Turning Revolt into Style

The process and practice of punk graphic design

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Bibliography

If you're going to reminisce, then you need to do it properly.[1]

[1] The Mekons (1982), '1st Guitarist', *The Mekons Story*, vinyl album, United Kingdom: CNT Records.

Introduction

Turning Revolt into Style: The process and practice of punk graphic design takes a close look at the complex relationship between punk and the graphic design profession, from the innovations of DIY pioneers to radical changes in the commercial design industry. These changes reflected not just the influence of an emerging cohort of young designers who aligned themselves with the new subculture, but also the advent of new technologies and working practices, particularly in the printing industry during the early days of photocomposition and digital reproduction. While punk history spans more than five decades and myriad global scenes, this book attempts to capture a relatively brief timeframe and centres on the United Kingdom. Its focus ranges from Helen Wellington-Lloyd, Nils Stevenson and Jamie Reid's first attempts to graphically visualise punk in the early days of the Sex Pistols, through dramatic changes in technology and labour relations in the printing industry during the early 1980s, culminating in the responses by music graphics professionals to the Copyright, Designs and Payments Act of 1988.

Punk's visual language was formed in response to the cultural moment in which it was situated. This book draws upon interviews with leading punk and post-punk designers including Malcolm Garrett, Bill Smith, Chris Morton, Steve Averill, Mike Coles, Bob Last, Rob O'Connor, Jill Mumford and Neville Brody, together with print production expertise from Murray Arbiter at ArbiterDrucken and Tim Milne of Artomatic. Along with a close analysis of punk and post-punk record covers, fanzines and other artefacts, it charts the story of a seismic cultural shift that was to have a lasting impact for decades to come. The text centres on two key questions: how did a new generation of young, punk-inspired graphic designers navigate the music graphics profession in the late 1970s and early 1980s? And how did significant changes in printing technology, labour relations and working practices in the design profession impact their work during that period?

The visual styles of the emerging punk subculture (graphics, fashion, dress, photography) were formed not just from historical antecedents but also in relation to contemporary conditions. While

several high-profile books, exhibitions and articles in recent years have focused on punk graphics,[1] they have not usually situated punk's visual aesthetic within the technological, cultural, professional and political contexts that directly impacted its look, style and material qualities. These 'punk art' collections have tended to showcase objects, sometimes naming the designer and adding a few art historical references to provide design inspiration or context, but they rarely if ever consider the design process, the actual *practice* of making designed artefacts. This book is an attempt to join the dots, to map the connections between amateur producers, punk-related or affiliated design practitioners, the mainstream music industry and its allied music graphic design professionals and studios. It also considers the impact of craft skills, design and print technologies and the social and political landscape within which those designers turned revolt into style (to borrow a phrase from the late, great George Melly) and created a set of innovative, powerful and long-lasting subcultural visual codes that would impact the mainstream for many years to come.

The initial punk explosion in the United Kingdom happened at a time of significant social, political and technological change. Graphic designers contributed to, and were deeply affected by, those changes. Punk's back to basics ideology brought a sense of urgency to a stagnant and complacent music industry, while many established design professionals took the opportunity to contribute positively to the new movement. In practice, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the commercial and professional relationship between popular culture and punk, particularly the role of the music industry and the business model that operates behind the creation of new styles and markets.[2] This includes not only the investors, managers, critics and journalists, marketing teams, promoters, manufacturers, distributors and retailers, but also the art directors, typographers, illustrators, photographers and branding and identity designers who created its visual aesthetic.

While this book can never hope to be comprehensive, the focus is on graphic design and typography, rather than illustration and photography as distinct, separate disciplines. Professional rock photographers who helped shape a punk aesthetic deserve recognition, however, not least because their work was closely integrated with the design of some notable punk and post-punk album

covers. Among these, an older group of professional photographers including Michael Beal, Keith Morris, Derek Ridgers, Rik Walton, Sheila Rock,[3] Jill Furmanovsky, Adrian Boot, Pennie Smith, Peter Gravelle,[4] Kate Simon, Chris Gabrin and Brian Griffin[5] pre-dated the punk explosion. Many had experience working with design teams at the major record labels, while relative newcomers such as Janette Beckman, Ray Stevenson, Erica Echenberg and Mick Mercer established a photographic practice through their documentation of the new subculture from the inside.

Like photography, illustration is mentioned only lightly. This book is about the design practice and process, which often entailed an art director or graphic designer working with an illustrator, photographer or type designer as commissioned contributors to a larger, more complex project. In this model, the graphic designer might be seen as the concept originator, project manager and coordinator leading the construction of a visual identity, with the image – photograph or illustration, for instance – one component of the bigger whole. Obviously, such definitions are messy, complicated and flawed, particularly in those instances where a photographer or illustrator took on the design brief in its entirety, or where the image constituted a significant part of the final design. Russell Mills, Ian Wright or Linder Sterling might be important examples here, particularly in Mills' work for Penetration, The Skids and Wire, or his collaboration with Brian Eno, *More Dark Than Shark* (1986),[6] along with Wright's illustrations for *The Face* and *New Musical Express* and Sterling's drawing, collage and photomontage work for Magazine and her own post-punk band, Ludus. Gee Vaucher's work also spans a similar range of professional roles as Mills and Sterling, working primarily as an illustrator but also taking responsibility for much of the graphic design output of the anarcho-punk group Crass, along with her own tabloid format illustrated journal, *International Anthem* (1977–1984).[7]

The evolution of a new form of punk-inspired visual communication also enabled a generation of young, innovative designers to gain a foothold in the profession, or at least to contribute to a rapidly developing and dynamic new set of styles. These ranged from those with art school experience or design training who became closely linked to a particular group or label – Jamie Reid, Chris Morton, Malcolm Garrett, Linder Sterling, Bob Last, Gee Vaucher, Peter Saville, Vaughan Oliver – to up-and-

coming music graphics specialists including Phil Smee, Neville Brody, Mike Coles (Malicious Damage), Rob O'Connor (Stylorouge) and Alex McDowell (Rocking Russian). At the same time, a new generation of punk-inspired amateurs struggled against the odds without any clear historical or contextual reference points. These included Mark Perry, Tony Moon, Charlie Chainsaw, Tony Fletcher, Mike Diboll, Tom Vague, Alan Rider, Tony Drayton and hundreds of others, particularly in the burgeoning punk fanzine market. Punk graphics also owed an obvious debt to a cohort of experienced art directors and designers who could utilise their skills in the marketing and branding of the new style, such as Barney Bubbles, George 'God' Snow, Bill Smith, Jo Mirowski, Jill Mumford, Paul Henry, Nicholas De Ville and David Jeffery.

