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## Realizing the Scene; Punk and Meaning's Demise

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Joplin and Hendrix set the intensive norm for rock shows, fed the rock audience's need for the emotional charge that confirmed they'd been at a "real" event... The ramifications were immediate. Singer-songwriters' confessional mode, the appeal of their supposed "transparency", introduced a kind of moralism into rock – faking an emotion (which in postpunk ideology is the whole point and joy of pop performance) became an aesthetic crime; musicians were judged for their openness, their honesty, their sensitivity, were judged, that is, as real, knowable people (think of that pompous rock fixture, the *Rolling Stone* interview)'.  
-Simon Frith, from 'Rock and the Politics of Memory' (1984: 66-7)

'I'm an icon breaker, therefore that makes me unbearable. They want you to become godlike, and if you won't, you're a problem. They want you to carry their ideological load for them. That's nonsense. I always hoped I made it completely clear that I was as deeply confused as the next person. That's why I'm doing this. In fact, more so. I wouldn't be up there on stage night after night unless I was deeply confused, too'.

-John Lydon, from *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (1994: 107)

'Gotta go over the Berlin Wall  
I don't understand it...  
I gotta go over the wall  
I don't understand this bit at all...  
Please don't be waiting for me'

-Sex Pistols lyrics to 'Holidays in the Sun'

## INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL STUDIES

What is Lydon on about? What is punk 'about'? Within the academy, punk is generally understood through the lens of cultural studies, through which punk's activities are cast an aura of meaningful 'resistance' to 'dominant' forces. Punk is taken to be an example of subcultural counter-hegemonic struggle, expressed through style and music. But does the scholarly exploration of 'meaning' and 'identity' help us to account for the sort of 'deep confusion' expressed through(out) the subculture, and explicitly articulated by Lydon/Rotten in the epigraphs? With the aid of Lacanian psychoanalysis – particularly as it has been interpreted and widened to the study of cultural processes in the work of Slavoj Žižek – I will attempt to reopen the field of inquiry. Rather than viewing punk as a subcultural formation concerned with the development of meaning and identity, the task, I argue, becomes to interpret the ways in which the subculture gave visceral expression to the *failure* of the fantasy structures providing *for* meaning and identity in mid-1970s Britain. Thus, upon delimiting how psychoanalytic theory can help in the analysis of subcultures I will demonstrate how punk appeared as an expression – a pressing out – of the demise of Symbolic efficiency; their usage of the swastika, for instance, confused the very terms by which one might have made sense of their "identity". In this non-sense, subcultural activity should be interpreted not as meaningful resistance to dominant forces but as an expression of the disappearance of the space of the Political proper. I suggest this dimension of non-meaning has so far remained under-theorized on account of the predominance of a humanist worldview which has trouble recognizing anything that does not propound meaning and identity; such an ideological framework can be observed in cultural studies approaches as well as music criticism more generally, as I outline through a discussion of the observations of the influential American rock music critic, Lester Bangs. As contemporary capitalism relies on the assertion of assorted identities (*viz.*, market segmentation and endo-colonization), I conclude by considering the ways in which punk's extirpation of identity, or traversal of the fantasy, might be seen as a commentary not only of the marketplace but of the scholarly field of cultural studies that has, for too long, dominated interpretation of the phenomenon.

Frith's own epigraph indexes the quest of rock stars to achieve "authenticity", and, moreover, the investment of their audiences in its being secured. Punk reacted by debunking such pathetic – *pathos*-laden – claims to meaning and identity. This battle was launched not in the pursuit of a deeper, more fundamental authenticity, but in order to reveal and relish in the inescapability of artifice. While hippies fawned at the feet of their musical acts, punks gobbled at them, which, while perhaps initiated by Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols due to his phlegm problem (stemming, as with his iconic stare and hunched back, from a childhood bout of meningitis), soon became indicative of the lack of distance between performer and audience: if you could reach them with a loogie, one needn't deem them auratic, and *that* one spat on the band indexed one's animosity to rock deification. Punk partly rejected meaning and identity, though it is precisely the nature of this abrogation that calls for – that

desires – interpretation.

This rejection, which I would argue is also present in other subcultural formations, if to a smaller extent, remains largely unexplored in the literature on subcultures. Early discussions from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) remain valuable, though the consequences of their findings, I argue, are not fully worked out, neither in their own writings nor, certainly, with those that came later. The dominant tendency has been to interpret punk through the Gramscian theory of hegemony, which has, more broadly, been crucial for the study of subculture and the formation of the field of cultural studies. This theoretical framework was appropriated in the study of culture in order to avoid the acknowledged pitfalls of populism, in which the texts and practices of ‘the people’ were unproblematically celebrated as authentic self-expressions, and vanguardism, in which scholars considered most people ‘dopes’ but looked to certain enlightened subjects and groups as holding revolutionary potential. In Gramscian cultural studies, to the dominant forces of power are opposed resistant ones, and although the warring factions are seen to be not only interrelated but *intrarelated*, the movement of analysis remains to delimit, and so buttress, resistance against power. The analysis of punk became the exploration of how this working-class subculture expressed the meaning of its resistance, how it rearticulated the signs of its existence into a meaningfully resistant form. Of course, such meaning is difficult to decipher, ‘obliquely’ expressed through style (Hebdige 1979: 17). The task of the analyst was and is to articulate such oblique rearticulation, to thereby carry forward its central message of resistance. This framework appears very much a kind of synthesis of vanguardism and populism, which after noting the inappropriateness of separating dominant from resistant forces proceeds by doing precisely that. For, if resistance can be given meaning, the analysis of culture becomes suffused with politics; the cultural analyst practices politics. However, it is not clear that punk can be interpreted meaningfully, that its concern was with producing meaning, oblique or otherwise. I argue that punk saw itself less as existing in meaningful dialectic with dominant forces than it did as expressing the failure of society, of the Symbolic, of fantasy, of everything that guaranteed and made cohere “meaning” itself. This calls for an entirely different form of analysis.

