

ALTERNATIVE TV

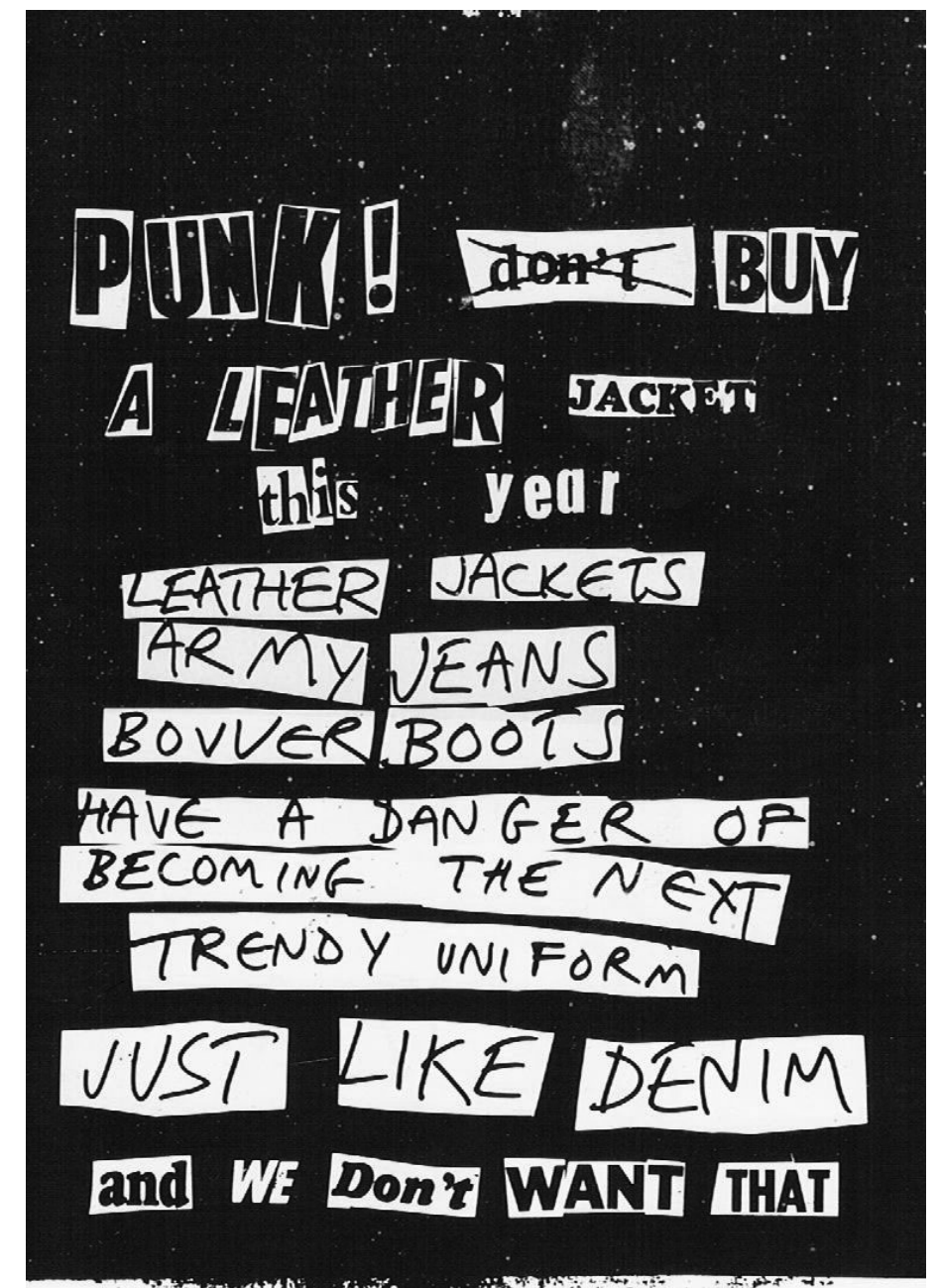


HOW MUCH LONGER
YOU BASTARD

How Much Longer? Punk Styles, Punk Aesthetics, Punk Conventions

HOW MUCH LONGER? PUNK STYLES,
PUNK AESTHETICS, PUNK CONVENTIONS

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A few critical thoughts, reflections, comments – and a little bit of provocation – on the subject of punk graphic styles: their evolution, recuperation and standardisation.

How much longer will people wear

Nazi armbands and dye their hair?

Safety pins and spray their clothes

Talk about anarchy, Fascism and boredom?

