taking place as you listened" (29).

Marcus attends primarily to the aesthetics of Sleater-Kinney, although he also notes that the band releases its albums on Kill Rock Stars, an independent punk label that not only “functions very well as the center of its own universe” (1) but strengthens the band’s “ability to treat a musical career as at once a form of free speech and real work” (29). He adds that the band sells about one hundred thousand copies of each of its albums. What strikes me as problematic about Marcus’s article is that it exemplifies a tendency in much of the commentary on punk, both academic and non. Marcus describes punk and its effects using aesthetic and often idealist categories: punk is a transhistorical and transcendent force that destabilizes everything in “the world at large.” It has something to do with “destiny,” “strength,” “warnings,” “promises,” and “events,” and all of these categories are linked to “independence” and “free speech.”

I do not mean to suggest that the aesthetics of punk should not be investigated, and Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989) contributes significantly to that ongoing project of cultural studies. However, the aesthetic exploration launched by Dick Hebdige as well as Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons and continued in the works of Marcus and Neil Nehring, among others, must take place alongside considerations of economics, because, in punk, questions of aesthetics and economics are intertwined: economic concerns will necessarily lead to and find expression in aesthetic forms, and aesthetic forms will both reflect and inflect economics. For this reason, I will not examine the triangulation of semiotics, punk, and identity in this text. Lawrence Grossberg’s essays and Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) are valuable forays in this direction, but I am less concerned with what occurs—it seems to me—in the brains of punks as they construct and are constructed as subjects and subjectivities than with punk as a set of material practices that produce certain effects, including subjectivity. As Raymond Williams writes, a materialist critique concerns itself with people “working on physical things and the ways they do this, and the relations they enter into to do it, working also on ‘human nature,’ which they make in the process of making what they need to subsist” (*Keywords*, 200). With this definition in mind, I advance a materialist investigation of punk economics and punk aesthetics in this book, in order to formulate some of the ways in which punk both resists and is resisted by capitalism, a term that is largely absent from the work of most critics of punk.

The entire field of punk can be understood as a set of problems that unfold from a single contradiction between aesthetics and economics, between punk, understood as a set of cultural productions and practices that comprise an aesthetic field, and capitalism and the commodity, an economic field and an economic form in which punks discover that they must operate. Throughout punk’s various moments and textualities, this central contradiction spins

out a variety of interrelated problems that punk mediates, demonstrating, as it does so, the utility and inutility of certain approaches to the task that Marx lays out in the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 123). Punks want to change the world, and many believe that what most needs to be changed is capitalism. Consequently, punk both raises and attempts to work through two related problematics, one economic and one aesthetic: Can the commodity form be taken up and used against capitalism? Can all aesthetics be commodified?

PUNK: A PROVISIONAL DEFINITION

punk . . . [a] molded stick . . . used to ignite fuses esp. of fireworks
—*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

One of the most difficult tasks that writing on punk demands is that of formulating a working definition of the term from which to strike out. To begin, I will advance four propositions in order to broaden and narrow the field that I will be investigating in the following chapters. First, there are several major genres of punk textuality: music (recorded and performed), style (especially clothing), the printed word (including fanzines, or “zines”), cinema, and events (punk happenings aside from shows); together, these texts make up the “punk project.” Over the course of the history of punk, music has not always served as the textual form that best embodies the opposition at punk’s core, and, for this reason, I will concentrate on different textual forms at different historical moments.

Second, the building block of the field of punk is the “scene,” and punk is made up of a series of major scenes, beginning with the New York Scene of 1974–76 and continuing through the California Pop-Punk Scene of the early and mid-90s. Although hundreds of small punk scenes, containing a few hundred members each, have sprung up across the United States and around the world since 1974, I have chosen to schematize punk history in terms of the seven largest scenes, each of whose participants number in the thousands. While numerous texts, both academic and non, document the New York and English scenes, only a few predominantly nonscholarly books touch upon the later scenes. It is in zines, though, that punks produce and articulate their own histories in the most detail. It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of the internationally distributed punk zine *MaximumRockNRoll* (MRR) to any accounting of punk history. MRR has appeared monthly since its inception in 1982 and has traced or generated most of the major and minor debates in and around punk during that period. Other zines proffering histories of

punk and informing my work include the widely distributed *Punk Planet*, *Flipside* (Al Flipside began publishing it in 1977, and it is the longest-running zine to date), *Search and Destroy*, *Punk*, *Sniffin' Glue*, as well as numerous zines that are distributed locally or regionally.

Third, two vectors shoot through and condition all of the various textualities of punk. From punk's birth in 1974 in CBGBs (a small nightclub in New York City's East Village) to its present multiplicity of scenes, which spans the globe, punks have always mounted economic and aesthetic forms of resistance to capitalism and the commodity as its most ubiquitous form. Because punk's oppositional practices have mutated radically over the past thirty years, it is impossible to establish a transhistorical definition of "punk aesthetics"; therefore, the best attempts to describe punk in aesthetic terms have focused not on punk as a whole but on one of its seven major scenes. On the other hand, punk's economic modes of oppositionality have never been well documented, and it is to this task that I turn in this work.