With its delineation of the Real and the drive it is with the aid of Lacanian psychoanalysis that we may better begin to approach the import of this extirpation of meaning and identity. The existence of subcultures, from the Teds to the punks, pointed to the lack inherent within the social edifice. That is, subcultures existed to the extent the ‘parent’ culture (Clarke *et al.* 1976) failed to provide meaningful narratives with(in) which youth could identify, so that coming of age entailed not successful, organic integration into society, but something more like the reverse. The spectacularity of these subcultures was meant as an affront, a means by which its participants declared themselves different, if not revolutionarily so. If this affront to some extent produced its own narratives that allowed for meaning and identity, it involved, more radically, a drive to express – to press out – the parent culture’s meaninglessness. Not surprisingly, subcultures were taken as effronteries by the guardians of moral order and cultural values, threatening as they did to expose the fragile foundation

upon which one's society was formed. (By contrast, a *counter-culture* *does* presuppose itself as a revolutionary outfit, and rather than indexing a lack within the social order, counter-cultures posed, and pose, themselves as alternative, coherent and cohesive societies ready to take control.) Punk – or at least early UK punk – *reflexively* drew attention to this very dynamic, intensifying, and so helping to reveal and realize, this tendency of previous subcultural formations. This was its force and its verve.

Today, subcultures may be said to be everywhere and nowhere, the very basis of the economy being the production and dissemination of the identities formed through subcultural activity, be they Zen-inspired, Goth, or latte-induced; every lifestyle a subculture, and every subculture a lifestyle, sustained through the 'subcultural industry' (Roberts 2004: 578). This is a logical development: as the "general culture" ever more fails to provide for meaningful integration, and so is itself both everywhere and nowhere (for instance, at once quasi-national, quasi-global, and "local"), people migrate towards this or that lifestyle/subculture as (temporary) means of sustaining identity and securing meaning. If for punk the failure to meaningfully integrate found visceral and violent expression within a determinate and delimitable context – *viz.*, a society – today the failure to integrate is too diffuse to draw an analogous reaction. Yet, though it would be a mistake to transpose punk into the present, there is a way in which punk enacts a continued, interminable judgment on everything that has developed in its wake, an insistent negativity that should be both acknowledged and affirmed.

In this non-sense, I am limiting 'punk' to the UK scene of 1976 and early 1977. While the UK scene existed as an expression of the demise of their society, the American version found itself more comfortably aligned with the American pseudo-nihilist, disaffected *tradition* of 'dropping out', and thus cannot be said to have served as an index of the failure of the American Symbolic. I propose to follow, in what follows, the ongoing import if not meaning of punk's judgment, which has been obscured in previous analyses explicitly committed to delivering the subculture up to meaning in the dialectical imaginary of hegemonic struggle.

#### **THE DEMISE OF SYMBOLIC EFFICIENCY, OF MEANING AND IDENTITY**

That subcultures largely emerged in the 1950s, along with the birth of the 'teenager', is not fortuitous in an era that also witnessed horrendous trauma alongside the peculiar inability of language to articulate and mourn such horror. Žižek rightly notes that in our contemporary moment we live under the demise of Symbolic efficiency (1999: 322). Symbolic efficiency refers to the guarantee that attaches itself to the enunciation of meaning, that, to put it simply, we trust – together – we are making sense. In every quotidian encounter we presuppose and address our discourses to a sort of Ideal Witness, or 'big Other' (in the past this would have more easily been written as 'God'), who makes ultimate sense out of and guarantees what is communicated. Žižek often notes that 'the big Other does not exist', and that we only believe it to through the *trust* we place in Symbolic efficiency. It is