A punk visual aesthetic

With a history now spanning fifty years or more, punk is a phenomenon that is difficult to define in simple terms. As a social, cultural, philosophical and aesthetic movement, it has always covered a wide assortment of practices, styles and expressions. Recent popular accounts have at times sanitised punk history and attempted to shoehorn it into a retrospectively 'progressive' narrative that belies its original complexity and inherent contradictions.[8] Some punk participants are considered, reflective and socially or politically engaged. Others care about hedonism more than activism, with punk functioning as a stylistic backdrop to their greater desire to have fun. Still more are happy to fit in to the scene as fans and followers, without a desire to actively contribute to the wider 'punk community'. Core values are, therefore, hard to pin down, though a few simple codes and conventions receive support across many punk scenes: a call for autonomy, authenticity and empowerment alongside a rejection of authority, tradition and commercial exploitation.

None of these values are unique to punk, nor did the subculture set a precedent anything like as powerful and dramatic as some sections of the media would go on to portray it. That is not to say, however, that punk did not embrace and facilitate new opportunities and codes of practice that deeply affected a range of institutions, from the music business to film, photography, art, design,

journalism, publishing and the wider entertainment industry. It is not the intention here to narrow punk to a tightly bound set of principles or a particular historical narrative, though the focus is largely on its impact in the United Kingdom. This book attempts to investigate the intersection between subculture, media, the music industry, design, technology and the wider social, cultural, political and economic environment of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, it makes the case for punk art and design as an act of *making*, embodying practice, craft, technology, materials and labour, and for the dissemination and reception of punk through objects and artefacts – records, fanzines, flyers, posters, magazines, badges and other graphic ephemera – alongside clothing, music and performance.

As an early London Weekend Television documentary on the UK punk rock phenomenon, first broadcast on 28 November 1976, indicated, part of the new subculture's philosophy revolved around the idea of participation and the levelling of hierarchies between performer and audience. Presenter Janet Street-Porter's narration attempted to get to grips with the basic principles of punk as a do-it-yourself model of subcultural participation, 'There's also a new feeling that you don't have to be a special sort of person to pick up a guitar or stand in front of a mic and sing. In punk rock, anyone can have a go.'[9] In practice, such hierarchies were harder to budge, particularly outside the realm of punk performance, although even here the mythology only briefly outweighed the brutal reality that some musicians were simply more capable, or more interesting, than others.

Just over a year later, LWT revisited the subculture with a longer programme entitled *The Year of Punk*, drawing on some of the same footage as the original feature, but now accompanied by clips of bands performing live at the Roxy and Vortex punk clubs in London over the previous year. Street-Porter once again highlighted punk's anyone can do it philosophy, although with the benefit of hindsight she also offered something of a critical reflection, 'Another fundamental part of punk's attraction was the belief that anyone could be a musician. This was exciting for the punk fans, but it naturally led to some rather basic performances.'[10]

By now, punk and new wave music was becoming a big business, and the down-to-earth, street-level narrative was perhaps more of a mechanism for selling commodities through a sense of supposed

authenticity than a practical manifesto for wider participation. There is, of course, a tension here between punk as attitude and ideology and punk as a new and distinct form of popular music, between a philosophical approach to the subculture and the commercial priorities of a music industry that saw an opportunity to access emerging markets and new audiences. Certainly, when it came to punk products – records, clothing, promotional material – the more traditional business-led operations of branding, marketing, professional design and copyright held sway. Punk clothes, always displaying a tension between the high fashion of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren in their King's Road boutique and the charity shop adaptations and home-made, do-it-yourself outfits of early fans, also witnessed a boom in copycat items sold by smaller traders and mail order sellers advertising in the back pages of the music press.

Early punk graphics in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe and Australia ranged from the Situationist-inspired détournement of the Sex Pistols to the everyday street style of The Ramones, The Saints, The Undertones and The Lurkers, the minimalist sophistication of Talking Heads and Wire, the comic irreverence of The Damned, the ironic visual identity of Stiff Records and their roster of oddball, leftfield artists, the retro styling of The Jam, The Rezillos and Generation X, the overt DIY call-to-arms of Desperate Bicycles, Television Personalities and Scritti Politti, the quirkiness of Buzzcocks, XTC and Magazine, or the gritty, urban rock'n'roll street gang image of The Clash, Sham 69 and countless others that followed in their wake. In the United Kingdom, Jamie Reid's work for the Sex Pistols led the way, leaking out through the music press and mainstream media even before the group had recorded their first single. Reid's deliberately rough and ready, agit-prop style was mirrored to an extent by the early punk fanzines, though the symbiotic relationship was largely coincidental – many of the fanzine producers were creating graphics that were primarily driven by (the lack of) available technology and limited skill sets, while Reid (a highly experienced artist and graphic designer) was making a conscious choice of visual strategy. Some years earlier, Reid had developed a rough and ready sense of agitprop visual style at Suburban Press, after the collective acquired a Multilith 1250 offset press. He brought these graphic strategies to the table in the creation of a punk aesthetic,

utilising methods and at times reusing older work for a new purpose.[11]