Last, it is worth noting that, for many (but not all) punks, the corporate music industry stands in for the whole of capitalism, for it is when they confront the major labels' business practices, music, and bands that punks best understand themselves as opposed to capitalism. What I find most hopeful about the punk project is its underlying refusal to give up on imagining something other than the world as it is. In his introduction to *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson describes the present as "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" (ix). In Marxian terms, his claim suggests that the present does not realize that the current mode of production and the modes of being that it produces are historical and, consequently, changeable. In truth, capitalism is neither natural nor necessary, and punks have not forgotten this fact. They cannot fully imagine what the better world would look like, but they refuse to accept the one that they know as final.

A DESIRING PUNK/PUNK DESIRE

In 1999, GTE conducted a direct mail advertising campaign for its "Caller ID" service that allows customers to learn who is calling them (or at least who is being billed for the call) before they pick up their phones. The envelope containing this offer is a concisely worded ad, whose copy appears in the upper left quarter of the envelope. It reads, "Before You Talk To Strangers . . . Ask for ID. Caller ID. From GTE." A black and white photo of a punk occupies the right third of the envelope. His black hair has been molded into spikes, one multiply pierced ear is visible, and he wears a black jacket, black metal-studded boots, and a white T-shirt with black stenciling. Numerous decora-

tive pins adorn his jacket, and he wears a necklace fashioned from paperclips. With a stereotypically punk sneer—between a smile and smirk—he scowls up at the camera, whose positioning above him combines with the ad’s use of black-and-white film to suggest a still shot taken from a surveillance camera’s tape. The ad implies that Caller ID works like such a camera: it allows its customers to deny entrance into their homes to undesirables. For the ad’s purposes, the punk is an undesirable. But what makes the punk a threat? My aim in the first chapter is to argue that the ad’s punk—and punk in general—represents threat and, obversely, liberation, because they represent repressed cultural impulses or desires. Why does the punk want in? According to the logic of the ad, he is what has been barred from the posh home whose grounds the security camera surveils. Who knows what he would do if he gained entrance? Perhaps he is the return of the repressed, in which case the real threat is that at some level we want—or should want—to let the punk in.

Central to my reasoning regarding punk in general—and this ad in particular—is Raymond Williams’s assertion that “no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention” (*Marxism* 125). For Williams, human practices, energies, and intentions that fail to find expression within the “dominant culture” come in the back door as “residual” or “emergent” social phenomena, because, one way or another, they must be expressed. This idea closely parallels Jameson’s concept of a “political unconscious”: Jameson theorizes capitalism as a system that promulgates “impulses” that are propitious to its growth and represses those that would oppose it. Like Williams, he assumes that the dominant mode of production cannot express the full range of impulses or desires that emerge within its purview and represses those that threaten to destabilize it. Those repressed impulses and desires return, however, in sublimated forms in all the various registers of production: economic, social, political, etc. For Jameson, the cultural productions of mass culture are specifically designed to redirect these impulses:

[I]f the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are “managed” and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses—the raw material upon which the process works—are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them. (*Political* 287)

Mass culture must summon precisely the desires that oppose the dominant culture before it can exorcise those impulses. Presumably, the prohibited desires serve as the bait that lures consumers and encourages their consumption, but,

having enticed consumers to part from their money, cultural productions must subsequently redirect the desires that have been awakened away from their initial targets, in a perfect example of bait-and-switch. Examples might include the films *American Beauty* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999), both of which begin by critiquing consumerism in contemporary U.S. culture but detour unexpectedly toward a saving mysticism (*American Beauty*) and a heterosexual relationship (*Fight Club*).

With the above repression model in mind, the project of naming and mapping punk's desires becomes possible. Although, at first, desire would seem to exist only in the brains of punks, it has a materialist shape: the commodity. The commodity marks the place in the process of production where desires become material and is therefore the fundamental form of the punk artifact. Punk commodities are the products of the work that a set of knowable collective impulses perform or demand. In other words, punk commodities figure as crystallized forms of collective desires: they are produced and thrown off as constellations of related commodities where desire and repression collide. Because commodities are the bearers of desire, they can be read as expressions of the forces that shaped and became embodied in them. Punk in general can be grasped as a material exploration of how a specific set of illicit desires repressed within a dominant social order return to haunt it and, in the best cases, blast cracks in its surface. The first chapter of this text is, then, a hauntology.

Where Jameson assumes an a priori pair of qualities for the desires that he anticipates finding in mass culture texts—ideological (in concert with capitalism) and utopian (opposed to capitalism)—and finds the ideological impulses always and ultimately foreclosing on the utopian impulses, my own findings correlate less precisely with this incorporatist model of an all-consuming capitalism. While I agree with Walter Benjamin's assertion that "the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question" ("Author," 229), I find it worth noting that Benjamin refrains from claiming that all revolutionary themes are therefore assimilated. Some of them escape, and it is to a narrative of those that escape that I will turn below.