precisely this trust that is increasingly missing today (1999: 342), so that in this sense the big Other today does not exist twice over, as it were. Jodi Dean puts it well: 'although the symbolic order is always and necessarily lacking – ruptured – today this lack is directly assumed' (2006: 40). It might be retorted that things still manage to get done, that anarchy does not prevail in the way this analysis would seem to suggest. In quotidian encounters it is not as though one gets the sense that meaning is impossible to reciprocate, that, on the contrary, communication *does* seem to flow. And yet we know that it overflows: never has the species communicated so much, forever following up on things *not* done. If we seem to together presuppose understanding, this very understanding is everywhere, and at all times, shot through with the sort of doubt of which only Descartes could previously be certain. If we trust, what we trust, ultimately, is that we do not trust. Two images help in imagining this situation. The first involves the nervous anxiety that accompanies the moments after having sent an email message: 'Did you get my email (Did you read it? All of it? Reply?)' In email communication we trust only that we do not trust our interlocutors – or even ourselves – to understand what we desire. The second is that of the one-night stand, of both parties coming to terms on – establishing a kind of contract regarding – their distrust of the other. Before anything has really begun they know they are destined for anonymity, together only for one night of protected sex, or, if they are feeling somewhat nihilistic and need the extra thrill (and *not* because they trust one another), unprotected. 'The condom', Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) muses in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), 'is the glass slipper of our generation. You slip it on when you meet a stranger. You dance all night, and then you throw it away. The condom, I mean. Not the stranger'. She means both, of course.

What effectuates the demise of Symbolic efficiency, the demise of trust? One should index precisely what working-class subcultures were themselves indexing, understanding, in appropriating the semiotic terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce, that the index gestures towards a Real incapable of Symbolic digestion or articulation: the psychic consequences of World War II (Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Dresden: the wholesale destruction of populations *qua* populations), and capitalism increasingly determining social, political and cultural life. The "result" was the *explicit* failure of language, the lack of language 'directly assumed' (to paraphrase Žižek on Adorno, no poetry – or prose – after Auschwitz [2008: 4]). In the context of the decreasing influence of shared values, customs and rituals, subcultural activity should not be so readily assumed to be inclusive of meaning, as it may well have more to do with an expression of the *failure* of meaning and Symbolic efficiency. Since the very field of post-World War II social relations was formed by the inability to mourn the victims, events and consequences of the war, capitalism's forward march de-substantializing once held notions of community, and the *explicit* failure of language to 'say what it wants to say', punks but expressed the social contradiction, the antagonism, in the very *lack* of its political mediation. This very lack of mediation was, through the performances of the Sex Pistols, given a certain *immediacy*. In some way (if not "sense") punk *realized* the lack of mediation itself, the disappearance of the space of the Political proper<sup>1</sup>.

I want to affirm the cinematic *and* Lacanian undertones of this 'realization'. The Sex Pistols were creating a scene, were *expressing* – underscoring the etymological sense of “pressing out” – the demise of Symbolic efficiency. Though his over-inflated sense of importance is well documented, it is perhaps no coincidence that Malcolm McLaren had initially wanted to make a film embodying Situationist principles, only to find it impossible to realize. With the Sex Pistols, he was given a second chance, though only, I argue, because a persona emerged over which he was forced to relinquish control: Johnny Rotten. As with a director forced to accept certain unchangeable qualities of his actors, such as their expressive physiognomies – or ‘photogenesis’ (Cavell 1984; Delluc 1917) – McLaren had to acquiesce to the fact that that which would catapult the Pistols to fame was coterminous with that which undermined any presumption of control. Unable to accept this, however, upon the dissolution of the band McLaren made the entirely flawed *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* (Julien Temple, 1980), the swindle being that he used most of the band’s money to produce the film. As though he were traumatized by it, McLaren vainly attempted to provide some sort of meaningful framework around the dynamic of the Sex Pistols, retroactively declaring himself Master. For a time, and due to the scene it enabled, punk *was* radically unsettling. This was not so much because it *threatened* “civilization”, but because it *realized* its demise, spectacularly, enigmatically, and without meaning. Punks were, in every sense of the word and in every way of their “own” volatile volition, *punk*: worthless, rotten, criminal, abject, prostituted. On the stage of their everyday lives, punks relished in the extirpation of identity and meaning, by (mis)appropriating the swastika, defacing themselves and “outing” the modalities of enjoyment. They seemed to say: ‘you can have it for free’, only for the observer to find nothingness inside.

It might immediately be said that this analysis risks performative contradiction. In arguing for the meaninglessness of punk, does it not at the same time circumscribe punk’s activities, thereby delivering it over to scholarly meaning? And would this not entail, in the manner of Gramscian cultural studies, a projection of meaning onto the object of study even in the face of having argued for its meaninglessness? I think such a critique would be hasty. The import of punk is not being denied here, only its ‘meaning’ in the sense this has taken on in cultural studies. That is, we must be clear on what we mean by meaning. For many scholars of cultural studies meaning enables and sustains identity, and in opposing their frameworks to previous theories of ‘cultural dopism’ that presumed individuals to be passive recipients of mass ideology, meaning-making as such is often taken to enjoy a resistant edge. In the long view, the claim that humans are meaning-making creatures appears rather banal and without political import. Punk’s significance, such as it was, is not to be located in this field of meaning, though in circumscribing punk, its indexing the failure of the Symbolic, it is true that I do interpret and that there is, I trust, meaning within such interpretation. This seeming conundrum could be resolved psychoanalytically, of course: in interpreting the dreamwork, the psychoanalyst ultimately delimits and circles around its meaning/less kernel – one that, I am arguing, was paraded as such in the punk dream, the punk scene.