> As the members of Suburban Press did much of their own servicing, they learned the capabilities of the machine through trial and error, also finding that bolder designs with marker pen, ripped edges and less finesse would reproduce with more attack than finer images.[12]

Perhaps as much by serendipity as by choice, punk's do-it-yourself graphic underground aesthetic closely mirrored the developing styles and conventions of the punk mainstream and vice versa. Professional designers could emulate some of the rough and rudimentary styles that were bubbling up from below to project a sense of grass-roots authenticity, while many of the amateur punk DIY creatives attempted to fit their work within emerging punk visual styles, much of it residing in the mainstream music industry. The dissemination and reach of punk 'product', usually a direct result of the marketing and distribution power of the major labels and their (temporary, at least) investment in the new wave, meant that many of these examples set the tone more widely. In the process, punk record covers and features in the traditional music press contributed directly to a received notion of punk fashion and graphic style across the regions of the United Kingdom, particularly among younger audiences with little direct experience of live gigs or the London-centric punk clubs.

Once punk became more widely recuperated and stylised, by the record industry and fans alike, visual conventions began to narrow, leading to a more generic set of punk graphic conventions that persist today. Harder visual boundaries were put in place between punk and what became known as new wave, for instance, though the two terms had been largely interchangeable when the scene was in its infancy. Different factions subsequently diversified and fragmented from punk's original broad umbrella to create more tightly focused scenes and sub-genres including hardcore, anarcho-punk, Oi! and post-punk, each developing its own visual conventions in the process.

Music graphics

The relationship between the fine arts and the applied or commercial arts is long and complex. The creation of visual work in response to a brief or on behalf of a client is widely viewed as distinct from, and sometimes inferior to, those practices where the artist is attributed with concept, content and form, without external input or influence. Meanwhile, graphic design for the popular music industry, or music graphics, occupies a somewhat elevated position within the design profession, at least for its more celebrated exponents, separated from the murky world of more mainstream, commercial creative practice such as branding and identity, packaging, information and editorial work. In part, this is due to the long-established cultural cachet afforded certain sections of the popular music industry, where notions of counterculture still hold sway. A legacy of the 1950s and 1960s rock'n'roll and beat booms, rock music has long been associated with the popular avant-garde, with notions of authenticity, rebellion and independence from the mainstream.[13]

Elements of rock and pop music have achieved a level of critical acclaim that has resonated with the public, situating both the recording artists and their associated partners (producers, designers, illustrators, photographers, record labels) in a nebulous space somewhere between 'high' and 'low' culture. Album cover art (a term that is equally problematic in its ambiguous connotations) in many cases plays an intrinsic part in the cultural significance of 'iconic' albums. From *Abbey Road* to *Led Zeppelin*, *Dark Side of the Moon* to *Aladdin Sane*, the record cover is often inseparable from the songs, embedded in the mind of the listener as the image that directly reflects the content of the music and offers some special insight into the philosophy and character of the artist. Meanwhile, the designers and creative teams behind much of this work often go unrecognised, beyond perhaps a minor credit in the sleeve notes. Those few designers and studios that did manage to achieve a level of public recognition at the height of the popular music boom of the 1970s and 1980s – Roger Dean, Storm Thorgerson and Aubrey Powell at Hipgnosis,[14] Barney Bubbles,[15] Jamie Reid,[16] Peter Saville[17] – often did so through the critical and commercial status of the artists and albums they packaged as much as the intrinsic qualities of the visual work they created.

There were a few rare instances where public acknowledgement and appreciation of the creator of the cover design approached that of the musicians, often due to the existing profile or status of an acclaimed guest artist, rather than a recognition of the work of an anonymous graphic designer commissioned to create a visual identity. The critical high praise surrounding, for instance, Peter Blake and Jann Haworth's physical montage for The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Richard Hamilton's embossed, plain white cover for The Beatles' *The Beatles* (popularly known as *The White Album*), or Andy Warhol's artwork for the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* and The Velvet Underground's *The Velvet Underground & Nico* muddy the water further, with the notion that *some* album designs may even stand alone as venerated examples of visual art. Those covers seem to hold a resonance separate from the music, superseding the core principles of branding and identity design that apply more generally to record packaging. In practice, for many listeners, fans, readers and viewers, a balance is always struck between the group or artist who created the music, the sound of the recorded songs, the design of the cover and the cultural status or desirability of the manufactured product.

Art vs. design

Graphic design occupies a unique position within the creative arts. It is an applied art, rather than a form of independent artistic practice – it marries creative practices with batch (usually print) production for commercial or cultural ends. Much graphic design work is also anonymously produced, with the artefact and message embodying its central purpose and its creator left uncredited.[18] At the same time, graphic design objects are often viewed as ephemeral: the 'design' is the conduit to access the event, product, or content (poster, package, book, magazine), rather than an object with cultural or commercial value in and of itself. Seldom would a buyer purchase a book or record purely for its cover. A book may be beautifully designed, and its functionality may be seamless and harmonious, but its primary purpose is to package the text in an appropriate form to be read by a reader. While a poster for an event may have aesthetic qualities that lead to its display on the wall beyond the timeframe of its message or content (as a beautiful, desirable, or collectable object), its core function

is to communicate – not simply to act as a visual artefact in and of itself. Graphic designers are usually commissioned to handle the form of a piece of visual communication, while content is authored by someone else: the client, the brief. Design may offer an aesthetically pleasing or appropriately functional window to content, but it is seldom the focal point: books are to be read, records to be listened to, posters to communicate information – the packaging simply a vehicle to guide the reader or listener to the content.