ATV – How Much Longer? (Deptford Fun City 1977)

Punk's original premise embraced a number of ideological positions: the notion that 'expertise' is unnecessary (*anyone can do it*), a call-to-arms for direct action and independence (*do-it-yourself*) and the questioning of authority. These were married to a focus on individuality, creativity and personal expression that set itself in opposition to the 'norm'. Punk's initial success witnessed an explosion of new sounds and styles, from music to fashion, art, graphic design, film, writing and publishing. 'Punk', or 'new wave', was simply an umbrella term that could be applied to an eclectic and disparate range of material or activity. This was abundantly obvious to anyone with ears to listen (try comparing the music of the Sex Pistols with the Ramones, Stranglers, X Ray Spex, Wire, Siouxsie & the Banshees, XTC, Buzzcocks, Blondie and Talking Heads, for instance), but was equally clear in relation to punk's visual and graphic languages. In parallel to the broad diversity in musical styles, a quick look at the graphics that accompanied these groups tells a similarly wide-ranging story. Jamie Reid and Helen Wellington-Lloyd's work for the Sex Pistols was radically different to Arturo Vega's tongue-in-cheek Ramones identity, Paul Henry's complex album cover concepts for the Stranglers, David Dragon's wonderfully obtuse minimalist artwork for Wire's *Pink Flag*, or Malcolm Garrett's sophisticated, ideas-based graphics for Buzzcocks, Magazine and the Members.

Punk Individualism, Provocation and Graphic Agitation

Reid's powerful 'punk' imagery was largely distinctive for a number of reasons – in part because his visual skill and dexterity was incredibly hard to match, and in part because his graphic style and approach was so strongly connected with one genre-defining group, the Sex Pistols, that any attempt to replicate it appeared immediately inauthentic and corrupt. Of course, others were also keen to mark their own points of difference, their own uniqueness and individuality, to set them apart from the wider punk crowd. Such attitudes reflected punk's autonomous spirit of rebellion – the irony being that 'punk' was a movement of self-styled individuals who widely rejected the idea of a coherent, collective group identity. This was reflected as much in interviews and public statements by key figures within the emerging subculture (e.g. the rejection of 'punk' as a term, the struggle with other umbrella suggestions including new wave, regular expressions of personal or group distinction from all the 'rest') as it was in lyrics and visual communication. For example, note the stereotype of 1977-era punk songs communicated in the first person as a statement of individual autonomy: expressions of subjective angst and self-identity seemed to be commonplace in the wake of the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy In The UK* (with its opening salvo "*I am an anti-Christ, I am an anarchist*" setting the tone for what was to follow) and *I Wanna Be Me*. UK examples include the Drones *I Just Wanna Be Myself*; Sham *69 I Don't Wanna*; the Boys *I Don't Care*; Suburban Studs *I Hate School*; the Lurkers *I'm On Heat* or *I Don't Need To Tell Her*; 999 *I'm Alive*; UK Subs *I Live In A Car*; and Buzzcocks *I Don't Mind* or *What Do I Get?*.

Malcolm Garrett attempted to reflect the ironic obtuseness of Buzzcocks' music and lyrics in his approach to their record sleeves and posters, as he noted in *The Art of Punk*: "*I felt that this approach reflected the group's lyrics, which were on the one hand quite "domestic," but also bittersweet, slightly dehumanized (there is no "he" or "she" in a Buzzcocks lyric), and somewhat aggressive all at the same time.*" Strategies

for Buzzcocks included playfully highlighting the production process itself, labeling special carrier bags for the debut album with the word Product, or massively enlarging the United Artists logo and catalogue number on the sleeve of the single *I Don't Mind/Autonomy* so that it dominated the band name and song titles. Both songs were taken from the debut album (contradicting punk's widespread value-for-money ideology), a strategy that Buzzcocks and the designer disagreed with: Garrett's deliberately obtuse promotional poster ignored the song titles and simply stated "*this single out now, new single out soon*".

In some ways, early punk's diversity was its core strength. Creative responses to punk's call-to-arms were often witty and engaging, sometimes radical and challenging, innovative and experimental, sometimes simplistic, superficial or downright inane. There was no inherent punk 'style', at least beyond the restrictions imposed by amateur production and a lack of skills or technique – early punk fanzines, for instance, shared aesthetic similarities that were largely a product of the process of design and print manufacture, rather than a set of coordinated intentions. Mark Perry said he set out to create a 'proper magazine' with *Sniffin' Glue*, but lacked the skills to create a professional product. The result was something of a happy accident – a graphic style that embodies the urgency, energy and attitude of the new punk DIY generation. Other punk fanzine producers followed suit, though again the visual aesthetic and graphic style reflected as much the tools and techniques employed as it did a desire to emulate successful punk fanzines already in existence. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth – punk fanzine producers wanted their own work to stand out from the crowd, to retain a sense of individuality and autonomy, in the same way that many bands were looking for their own unique stylistic or rhetorical point of difference.