The dilemma has been addressed elsewhere. For instance, in his well-known ethnographic study and 'thick description' of Balinese cockfighting, Clifford Geertz observes that the cockfight came to express/press out for its participants social tensions normally well-observed from view: 'The transfer of a sense of gravity into what is in itself a rather blank and unvarious spectacle, a commotion of beating wings and throbbing legs, is effected by interpreting it as expressive of something unsettling in the way its authors and audience live, or, even more ominously, what they are' (1973: 444). Through "art", a culture interprets itself: 'societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations' (453), opening onto the meaningless Real. Geertz, the anthropologist *cum* phenomenologist, is also a proto-psychoanalyst, as most anthropologists arguably are so long as they are not taking words at face value but interpreting a culture interpreting itself. While meaningfully interpreting Balinese cockfighting Geertz repeatedly notes the point at which interpretation breaks down, this point being the same at which the participants themselves cannot be said to 'make meaning'. From this angle, the sorts of analyses common to cultural studies of cultural phenomena appear as 'thin' descriptions, typically detailing the ways in which 'users' float from text to text and merely reinforce their already existing identities through meaning-making cultural activities. Encountering the cockfight, cultural studies would miss entirely its import in and of the Real. 'If', the film theorist Elizabeth Cowie observes, 'stories did simply tell us our identities, or enabled us to become *something*, to take on or to find our identity, we would no longer go on wanting stories' (1997: 117). Nor, one might add, would it remain important to analyze them. The analysis of punk presented here follows in this Geertzian tradition, interpreting its object while acknowledging the many instances in which interpretation rubs against its limit, the limit, the Real, being precisely that which both circumscribes *and* motivates the (sub)cultural practices *as well as* the act of interpretation. Punk's import is not to be located in counter-hegemonic struggle, in which the analyst, according to what Žižek has recently called the 'hermeneutic temptation' (2008: 76), would deign meaningful the subculture's 'resistance' to the forces of 'domination'. Punk's import, its *point*, was to ex-*pose* and ex-*press* the failure of the Symbolic, of anything that might have provided, that once did provide, for meaning. To bastardize Barthes' terminology (1981), the point of punk was this, was its, *punctum*. We get nowhere by paving it over.

#### **EX-PRESSING NOTHING: WHY ONE SHOULDN'T LOOK TO MUSICAL ACTS FOR POLITICAL REDEMPTION**

At the end of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige corrects himself from the Romantic tendencies at work in his earlier essay, 'The Meaning of Mod' (1976), where he strains to read meaning into gestures that may not, in fact, have had any for the mod. Starting again from semiotic analysis, he tries to find the meaning of punk, but to do so he will ultimately have to find a meaning for the punk appropriation of the swastika; what, after all, could *that* mean? He writes:

The signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally

signified, and although it had been re-positioned (as 'Berlin') within an alternative subcultural context, its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit. It was exploited as an empty effect... The key to punk style remains elusive. Instead of arriving at the point where we can begin to make sense of the style, we have reached the very place where meaning itself evaporates (1991: 117).

This seemingly most meaningful symbol – in the words of Stuart Hall, 'that sign which, above all other signs, ought to be fixed' (1981: 190) – turns out to repel meaning. Hall notes that '[t]he streets are full of kids who are not "fascist" because they wear a swastika on a chain'; the swastika's 'signification is rich, and richly ambiguous: certainly unstable' (ibid.). Many a schoolteacher can attest to the peculiar doodles, of swastikas and mushroom clouds, left on desks and wayward papers, as well as to the fact that the majority of those culpable are not fated for the nightly news. Most are simply toying with the taboos of our culture, pushing the limits, (while) internalizing the Law.

One would think this conclusion would give Hebdige some semiotic pause, enough, even, to consider re-titling his book. Instead he immediately begins exploring the theoretical developments of the *Tel Quel* brand of semiotics that emphasize the polysemic nature of any given term. At the moment he marks the fundamental nothingness and stupidity of the punk use of the swastika, in other words, he goes on to emphasize its excessive and potentially 'infinite range of meanings' (117). He is right, of course, to reject the standard semiotic method of finding a determined or symptomatic meaning behind overt signifiers, but I am uneasy about immediately moving on as he does to emphasize the 'productivity' of language (119). After all, such incessant productivity is but the very condition of post-industrial postmodern capitalism, and it is not at all clear the punk appropriation of the swastika can be so easily subsumed within. To be sure, the endless performativity of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2005) does hollow out meaning, but in the very process of doing so it believes itself full of it. In wearing the swastika, by contrast, punks were not engaged in anything like branding. They did not ask for the swastika to be taken as a meaningful component to their identity; on the contrary its effect was to confuse the terms by which one might have made sense (out) of their style. Being meaning/less, the punk usage of the swastika had more to do with a sort of expression of the very demise of Symbolic efficiency than any productivity of language.





Vivienne Westwood wearing her own creation, the "Destroy" t-shirt, which also features an inverted Crucifix.

Siouxsie Sioux, one of the original punks whom often wore the swastika, suggests that it 'was always very much an anti-mums and anti-dads thing' (in Savage 1991: 241). If what the older generation was most proud of was the defeat of Hitler's Nazi Germany, she continues, wearing it allowed one to watch 'someone like that go completely red-faced' (ibid.). Jon Savage writes:

The wearing of the swastika served notice on the threadbare fantasy of Victory, the lie of which could be seen on most urban street corners. That this fantasy was now obsolete was obvious to a generation born after the war and witness to England's decline... What better way to display this lack of meaning [than] by detourning a once loaded symbol? (ibid.)