The punk subculture, in its mid- to late-1970s incarnation, significantly affected the graphic design profession, from the impact of pioneering – and often independent – designers disrupting traditional practices and career patterns to their embrace of new and innovative methods and technologies. Punk's desire to demystify and enable a close relationship between the artist and spectator, to break down barriers with the audience and encourage others to 'do-it-themselves' is also reflected in design strategies and methods that offer a sense of authenticity, autonomy and personal connection. This projection of grass roots authenticity and a connection between artist and audience is exemplified not only in the design and production of fanzines and independent DIY punk records but also in much of the work produced by professional designers at the major record labels to fit the contemporary zeitgeist.

The design of record sleeves and other graphic ephemera associated with popular music relates directly to a range of wider fields: the design and print industry, technologies for reproduction, cultural conventions, materials, economics, audiences and readers or buyers.[19] The design of punk and post-punk visual material in the United Kingdom is little different in this respect, though rapid changes in technology along with a radical restructuring of the print industry through the early 1980s did have a material effect on the way designers worked and the kinds of work that they created. While punk graphic design has been a subject of some interest to historians and curators, it has often been situated in the context of social history or as a subsidiary area of subcultural studies, itself a field largely centred in the humanities and social sciences.

This book takes a wider critical approach, positioning punk and post-punk graphic design within

a range of contemporaneous social, cultural, economic and technological contexts. These include the established music graphics industry and professional design studios in the 1970s and 1980s, the evolving punk mantra of independence and do-it-yourself, the impact of new technology and the social, political and economic conditions of the design and print industry at a critical juncture in its history. During a period when aspiring new artists and designers were engaging with the opportunities afforded by punk's social and cultural schism, technological upheavals were heavily affecting the design and print industries. Wholesale changes in pre-press techniques significantly disrupted the labour market and led to the axing of jobs embedded in specialist crafts, particularly in composition and hot metal typesetting in the national newspaper industry. In turn, this impacted the power of the print unions and forced major changes to longstanding working practices throughout the graphic design and print professions.

A punk design historiography

The election of a new Conservative administration under Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 led to a new era in industrial relations. Long-stablished working practices were now under threat and the dominance of the trade unions that had reached its pinnacle in the Winter of Discontent of 1978/79 was to swiftly become a focus of media and government attention. Traditional industries centred on manufacturing and engineering (such as steel, coal mining, shipbuilding and car making) faced radical restructuring or closure, leading to a series of high-profile industrial disputes between 1981 and 1987 and increasingly acrimonious battles between the government and unions.[20] This period has been highlighted as significant in contemporary British history, though many of the books published on the subject have tended to blend journalism with academic research. In part, this may reflect the increasing centrality of popular culture to our understanding of historical narrative, along with a deeper public interest in the recent past. At the same time, as Lucy Robinson notes, it has inspired a range of alternative interpretations of events.

> Popular journalism and academic work blurred around the eighties, with journalists writing many of the histories that have ended up on university reading lists, and with academics producing narrative accounts for the trade market… If there is a consensus in these histories of the eighties, it is that there is *no consensus* over the history of the 1980s.[21]

After a period of two or three decades had passed and the 1970s and 1980s shifted into the rear-view mirror, writers began to produce narrative accounts of each decade, focusing primarily on social, cultural and political change. Central themes ranged from the global crises and industrial strife of the early 1970s to the impact of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration between May 1979 and November 1990. Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2009),[22] along with Alwyn W. Turner's *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (2008)[23] and *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* (2010)[24] perhaps best capture this drive to slice historical events into temporally delineated thematic critiques. Turner in particular employs popular culture as a lens through which to comment on changes in British society: notable examples taken from pop music, television drama, comedy and film are juxtaposed with bigger questions relating to industrial relations, race, the environment, women's rights, violence, the Cold War and globalisation. Meanwhile, Dominic Sandbrook's popular histories *State of Emergency: Britain, 1970–1974* (2010),[25] *Seasons in the Sun: Britain, 1974–1979* (2012)[26] and *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979–1982* (2019)[27] focus on even narrower temporal and societal shifts, while adopting broadly similar approaches to historical narrative.

Andy McSmith's *No Such Thing as Society: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (2011)[28] also draws on pop cultural references to construct a grand narrative of what the publisher's cover blurb describes as 'the revolutionary decade of the twentieth century,' though the author places social, political and economic change (the Thatcher government, feminism, the miners' strike, race relations, unemployment, the Falklands War) front and centre. Examples from television, pop music and media are employed by McSmith as a reference point rather than a driver of events. Similarly, Graham

Stewart's *Bang! A History of Britain in the 1980s* (2013)[29] offers a few nods to prominent pop stars and events (Wham, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Live Aid) but the core focus is on national politics, foreign policy, the media and the economy.

Andy Beckett's *Promised You a Miracle: UK 80–82* (2015)[30] and David Elliott's *1984: British Pop's Dividing Year* (2020)[31] both move beyond the notion of historical shifts arranged by decade to focus on brief periods of radical change: in Beckett's case largely centring on the economy and political ideology during the first term of the Thatcher government, while Elliott looks more explicitly at pop music from Prince and Michael Jackson to Mark E Smith. Intriguingly, Elliott also dedicates a chapter in the book to graphic design, offering a broad summary of some of the key players in the early 1980s and the emerging aesthetic tropes of post-punk, synth-pop and the new romantics, though the author doesn't attempt to map these in relation to professional practice or technological developments.