As punk evolved, so its visual language developed in tandem. The rawness of early punk was softened by the impact of commercial interests as time went on, though like so many other aspects of punk history, this is a complicated story. On the one hand, investment by major labels might be seen as exploitative – the implementation of a business model to what might be seen as 'authentic' youth subculture founded on autonomy and resistance. But, equally, it reflected the *success* of that subculture to impact on the lives and interests of a huge range of people across the UK, Europe, the US and beyond, and the need for greater investment in manufacturing and distribution to meet demand. Geographical distinctions also need to be made here: the marketing of New Wave (and more distinctly, Power Pop) in the US differed from the situation in the UK, in part since the much closer proximity of towns and cities in the UK allowed for a greater sense of community and subcultural cohesion (and the development of a punk 'underground') than the vast land expanse of the US. Equally, the way that the established music industry operates in different countries played a part in dissemination, and acceptance (or otherwise) of the emerging subculture: US Hardcore was in many ways a closer parallel to the early UK punk scene than its 'New Wave' precursors in New York, Detroit and the West Coast, which were largely seen as a continuation of existing avant-garde rock music styles and genres, facilitated and marketed by industry professionals. Certainly, the notion of autonomy and artistic control played a major part in defining a punk 'subculture' in relation to the traditional music industry, though the subsequent

commercial success of the ‘independents’ was to lead to a great deal of ideological wrangling. Perhaps the natural conclusion of this dichotomy was the (short-lived) success of Rough Trade and the Cartel network – the marriage of independent ideals to established markets and industry models.

Obviously, there are also contradictions – while many of the successful first wave of punk and new wave groups in the UK were taken on by the established music industry, plenty of others were inspired by the *do-it-yourself* narrative to take up arms and create their own version of the subculture. Some of this was ideological – a reaction to recuperation by corporate interests and a return to, or continuation of, punk’s supposedly autonomous, underground roots – while some was driven more by necessity than ideology. After all, the industry exploitation of punk and new wave was moving fast, and no one expected it to last too long, not least many of the major labels who signed short-term contracts with their new protégés and went for the fast buck rather than any sort of extended investment. By 1978, the A&R men were looking beyond punk and searching for the next big thing – the Mod revival, Ska and Two-Tone, the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, or the electronic music boom and New Romanticism that was just about visible on the horizon. Simply put, the next generation of punk bands simply weren’t being signed up by the majors in the same way that the first wave had elicited such a frenzy of activity, in part because the labels had already placed their bets, and in part because they didn’t see much of a long-term return on what was expected to be a short-term trend.

Everybody’s saying that punk is dead, it’s time to close the shop
I’m sorry but we mean it man – we’re never ever gonna stop
And we don’t care what the papers say, we’re gonna pogo ‘til we drop
Even though you’re tryin’ to tell me everybody’s into Power Pop
 Alberto Y Lost Trios Paranoias – *Fuck You* (Logo Records 1978)

The picture regarding punk autonomy and independence is, then, pretty mixed. Some pioneering spirits (bands, labels, artists, designers) set out to pursue an ideological path in opposition to major commercial vested interests: Stiff, Rough Trade, Factory, Small Wonder, Beggars Banquet, the Desperate Bicycles, Crass, Scritti Politti. Others seized an opportunity offered by the contemporary zeitgeist – after all, the punk and post-punk independent scene was booming by 1978, and many groups and small labels found that they could self-finance a limited run of records in likely anticipation of covering their costs. Independent distribution networks offered a further prop to this cottage industry, alongside the proliferation of mail order outlets and other businesses set up to facilitate the DIY punk boom.

The Rules Are ... There Are No Rules

By the late 1970s, UK punk had officially morphed into a range of sub-genres, all competing for attention. To a large extent, this was driven by commercial interests as much as by the groups or artists themselves. The early punk umbrella had contained a wide variety of styles and approaches anyway – they just hadn’t been individually named or marketed as such. As the incandescent flash of the initial punk explosion was becoming tarnished in the media, participants were moving on to seek out new styles, and a new generation of punks was coming in to take up the reins. Some of the

shifts were aesthetic and stylistic, some were commercially-driven, while others were ideological or political – punk morphed into Post-Punk, New Wave, Real Punk, Oi!, Anarcho Punk and Goth, and continued to fragment and shatter as time went on. In some ways, this was a boom time for punk art and design – the need to demarcate a sense of difference was even more marked, though the unfortunate counterpoint was that a stronger sense of tribalism and sub-genre affinity began to cement visual codes and stylistic conventions in graphics, dress codes and fashion.