Rather than simply following the Situationist logic of playful and (ultimately utopic) *détournement*, with which punk is too closely affiliated in the literature (Marcus 1989), wearing the swastika should also be seen as a serious, *dystopic* affront to meaning and identity. At the time of punk the racist and xenophobic National Front was gathering in strength, particularly amongst youth. While the wearing of the swastika (of all things) would seem an idiotic tactical maneuver on the part of anti-racist punks, it in some sense co-opted the National Front's usage of the symbol. One could say they de-sacralized the swastika, rendering it a little less auratic for the vulnerable youth toying with its symbolism. In this (non)sense it was a key intervention: if an adolescent thought drawing a swastika enabled a private space of resistance, and so a space for the self, punk debunked this fantasy by coming right out with it – as meaning/less. Wearing the swastika not only rendered enigmatic the identity of the punks, it confused the identity-formation of xenophobe youth; predictably, punks were the targets of frequent attacks from this quarter. And from many other quarters, too. Steve Severin, a member of the so-called 'Bromley contingent' of punk fans and a founding member of Siouxsie Sioux and the Banshees, ruminates:

On the inside, we were confused and sometimes unfocused. Maybe that's what made the

Pistols so frightening to outsiders. You couldn't pin it down nor understand it, so the police, the Teds, and the government chose to smash it down as hard as they could (in Lydon 1994: 181).<sup>2</sup>

At the core of the punk "identity" was something like a black hole in some manner resisting the very notion of identity. In what would become a classic text of subcultural and cultural studies Hebdige realizes this, but recoils into asserting some sort of free play of identity through the polysemy of meaning. As we know, many works of cultural studies follow along this path in arguing for the ability of marginalized and disadvantaged groups to read and consume cultural texts in resistant ways. The problem with these analyses, Žižek argues, is that by focusing on identity (of whatever kind) as the central problematic, one misses the overdetermining factor that provides for the very matrix of contemporary identities: capitalism. Asserting one's identity is rarely a resistant move within contemporary capitalism, and should, in fact, be seen as one of its operators (self-help and/or Oprah). Though, to be sure, it is not being suggested that the goal of empowering disadvantaged groups merits abandoning, this project should be pursued with greater rigor in understanding the centrality of capitalism in providing the horizon *for* the creation and sustenance of identity (Žižek 1999: 356). Though punks were not exactly scholars of Marx or Lacan, they (visibly) apprehended the increasing intrarelation of identity and Capital.

This is not merely to repeat the well-worn opposition between political economic approaches, focusing on the economic determination of cultural objects and practices to the exclusion of what people *do* with culture, and those of cultural studies, which more often than not simply flip the priorities (Garnham 1995; Grossberg 1995). On the contrary, it is via the analysis of the objects and practices of punk – what punks did (including how they "read against the grain") – that we are led to conclude the focus on "meaningful resistance" obscures how one's subjective sense of self can seem "real" while being a regressive fiction, particularly to the extent it is enabled and sustained through Capital. Strictly speaking, identity is always, from the beginning, a sham, the imaginary means by which one shores up one's defenses against the Real. Though one cannot simply do away with the fiction of identity, it is clear that it is not a progressive political posture to celebrate it as such, particularly against the backdrop of contemporary capitalism. Yet it is precisely in this way that cultural studies advances as a field from its initial study of subculture, forgetting, or failing to properly theorize in the first place, the Real of punk that Hebdige and others brushed up against – that is, punk's ex-pression of identity's artifice, both *as such* and as Capital's operator.

Insofar as it forgets the role of Capital in its formation it is the fantasy of the "resisting" self that is fundamental to the contemporary apolitical order, marking thus the political dimension of articulating and traversing this fantasy. As Žižek notes, traversal entails the acknowledgement of one's lack of substantial depth, realizing that, in effect, one has nothing to lose. This involves identification with and assumption of the fantasy, a situation which necessarily involves the analysand's 'subjective destitution': in traversing the fantasy the subject loses the very kernel of his being, that which made him 'him', apprehending in this way that one "is" but the masks one wears when in different social

situations. Robert Park, the Chicago School sociologist, writes:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning [*persona*], is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (in Goffman 1959: 19)

If the traditional sociological frame of analysis involves the opposition of 'individual' and 'society', mediated through various processes of 'socialization', what Park is pointing towards here, and what Erving Goffman spends his career analyzing, is the extent to which the self exists solely through its performances, subject to accreditation (or not) by one's peers. The fantasy of some secret, inner core locatable beneath these masks could be seen as the result of misreading the cues from one's relations with others. If, for instance, one's roles or masks are routinely accredited by others one may begin to internalize the accreditation in (thereby) forming a sense of self. If, on the other hand, one feels as though one's already fragile sense of self were being threatened one may be led to place blame on conspicuously external factors: immigrants, for instance. While the lower classes all too frequently try to protect whatever 'turf' they have through assorted kinds of xenophobia, the well-to-do can *afford* to be cosmopolitan to the extent their performances are routinely accredited. It is precisely such fantastical projections, on both sides, that stand in need of traversal. In traversing the fantasy one realizes the lack in the Other and, concurrently, of oneself: the two lacks overlap (Žižek 2006: 356). On one side of the sociological divide, the very notion of the individual breaks down, while on the other comes the realization that there is no such thing as an organic Society in which we are all embedded. Self and Society, so far as they are, are performed. Warts and all.