A recent history of the 1980s by Lucy Robinson, *Now That's What I Call a History of the 1980s: Pop Culture and Politics in the Decade That Shaped Modern Britain* (2023),[32] takes a slightly different approach. The author doesn't seek to avoid inevitable overlaps when exploring green activism, the peace movement, militarism, racism, employment rights and the unions, terrorism, the news media, censorship, sexuality, AIDS and consumerism. Robinson deftly leads the reader through these topics while offering parallels in the music and visual style of such disparate pop culture figures as Adam Ant, Smiley Culture, Bananarama, Princess Diana and Roland Rat. Using the *Now That's What I Call Music!* series of compilation albums launched by Virgin Records and EMI in 1983 as a metaphor for the contemporaneous interplay between a multitude of themes, events and institutions, the book invites readers to think beyond simple chronologies and to embrace complexity.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a resurgence in interest in the history of punk in the United Kingdom (inspired by anniversaries of several prominent dates in the original punk calendar) resulted in a flurry of activity. In 1999, Roger Sabin edited the first serious collection of academic essays on the history of punk, *Punk Rock: So What?*,[33] an attempt to reconsider punk in a cultural and sociological framework, questioning the value of persistent myths and often repeated histories. As Sabin records

in his introduction, a great deal of writing had been done on the subject, but objective studies based on the application of a rigorous academic methodology were uncommon, with a plethora of personal, subjective documentaries holding sway in the market.

> ...but the problem with all this debate around punk is that history is being rewritten. There'd be no need to worry if the discussions were making the correct historical connections; if the parameters of the debate were sound; if, ultimately, the commentators were 'getting it right'. But unfortunately, in general, they haven't been, and some serious errors of emphasis have been made.[34]

September 2001 saw the first British academic conference solely concerned with punk rock – No Future? Punk 2001, a week-long series of events, presentations and discussions at Wolverhampton University, timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the 100 Club Punk Festival of September 1976. This academic review of punk as an important element in contemporary cultural history reflected a growing trend through the 1990s towards a reappraisal of its impact since 1976. Jon Savage had set the standard for narrative histories of the early punk scene back in 1991 with the justifiably acclaimed *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*,[35] and many other journalists and former punk musicians joined the rush to publish their own version of events. In a frenzy of hyperbolic marketing blurb, several purported (and failed miserably) to tell the 'definitive' history of punk, often accompanied by little-known or previously unpublished photographs and memorabilia,[36] while others went back to musicians from the era and conducted retrospective interviews to create punk 'oral histories' that varied from insightful and informative to rose-tinted nostalgia.[37]

A popular narrative among critics and music historians suggests a lineage from successful British groups of the 1960s, through progressive rock and glam in the early 1970s, to punk in the late 1970s in the form of the Sex Pistols and The Clash. The early 1980s are usually represented by post-punk groups such as Joy Division and later New Order, with popular music again splintering and diversifying

to embrace funk, disco and the new romantic movement. Some of these aspects of what has been termed post-punk came under wider critical attention in the early 2000s. Music journalist Simon Reynolds' narrowly framed history of post-punk, *Rip It Up and Start Again*,[38] was published in March 2005 to widespread critical acclaim, prompting several features in the mainstream press.

In parallel to these broad social histories of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s and retrospective critical analyses of punk through the lens of sociology, ethnography and cultural history, numerous books have been published about punk and post-punk art and design. Like the popular histories, there was something of an acceleration of publishing after the turn of the Millennium, with the original punk movement by that time largely recuperated and institutionalised more than two decades after its perceived demise. Punk's highly charged visual aesthetic was ripe for exploitation and commentators seized the opportunity to get in on the act. There were, of course, precursors. *Melody Maker* journalist and punk advocate Caroline Coon had attempted to contextualise the early punk scene in an image-heavy book, *1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*,[39] first published in 1977, though most contemporary reportage was conducted through the music press and the punk fanzines.

Meanwhile, early collections of visual material, such as Ray Stevenson's *Sex Pistols File* (1978),[40] were aimed at fans and collectors, serving more as catalogues of memorabilia than critical appraisals of graphic artefacts. Jamie Reid and Jon Savage's *Up They Rise: The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid* (1987)[41] focused on the artist's portfolio to date and included some contextual commentary from both Reid and Savage, though there was still little sense of reflective critique regarding the *how* and *why* of the work. By this time, however, Reid's work for the Sex Pistols – and punk graphics more broadly – was beginning to receive at least some wider attention. Brian Cannon's *Going Nowhere: The Art and Design of Punk and New Wave* (1989)[42] attempted to summarise some of the conceptual themes behind punk's visual language, though the author did not attempt to unpack the practical processes at work behind the chosen graphic examples. Rock music journalist Greil Marcus got in on the act with his deeply flawed – and unfathomably influential – account of punk's artistic precursors, *Lipstick Traces*, in 1989.[43] Marcus cited solid philosophical and aesthetic connections between Dada, the

Situationists and punk, helping to substantiate a broader mythology that was set to endure in subsequent writing on punk art and design. He also dramatically over-stretched the narrative to include medieval heretics and mythological characters that seemed to reflect Malcolm McLaren's deliberate appropriations of the French Revolution and the Gordon Riots as a statement of fact, rather than a tongue-in-cheek, quasi-Situationist stunt.

In the broader field of modern graphic design history, expanding beyond a focus purely on punk graphics, Catherine McDermott's *Street Style: British Design in the 80s* (1987) framed a significant element of then-contemporary design in relation to punk's catalysing effect, though she linked it to a longer tradition of non-conformity in British culture.

> There is, however, an alternative British tradition which is essentially non-conformist and slightly eccentric. It has its origins in a working-class way of life which has always expressed itself by using irony, dissidence and poking fun at the establishment.[44]

Though it offers a broad critical reflection on fashion and textiles, graphic design, interior design and furniture, McDermott's book focusses on a small group of high-profile key players, with punk graphics largely reduced to the work of Jamie Reid, Malcolm Garrett and Barney Bubbles along with a nod to fanzines via Mark Perry's *Sniffin' Glue*. This brief history leads the reader seamlessly on to post-punk stylists Peter Saville, Russell Mills, 23 Envelope (Vaughan Oliver and Nigel Grierson), Terry Jones and Neville Brody, all seemingly engaged in auteur-like isolation from graphic design profession and the traditional art departments behind the scenes in the music industry. There are numerous errors and omissions (crediting Barney Bubbles with early work for The Clash, for instance, while a lengthy section attributes the collective visual output of Throbbing Gristle to Genesis P. Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, with no mention of Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson). This lack of specific detail is, sadly, typical of punk design history at what was then a nascent time in its development. However, McDermott does present a cogent case that sets the template and establishes the core narrative for many punk design histories

to follow, though her emphasis is on the new generation of successful practitioners who moved into high profile professional roles, with little acknowledgement of either the far larger cohort of punk amateur makers or the experienced professionals behind the scenes in the traditional music industry art departments.