Here we all are in the latest craze
Stick with the crowd
Hope it’s not a passing phase
 The Adverts – *Safety in Numbers* (Anchor Records 1977)

Anarcho punk was one example of a punk sub-genre that established new aesthetic and visual standards, emerging partly as a reaction to the political polarisation of the UK punk movement, with a direct connection to the underground counter-culture of the 1960s and early 1970s. Often employing explicit visual and verbal attacks on the power of the state, together with strong anti-war and /or animal rights sentiments alongside an austere, monochrome, deliberately lo-tech and raw design approach, records tended to follow certain unspoken aesthetic rules. Many of these conventions were directly influenced by the output of the band and collective Crass, whose media interruptions – incorporating records, books, films, events, concerts, printed publications and posters – employed a distinctive visual style and paved the way for an entire sub-genre. A viral campaign based on word-of-mouth communications within underground punk networks saw the band’s name and graphic identity stencilled on walls across the country and widespread recognition in fanzines and punk media channels. Utilising a strategy of (low) maximum price details on the sleeves, visual devices centred on a heavy black circle, the anarchist symbol, and fold-out posters, the group’s graphic output was designed to communicate strong political messages along with a sense of authority, directness and a lack of what the group saw as superfluous decorative or stylistic gestures.

Yes that’s right, punk is dead
It’s just another cheap product for the consumer’s head
Bubblegum rock on plastic transistors
Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters
 Crass – *Punk is Dead* (Crass Records 1978)

Crass’s visual work was self-produced, with art direction credits going to Crass and G Sus (Gee Vaucher). Drummer Penny Rimbaud had experience as a graphic designer, while Vaucher was an accomplished commercial illustrator, most recently for the *New York Times* magazine and *Rolling Stone*. The group’s circular visual identity was originally designed for the frontispiece of a self-published book by Rimbaud entitled *Christ’s Reality Asylum*, some time before the formation of the group. Designed by Dave King, the symbol “...represented the various forms of oppression that I’d discussed in the book: family, church and state. Heraldic in quality, part national flag, part cross, part swastika, the circular design broke on its edges into two serpents’ heads, suggesting that the power it represented was about to consume itself” according to Rimbaud. The symbol

also featured on the cover of the first Crass single, *Reality Asylum/Shaved Women*: the cover of the first pressing was silkscreen printed by the group themselves onto folded card with two-colour inlays, with subsequent pressings professionally litho-printed in black on a white newsprint background, in what was to widely become a graphic convention for the anarcho punk movement as a whole. Anarcho punk evolved as both a literal interpretation of the anarchist message of first wave punk, and as a protest against what the punk movement had become. Later developments saw a further reflection and critique of the way that anarcho punk, in itself, had become stylised and had established invisible rules and codes of conduct among its followers: some groups such as Hagar the Womb and Rubella Ballet deliberately introduced colour into the visual mix as a reaction against the graphic conventions of their forebears.

Nostalgia and Conformity

In some ways, the story of anarcho punk's evolution reflects the experience of most of the other punk sub-genres operating in parallel: an initial ideological or aesthetic premise, initiated by a group or small collective of participants on the fringes of the established punk subculture, sets a new visual, musical or ideological standard that helps to shape and influence others. A new punk sub-genre evolves, with participants helping to shape musical, stylistic and graphic conventions. Over time, these conventions become diluted through repetition and re-use, or are weakened by poorly executed and generic copycat material, and the sub-genre becomes stylised and in some ways a self-parody of its initial, radical premise.

I guess it's just the music that brings on nostalgia for an age yet to come
 Buzzcocks – *Nostalgia* (United Artists 1978)

I'm not sure I have any kind of 'answer' to the issues raised in this short reflective essay. Maybe it's just our shared experience of cultural life – the birth, progression and ultimate decline of subcultural groups and communities within a market economy. 'Punk' does continue to morph and change, though perhaps some current trends indicate a growing degree of what I might call nostalgic conservatism – punk as museum piece or cultural heritage. I have always taken issue with Dick Hebdige's theories of subcultures as initially driven by pioneers but then diluted and ultimately recuperated as commercial fashion styles, since I believe that subcultural evolution is ongoing, particularly as it impacts on people and places further afield, away from the 'cultural centres'. However, I also have to accept that a creeping uniformity can, and often does, take hold over what were originally radical and challenging ideas, styles and aesthetics. There are still some pioneering radicals out there within the wider 'punk' scene, but perhaps their impact is being obscured by the weight of convention across the majority of the subculture – tired clichés and boring modern traditions in music, lyrics, clothes, haircuts and graphics, alongside a disaffected thousand-yard stare, honed to perfection over the past forty years but, sadly, lacking any sense of ingenuity, menace or malice.