I am tempted to bring Goffman further into conversation with Žižek on this point. Todd McGowan notes the tension between Fredric Jameson, Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, on the one side, and Žižek, on the other, regarding this situation: 'The fundamental lacuna in Žižek's thought (and in contemporary Lacanian theory), according to these responses, is the bridge between recognition and action, between the psychoanalytic critique of ideology and a political program... Traversing the fantasy – the end of analysis – seems to be something that occurs only on the level of the individual' (2004: 146). Using the film *Dark City* to make his point, McGowan goes on to note that although this is accurate, it is in *everyone's* interest to ensure that no one traverses the fantasy, for a sort of revolutionary chain-reaction might occur were anyone to. Goffman acknowledges the fundamentally conservative nature of our everyday performances; if his delineation of the radically performative aspect of self and society seems to open the door to daily revolution, he notes that we tend, at the level of the everyday, to engage each other through a process of mutual acceptance that allows for minimal assertions of self. In a social order that founds itself on the very notion of the individualized self, it is not difficult to apprehend that in everyday situations one 'is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness', going 'to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present'; conversely, we are 'disinclined to witness the defacement of others' (1967: 10). Engaged countless

times everyday, the primary fantasy is maintained through this considerateness regarding the 'lines' (11) of others, tending towards the conservative maintenance of self and society. In reciprocating credibility to the images being presented, the conservative nature of social relations leads to the conservation of reality.

Punk radically and violently disturbs this conservationist order. Punk exists – which is to say that it perhaps does *not* long after 1977 – insofar as it puts on display the emptiness that is the result of the failure of Symbolic and Imaginary fantasy constructs or 'quilting points' (*points de capiton*) to convincingly tie things together. A freer floating Symbolic space ensures unease, anxiety, terror. In these postmodern times, there is a way in which fantasy has already been traversed – or at least radically destabilized, waiting only for someone to point out the elephant in the room. One must be precise: in (what goes by the name of) 'postmodernism', previously "infallible" fantasy constructs are undermined. The self becomes unmoored, while quickly attaching and re-attaching itself to now more temporary fantasy constructs and bits of enjoyment. In this way the subject has moved closer to finally losing that which it holds dearest as the density of its being, and, as the logical result of this, it everywhere and at all times seeks out new means of fantasy to protect and buttress the 'core'. The capitalist marketplace, which moves to its next stage of intensification by *threatening* the self in invading it so as to market its every cranny, is paradoxically turned to as means of *providing* new coordinates for this self. In this downward spiral, the self appears increasingly vulnerable, which, while a boon for marketers, is also precisely that which punk realized. Punk was not 'considerate', it did not engage in processes of 'mutual acceptance', and it was more than willing to witness the 'defacement' it indexed as an always already occurring feature of the contemporary moment – by spectacularly defacing themselves, for instance, literally and figuratively. In a word, face-fucking. In this sense, the conservative reaction to punk, that it represented the moral decline of Britain, was not without its merit; where it went wrong was in its use of punk as means of displacing and condensing anxieties over the loss of self and empire. If by doing so it hoped to solidify whatever was left, what remained was maintained primarily through negative, abject reactions to others, and increasingly less via positive aspirations to empire, nation or God. (Of course, such positive fantasy constructs have always relied on negative counter-images of the Other; the point is to note that if in the past the primary image was positive, with a negative counter-image, now it begins as negative, with only the counter-image being – minimally – positive.)

It is perhaps the ideological frame of humanism that prevents critics from appreciating this dimension of punk. It is remarkable, for instance, the extent to which Lester Bangs misreads (mishears) *Never Mind the Bollocks*. Here he discusses 'Bodies' and 'No Feelings':

...[W]hen you get right down to it all he was really saying was 'Yeah I fucked you you fucking worthless bitch, and now you're pregnant with a baby that quite probably is mine, but I couldn't care less because you're just a trashy slut anyway'... Jeez, and I thought all this cock rock was something we were going to wipe away... [On] the very next song on that album... [Rotten] went on about how he had no feelings for anyone except his precious preening self. Well, all that ever said to me was 'You can't hurt me'... More solipsism... (2003b: 378)

To be sure, on a first gloss 'No Feelings' would seem narcissistic in content: 'I got no emotions for anybody else/ You better understand I'm in love with myself/ Myself, my beautiful self'. However, a common mistake in music criticism is to determine the effects and meaning of a band based solely on their lyrics (Grossberg 1984), which, while always insufficient, is particularly so in the case of the Sex Pistols, wherein one gets or at least *should* get the sense that the hunched over lead singer, staring and snarling, needs to be taken with a degree of irony. Bangs must be cognizant of this, perhaps mistaking Rotten's insistent glare as indexing seriousness towards his lyrics. In any case, Bangs should be able to recognize that Rotten is not gallivanting on stage in the manner of Jim Morrison as if he actually partook of the latter's looks, knew it, and likewise proceeded to fall back on it as source of libido. When delivering the line 'I'm in love with myself', Rotten snarls the second syllable of the last word, which is to say, the 'self'. Bangs misses this, even though it is precisely the status of Rotten's self that is thereby put in question. From this angle, Rotten realizes the contemporary condition of self-help subjectivity as it falls back on it-self and its nuggets of enjoyment in the sustenance of (its) reality; acknowledging it on one level (enunciated lyrics), he absolutely destroys it on another (enunciation).