Four years after the publication of McDermott's book, journalist Cynthia Rose published *Design After Dark* (1991),[45] a picture-based overview of what the author describes as 'fresh design' in the field of contemporary popular culture and brief profiles of 'eleven dancefloor designers' including Ian Wright, Paul Elliman and Ian Swift. Much of the work featured strays some way beyond punk and post-punk design, mainly centring on dance music, jazz, soul and funk-related branding and identity or illustration work, though Rose does attempt to link styles back to punk-era designers including Jamie Reid, Alex McDowell and Terry Jones. Less successfully, she attempts to wrap in visual references to Mayakovsky and Constructivism, which are treated simply as examples of 'Soviet style' to be cross-referenced and namechecked, shorn of any guiding philosophy or historical context.

Another book that touched on the impact of punk in the fields of art, design and visual communication of the 1980s, John A. Walker's *Cross-Overs: Art into Pop and Pop into Art* (1987)[46] paralleled Simon Frith and Howard Horne's *Art into Pop*, published the same year.[47] Whereas Frith and Horne focused on the interrelationship between art schools and pop performers, Walker examined how pop draws upon art movements like Dada, Futurism and Surrealism in the design of album covers and in live performance, while at the same time contemporary artists use pop music for inspiration. Both books offer a broad overview of their subject spanning more than three decades, though the impact of punk – and particularly the work of the many visual communicators in the scene who had never been anywhere near an art school and knew little if anything of the early twentieth century European avant-garde – is described in very limited terms. Journalist and commentator Jon Savage had offered a more critical account of these relationships in two articles for *The Face* magazine some five years earlier,[48] aligning punk's radical deployment of appropriation with a subsequent era of art historical referencing as a commercial strategy centred on nostalgia. Savage's scathing critique

of the 'age of plunder' also suggested that 1980s pop's pillaging of its own visual past was playing into the hands of contemporary right-wing politics in the first term of Margaret Thatcher's government.

In 2012, Russ Bestley and Alex Ogg's *The Art of Punk*[49] attempted to examine the intention behind a broader range of punk-related graphic material from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, with a stronger emphasis on the voices of the artists and designers involved. The book features interviews with notable punk designers including Arturo Vega, Jamie Reid, Malcolm Garrett, Peter Gravelle and John Holmstrom, along with key contributors to the early punk scene such as Mick Farren, Andrew Matheson and Marc Zermati. In the same year, Johan Kugelberg's *Punk: An Aesthetic*[50] covered similar ground, though the book was more of a showcase of rare and unseen punk graphics with limited critical analysis: brief contributions from Gee Vaucher, Linder Sterling, Jon Savage and William Gibson obfuscate rather than illuminate a reading of the accompanying images. A year later, Jon Savage and Stuart Baker's *Punk 45: The Singles Cover Art of Punk 1976–80* (2013) [51] focused on the reproduction of a selection of 7" single sleeves from the United Kingdom, United States and further afield, though again it worked as a coffee table picture book rather than a critical study. Featuring some interesting choices of punk singles from the United Kingdom, United States and Europe, images of the front (and sometimes back) covers are simply captioned with the name of the band, song titles, label, release date and band members – with few designers credited and no analysis or reflection on the design or production process. Beyond a coherent introduction by Jon Savage, setting out some of the contextual history and citing some well-chosen examples of punk singles from the period, there is no critique or exegesis. The book revolves around the background to the material, leaving the images of record sleeves to somehow 'speak' for themselves without explanation, with very little writing on the 'art' that its title purports to be about.

The official '40th anniversary of punk' was commemorated in the United Kingdom in 2016, with exhibitions and events in London and other major cities along with yet another raft of publications on the history of the subculture. More archives and collections were raided for previously unseen artefacts, with some of the higher profile, wealthier collectors delving into their vaults, taking

advantage of the resurgence of interest (along with corporate and government funding) to jump on the bandwagon. Johan Kugelberg, Jon Savage and Glenn Terry's huge, luxurious volume *God Save Sex Pistols* (2016)[52] omitted any captioning or explanation of the visual material featured, beyond a chronology of the Sex Pistols alongside quotes from members of the band and their entourage. One high-profile book did at least begin to engage with some of the designers behind the artwork that was lavishly reproduced in full colour. Toby Mott's *Oh So Pretty: Punk in Print 1976–1980* (2016)[53] featured a short essay by leading graphic design historian Rick Poynor, who attempted to introduce the importance of design and print technology and the nature of craft in visual communication, disaggregating visual style from (perceived) intention, though the overarching theme of the book was as a simple showcase of the rare and expensive items in Mott's collection, functioning more like an auction catalogue than an exegesis of the design, aesthetics and print production of punk graphic material.