For Jameson, capitalism functions as a repressive set of containment strategies that code desires or impulses into forms useful to capitalists, but desires constantly break free from these codings and threaten to escape or return in sublimated forms. I, too, will derive desires from punk's artifacts that I read as material attempts to explore the limits of commodification in order either to mediate between desire and commodification or gesture beyond it. However, I do not aim to cleave too closely to Jameson's argument that no mass culture form ever wholly escapes capitalism's limits. Maybe he is correct,

but I am uncertain that this problem is not a false one. Slavoj Žižek reads Hegel in order to argue that demanding purity—for example, cultural productions or expressions totally free from commodification—is akin to “positing the presuppositions” (*Sublime Object* 215) that will prevent one from having to act. If I posit the presupposition that no such purity exists, then I find myself justified in my inactivity, in quitting before I have begun. Perhaps punk’s attacks upon and mediations of capitalism’s limits only serve to inscribe the limits’ contours more clearly and render them more legible. But my sense is that punk achieves something more than this modest aim.

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Let's Make a Scene

THE MULTIPLICITY OF CONJUNCTIONS and disjunctions among punk's desires do not separate out readily into discrete fields, but, for the purposes of this chapter, I will group them into seven major scenes, major because the participants in each scene number in the thousands rather than in the hundreds. Each of the major scenes emerges in a specific geographic site as a determinate constellation of commodities/desires. The seven scenes are: the New York Scene, the English Scene, the California Hardcore Scene, the Washington, D.C., First Wave Straight Edge Scene, the New York Second Wave Straight Edge Scene, the Riot Grrrl Scene, and the Berkeley/Lookout! Pop-Punk Scene. I have chosen to concentrate upon these specific scenes, because punks describe them as the largest and most influential in the history of punk.¹

If punk artifacts/commodities are understood as the effects and accretions of the emergence of repressed desires, then these artifacts can be interpreted for clues to the desires that formed them. One difficulty with approaching punk scenes, however, is that each one amasses myriad artifacts within the social field that it establishes. Even creating a taxonomy of only the most significant artifacts for any scene would prove an exhaustive and possibly useless endeavor. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus upon certain artifacts, sifted out of each scene, that, while by no means defining the scene, serve as nodes at which either new (to a particular scene) or recurring (from scene to scene) desires intersect. I will draw these examples from the major social groupings and genres of punk textuality: bands, music (recorded and performed), style (especially clothing), the printed word (including zines), cinema, and events (punk happenings apart from shows).

THE NEW YORK SCENE

The New York Scene emerged in 1974, lasted through 1976, and was centered around two small nightclubs, CBGB and OMFUG (the name of *one* of the clubs; the initials stand for Country Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers) on Bowery Street in lower Manhattan and Max's Kansas City in Greenwich Village (also in Manhattan).² The bands most integral to establishing the scene included the Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, and Blondie; later, Suicide, the Dictators, the Heartbreakers, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Talking Heads, and the Dead Boys, all attracted to the hype around the clubs, bands, and New York, joined the scene. The epicenter for the scene, however, was CBGBs and the Ramones that, together, serve as a locus where several of punks' early desires intersect.

Hilly Kristal opened CBGBs in March 1974, when very few venues in New York City booked underground rock bands. Clinton Heylin defines "underground" in the context of the New York Scene as a term referring to "bands self-consciously aligned with noncommercial popular music trends. More specifically, it refers to New York City bands supported by cult followings developed through live performances at local nightclubs rather than recording contracts and mass media hype" (135). Writing for *The Nation*, Mark Crispin Miller notes that, in 1974, the "Big Six" major record companies—Warner, CBS, PolyGram, RCA, MCA, and Capitol-EMI—controlled 81 percent of the U.S. market share (11). In short, when Kristal opened CBGBs, commercial music could be equated with the Big Six; all other record labels and unsigned bands were considered "underground" or noncommercial, provided that they did not appear to be aping the aesthetic choices of commercial acts in the hope of obtaining recording contracts.

In 1974, CBGBs became the only club in New York dedicated exclusively to underground music,³ and Kristal charged patrons one dollar to see unsigned bands play there. Read as an artifact, CBGBs attests to one of the most fundamental desires that constitutes not only punk's first scene but all of punk: the desire to resist the commercial realm, and especially commercial music—the Big Six in 1974. This desire is synonymous with punks' felt need to escape from the realm of the economic. In 1964, Herbert Marcuse defined "economic freedom" as "freedom from the economy—from being controlled by economic forces and relationships; freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living" (4). Although I do not read CBGBs as expressive of a desire for anything as profound or sweeping as Marcuse's "economic freedom," the club does represent early punks' desire to establish a realm not wholly conditioned by economics, a realm in which music and entertainment could concern themselves with something other than making money. Under capitalism, the club could not wholly succeed in this endeavor; Kristal did charge a dol-