Again, on a first read, 'Bodies' does appear a strangely misogynistic song: 'She was a no one who killed her baby... She was an animal/ She was a bloody disgrace'. And yet, even on this level one would have to acknowledge a strange shift in narrative position, as Rotten steps into the shoes, as it were, of the aborted fetus itself: 'Throbbing squirm/ gurgling bloody mess/ I'm not a discharge/ I'm not a loss in protein/ I'm not a throbbing squirm'; the song concludes with Rotten screaming 'Mummy! UGH!'. This impossible identification, *this regression to the time before the mirror stage*, signals the atrophy of fantasy and of the ego to provide (for) meaningful coherence. The form of the song, furthermore, is resolutely, desperately hysterical (in a way that only 'Holidays in the Sun' can match), realizing the profound disorientation that results with the disintegration of previously more stable narrative structures. Now, Bangs himself knew this. Upon observing in a different context an English kid 'moving through the crowd in a jagged mechanical pivoting careen, like a robot with crossed circuits', he hopes to explain it away as a result of amphetamine abuse; having it confirmed this is *not* the case, 'I wonder just exactly what, in the end, we can understand this thing to be about' (2003a: 257). Looking upon another scene (the previous night, as it happens), of one punk band member walking around the floor on her knees like a dog, he writes:

I suppose all you English tots are used to this sort of thing, but for this American it was Tod Browning's *Freaks* doing the Cretin Hop in the hypnotantalizing pulsating flesh. Like, if anybody starts asking me about the *sociological significance* of all this punk stuff I'm just gonna flash back to that [punk] down on all fours marching in circles, recalling most vividly her face as she did so: the fact that it was serene, *blank*, unconcerned, *unselfconscious*. (256-7, italics in original)

One night later Bangs had already repressed from his mind this 'vivid' realization. Punk struck a pose,

and what it posed was incomprehension, daring the wider world to make sense out of its – that is, the world's, and punk's (one at the heart of the other) – non-sense. If Bangs were willing to drop his misplaced humanism (his fantasy), he might have been able to more fully account for the import, if not meaning, of this `unselfconsciousness', that blank visage. That face-fucker. He might have remembered his "own" experience.



On the *Queen Elizabeth*, surrounded by the media in anticipation of the Sex Pistols performance to 'commemorate' the Queen's Silver Jubilee, Rotten looks confused and vulnerable.



The front page of the *Daily Mirror* after the Grundy incident, in which Rotten and Steve Jones profaned on live television.

As subcultures index the lack inherent to the social order, and themselves, they do so, spectacularly, through the mass media. It was at the moment of media overexposure that punk was at its strongest, in which the "message" "communicated" was the lack inherent to the subject *and* the social edifice. To use Jean Baudrillard's terminology, the strategy involved here was 'fatal'. Commenting on the contemporaneous "victory" of the object over the subject, Baudrillard writes:

This victory operates by subtle forms of radicalizing hidden qualities, and by combating obscenity with its own weapons. To the more true than true we will oppose the more false than false. We will not oppose the beautiful and the ugly; we will seek what is more ugly than the ugly: the monstrous. (2001a: 188)

These words could have very nearly been penned by McLaren. The Sex Pistols paraded themselves as deeply enigmatic figures, as monsters, objects for which there was no referent and no preexisting model. Neither they nor their fans could be easily digested or incorporated, "made meaningful". Rather than opposing the present system with meaning or appeals to reference, they became, to use

the words of Baudrillard in describing the uttermost limit of simulation, their `own pure simulacra' (2001b: 173), and did so from the beginning. In this they rendered the world a little more enigmatic, forcing people to confront the failure of fantasy to provide meaningful coherence to their experience. They weren't "meant" to be liked, or even understood, considering it appropriate enough to enigmatically provoke people into questioning the narratives that surrounded them, forming their very sense of self. If people reacted by instead displacing and condensing anxieties over this failure *onto* punk, the fact that punks gleefully accepted – even called for – this from the beginning again forced people to confront punk's affront. How much force could calling these youth `filth' carry when they nominated themselves *punk*? The very nature of this process of scapegoating was, in short, rendered strangely uncanny through the punks' *willing* assumption of this "representation" in their self-presentation itself. This emptied its force, which perhaps explains why after the Grundy incident the punk phenomenon sold more papers than Armistice Day, each new media text thereafter performing another desperate attempt to deliver it over to meaning.