Meanwhile, Tony Brook and Adrian Shaughnessy's *Action Time Vision: Punk and Post-Punk 7" Record Sleeves* (2016) featured a selection of single sleeves from the late 1970s and early 1980s taken from the collections of Tony Brook and Russ Bestley, with accompanying analysis by Brook and Bestley and interviews with Malcolm Garrett, Mark Perry and Daniel Miller.[54] The featured material in this case was selected for its visual style and interest to designers, rather than for its rarity or value on the collectors' market. Jamie Reid once again occupied the foreground in punk's emerging graphic history in 2018, with a retrospective exhibition, *XXXXX: Fifty Years of Subversion and The Spirit* at Humber Street Gallery, Hull, accompanied by a hardback book that catalogued fifty years of the artist's work.[55] That book was followed three years later by another collection of Reid's lo-tech and photocopied graphics, *Rogue Materials: 1972–2021* (2021).[56]

Other designers also utilised the growth in independent publishing to reflect on their own careers. Notable among these, Gee Vaucher's *Crass Art and Other Pre Post-Modernist Monsters*,[57] Mike Coles' *Forty Years in the Wilderness*,[58] Bill Smith's *Cover Stories*[59] and Rob O'Connor's *Delicious: The Design and Art Direction of Stylorouge* [60] provided a highly personal, illustrated history of the

designers' work. More punk DIY in nature, Graham A. Rhodes – who had worked as a designer for The Police and Miles Copeland's Faulty Products group of independent labels in the late 1970s – produced an autobiographical account of his career in art and design, *The View from Inside the Punk Monster*, in 2016.[61] While Rhodes' book is entirely text-based and lacks the visual exuberance of Vaucher, Coles et al., and relies heavily on anecdotes, he does at least outline some details regarding the design and print processes used in his work, from Letraset to the PMT camera.

A more recent fascination with punk fanzines as a source for archival research – and as sometimes fetishized visual artefacts – led to several retrospective compendiums of specific titles along with edited collections and at least some critical commentary. Notable among these, Mark Perry's *Sniffin' Glue: The Essential Punk Accessory* (2000)[62] led the way, followed by Tony Drayton's *Ripped and Torn: 1976 –79. The Loudest Punk Fanzine in the UK* (2018),[63] Alan Rider's *Adventures in Reality: The Complete Collection* (2021),[64] Tony Fletcher's *The Best of Jamming! Selections and Stories from the Fanzine That Grew Up, 1977–86* (2021)[65] and Pete Webb and Tom Vague's *Vague Volume One: 1979–1984* (2023).[66] Eddie Piller and Steve Rowland provided a broader contextual history in *Punkzines: British Fanzine Culture from the Punk Scene 1976–1983* (2021),[67] with further detailed critique and analysis provided by an academic collection from the Subcultures Network, *Ripped, Torn and Cut: Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines from 1976* (2018)[68] and Matthew Worley's archival history, *Zerox Machine: Punk, Post-Punk and Fanzines in Britain, 1976–88* (2024).[69]

2020 saw the first of two extensive hardback volumes by another collector, Andrew Krivine. *Too Fast to Live Too Young to Die: Punk & Post Punk Graphics 1976–1986*[70] included not only a vast collection of visual material spanning a full decade, from the initial punk explosion to its fragmentation into a diverse collection of competing sub-genres, but also the voices of several prominent designers and design historians (Steven Heller, Rick Poynor, Russ Bestley and Malcolm Garrett) who attempted to dig a little deeper into the work on display. Krivine published a second volume, *Reversing into the Future: New Wave Graphics 1977– 1990*,[71] the following year, shifting the emphasis a little to include more commercial and popular material spanning new wave, synth-pop and the new romantics. The

book also featured in-depth commentary and articles by two of the leading designers featured, Malcolm Garrett and Chris Morton, along with essays by cultural historian Matthew Worley and design historians Andrew Blauvelt and Rick Poynor. Blauvelt's essay, 'Riding a new wave', outlines a rounded historical and cultural context for the graphics on show, positioning styles, techniques and technologies in relation to the incursion of a 'new wave design' within the wider graphic design industry that 'would challenge the profession's conventions and, in particular, the hegemony of corporate-style Swiss design of the era'.[72] As a notable graphic design historian and curator, rather than a punk specialist, Blauvelt cites celebrated professional designers Rosmarie Tissi, Wolfgang Weingart, Willi Kunz and Hans-Rudolf Lutz, along with US designers April Greiman and Dan Friedman, as pioneers of 'new wave' design. However, the specific connections between graphics created for new wave artists (particularly in the United Kingdom, e.g. by Garrett, Saville, Morton and others) and a developing postmodern design style within the wider industry in the United States and Europe (Weingart, Greiman, Friedman) is harder to justify beyond visual or aesthetic similarities (we will return to this theme in chapter five, Parallel Lines: Into the Eighties).

More recently, art and design historians have made steps to interrogate specific aspects of punk art history and practice, with a focus on individual designers and the broader social and cultural context through which certain individuals came to prominence. *Gee Vaucher: Beyond Punk, Feminism and the Avant-Garde* (2022)[73] by Rebecca Binns situates Vaucher's work in the context of art history, politics and the counterculture. *Blank Canvas: Art School Creativity from Punk to New Wave* (2022)[74] by Simon Strange charts the relationship between British art school education and a generation of punk and post-punk musicians in the late 1970s, while Gavin Butt's *No Machos or Pop Stars: When The Leeds Art Experiment Went Punk* (2022)[75] examines a close-knit community of artists and post-punk musicians that emerged from the University of Leeds and Leeds Polytechnic in the late 1970s. Meanwhile, Marie Arleth Skov's *Punk Art History: Artworks From the European No Future Generation* (2023)[76] examines punk as an art movement, combining archival research and personal interviews with artists from London, New York, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin and Ian Trowell's *Throbbing*

Gristle: An Endless Discontent (2023)[77] focuses on the early history of avant-garde art/music collective Throbbing Gristle, from their countercultural roots in the art collective COUM Transmissions to their first steps into the punk and post-punk milieu.

Action, time and vision

This book is an attempt to cover a broad area of this historical and contextual ground within a single volume, to span both the cultural, political and economic history of the United Kingdom and the range of visual material associated with punk and post-punk in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is a study of punk graphics in print, encompassing the *how* and *why* of a wide range of visual material, together with a critical reflection on design as *process* as well as *product*. It offers an overview of the dynamic relationships at play during a particular period in modern British history, centred on the ways punk and post-punk designers embraced alternative ways of making and navigated rapid and significant changes in the music industry and the design and print professions. Concepts that have become closely engrained in discussions of punk art and design – do-it-yourself, autonomy, a rejection of tradition or authority – are subject to question, while we will also analyse the way punk 'designers' (from amateur to professional) employed materials, tools and techniques to respond practically to those developing, but often rather nebulous, ideals.

This book also seeks to acknowledge the many anonymous art workers and pre-press operators who were an essential part of the chain of print production and whose vital roles and craft skills have been lost to historical record through rapidly changing technologies. It aims to cover different aspects of the design process, from the tools that designers could access (which drove much of the graphic style of punk) to their engagement with the design and print industries (a particularly problematic issue for untrained amateurs and new designers who didn't follow traditional routes into the profession). In the process, it reflects on the expansion of the design and print industries to accommodate a new generation of punk-inspired designers along with a reduction in the power of the print unions and the breakdown of closed shop practices. This leads us to an important question: how

did design and print technologies – and access to those technologies – influence the development of a particular visual style for punk and post-punk graphics? Unlike many other studies of punk visual communication, the emphasis here is less about purely the 'look' of the objects and more about the way the social, technological and economic conditions of their manufacture led to stylistic approaches that, ultimately, became established as a punk visual aesthetic.

The chapters in *Turning Revolt into Style* are not intended to be comprehensive – references and citations linking to other in-depth studies are provided throughout to facilitate further reading. However, the intersection between a newly emerging punk-inspired design aesthetic, the promise of a kind of do-it-yourself autonomy for a new generation of designers, changing technologies in the print industry and the ensuing radical shake-up in industrial relations does merit investigation. This is an attempt to provide an overarching narrative concerning the various cultural, professional and commercial interests at play.

> Punk graphic design filled the gap between the advent of the photocopier and the advent of the computer.[78]

The following volume is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One, 'Pretty vacant: Punk graphic themes', introduces the notion of punk graphic design, the use of visual communication to promote the early punk scene and core themes that emerged. These include a rejection of standard pop music conventions, do-it-yourself, a wide range of radical and performative politics, the machine aesthetic, art school and art historical references. Chapter Two, 'Material interventions: Punk graphic processes', then interrogates the range of design methods that were utilised in response to these punk thematic ideals and the ways in which punk concepts were visually materialised. These practical strategies include the use of DIY tools and technologies as a rhetorical call-to-arms, appropriation, repetition, collage, distortion and wear and tear.

Chapter Three, ‘Design it yourself: The punk diaspora’, reflects on the take-up of punk-inspired styles in different regions of the United Kingdom, along with the adoption of locally specific images and iconography, together with changing post-punk styles associated with a range of distinct sub-genres that emerged over time. Chapter Four, ‘Your generation: Punk designers and the establishment’, outlines the relationship between the new, punk-inspired designers entering the music graphics profession in the late 1970s and the senior art directors and design professionals who had been working for many years to create visual identities for rock and pop bands in the established industry. Chapter Five, ‘New sounds, new styles: Design and technology’, focuses on design and print reproduction, ranging from the increased use of lo-tech, analogue tools by punk fanzine writers and DIY, independent record producers to photo-mechanical processes and the emerging digital pre-press tools that would become ubiquitous a decade later. The 1970s saw a gradual shift away from design as a process of specification to a more holistic model of planning, construction and pre-press artwork preparation on the part of the individual designer or studio.

Chapter Six, ‘A different kind of tension: Industry and the individual’, then centres on industrial and labour relations within the printing industry. Radical changes in design were reflected in a significant reconstitution of the print professions due to the impact of new technologies. These were led, in turn, by a complete overhaul of the national newspapers that met significant resistance from the print unions and resulted in widespread industrial action. Government interventions, in particular new legislation on secondary picketing and closed shop agreements, heightened the degree of antagonism on both sides, ultimately shifting the balance of power in favour of the employers and weakening the power of the trade unions. While the impact of this industrial relations battle was most evident in the national and local press, its effects rippled down throughout the industry, weakening the stranglehold the unions had held over print production for more than a century. Consequently, however, at least some independent, punk-inspired graphic designers were able to make further inroads to a design profession that had previously restricted access through closed shop working practices. Chapter Seven, ‘Parallel lines: Into the eighties’ explores the new design aesthetic of the

1980s, the 'new wave' styles associated with the emerging street style and fashion magazines and the apparent visual overlap with the 'new wave of graphic design' and emerging philosophies of postmodernism in design schools and the profession. Finally, 'Retro-spective: Influence and legacy' looks at the contemporary legacy of punk aesthetics, from youth branding and marketing to retro nostalgia, critiquing punk as both a heritage project and an ongoing global subculture. This reflective chapter also considers the nature of the contemporary graphic design industry in contrast to the design and print professions of the 1970s and 1980s.

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[9] *Punk Rock* (1976), Macdonald, Bruce (dir.), *The London Weekend Show* (28 November, London Weekend Television).

[10] *The Year of Punk* (1978), Macdonald, Bruce (dir.), *The London Weekend Show* (1 January 1978, London Weekend Television).

[11] Early work for the Sex Pistols was printed out of hours at Rye Express in Peckham, a print studio set up by one of Reid's former colleagues at Suburban Press, Nigel Kershaw.

[12] John Marchant in Reid, Jamie (2021), *Rogue Materials: 1972–2021*, London: L-13 Light Industrial Workshop, p. 2.

[13] Barker, Hugh and Taylor, Yuval (2007), *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*, London: Faber & Faber.

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[16] Reid, Jamie (2018), *XXXXX*, London: L-13 Light Industrial Workshop.

[17] King, Emily (ed.) (2003), *Designed by Peter Saville*, London: Frieze.

[18] This fact can, of course, create problems for design historians, particularly in areas of graphic design where the work never had a high cultural or artistic value in the first place.

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[22] Beckett, Andy (2009), *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies*, London: Faber & Faber.

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