Against the commonsensical (if misguided) retort that there isn't anything particularly elucidatory about discovering a lack of meaning, it must be repeated that this lack forcefully indexes there to be something amiss in culture and society. Of particular interest is how the Sex Pistols do not propose to improve the society they so vehemently critique, offering no positivity to their determined negativity, and positing no content to fill the hole, the Real, of self and Society. To be sure, a fully-fledged punk identity eventually emerged, taking the form of resistant subcultural selves in meaningful opposition to the 'mainstream'. Initially, however, punk was not so concerned with articulating presumably "political" positions for which the punk, to be a punk, was to commit him or herself. Bangs preferred the Clash for the band's overt, progressive politics:

Punk had repeated the very attitudes it copped (BOREDOM and INDIFFERENCE), and we were all waiting for a group to come along who at least went through the motions of GIVING A DAMN about SOMETHING. Ergo, the Clash. (2003a: 225)

He is not wrong about the Clash, whom did, Greil Marcus notes, attempt to `make sense out of the Sex Pistols' riddles' (1989: 12); Steve Connolly, the Clash's punk "everykid", suggests that 'they were construction to the Sex Pistols nihilism' (in Savage 1991: 239). Relative to the Sex Pistols, the Clash are altogether more meaningful, more 'humanist', `life' and `self-affirming', and Bangs prefers the band as such (2003a: 234). But is this `going through the motions of giving a damn', this gesture of political ambition, truly worthy of admiration? In fact, the *last* thing we need (though we get it all the time) is another simulation of the political: far better would be the group that through pure negativity tried to clear the space for something really political to emerge. In that sense, there *is* something politically progressive about being ruthlessly negative, even if – or rather, *precisely because* – it doesn't feel good. Better is the band that in their off-stage commentaries *and* in their on-stage lyrics never laid claim to a positive political program, understanding themselves for what they were: a group of (usually drunken) adolescents thrust onto a stage for which they were not quite (ever?) ready. Why, indeed,

should one look to music groups – or, for that matter, to artists whom ever more have to produce tortured artist statements claiming some political orientation or other – for political redemption? Devoting his life to music criticism, it should perhaps not come as a surprise to see Bangs leaning this way, trying to find in musical acts what he knows should be found elsewhere. And yet, since it *is* missing from the realm of politics proper, that Bangs should try to find a political dimension within rock is not without its symptomal value. The point, however, would be for a musical group to ‘point’ this out, as it were, and disappear, not to attempt to appropriate this dimension unto itself as, it could be argued, did the Clash. In a review of *The Filth and the Fury* (Julien Temple, 2000), arguably the best film on punk, *The Guardian* suggests that the ‘Sex Pistols told a simple, momentous truth, but simultaneously might have obliterated the opportunity for a pop group to develop the idea of “telling it like it is” with such force ever again’ (Cox 2000). This is probably true, but rather than bemoaning the fact it should set us to looking elsewhere in search of the political dimension – dare it be said, in the realm of politics proper.

#### **DRIVE AND THE DESIRE OF DESIRE; TOWARDS THE SUBCULTURAL PSYCHOANALYST**

A discussion of drive and desire would help in figuring for punk’s import, and the value of its negativity. Desire involves the continual chasing and courting of the elusive object, while the true aim of drive is the repeated *failure* of achieving its goal and the minimal enjoyment thereof. Žižek writes:

Desire emerges when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition, in the vicious cycle in which ‘*jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire’ (Lacan’s definition of castration) – and fantasy is the narrative of this primordial loss, since it stages the process of this renunciation, the emergence of the Law. In this precise sense, *fantasy is the very screen that separates desire from drive*: it tells the story which allows the subject to (mis)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire. In other words, fantasy provides a *rationale* for the inherent deadlock of desire: it constructs the scene in which the *jouissance* we are deprived of is concentrated in the Other who stole it from us. (1997: 32, italics in original)

The screen of fantasy was and is failing in its function. While, as noted, at the time of the Sex Pistols the National Front was gaining ground in its attempt at providing such ‘rationale’, its obvious nostalgia – wherein the claim to national greatness was secondary, an after-image of hate – suggests a desperate attempt to grab hold to something, to, somehow, make meaning. In other words, far from signifying the predominance of fantasy contemporary xenophobic discourses point towards its more fundamental *failure*. Desire aborts (remember ‘Bodies’), a condition punks realized. Making a big show of all things sex – wearing rubber ‘clothing’, or not wearing any at all, cavorting in bathrooms or at the apartment of Linda Ashby, dominatrix to the elite, and, most of all, on stage – punks sought to rid themselves of its enjoyment and all that it implied: hippie lovefests, prog rock, mindless if not meaningless sensibilities. Of course, they could not rid themselves of the enjoyment of the drive. It



sticks. '[I]n desire the subject pulls enjoyment toward (but continues to miss it)', Dean writes, while 'in drive the subject pushes enjoyment away (but still gets it)' (2006: 7).

The end of psychoanalytic treatment involves the traversal of fantasy, a shift from desire to drive; accordingly, the end of many of Žižek's works stress the importance of this shift, while highlighting its inherent political dimension. In his analysis of *Fight Club*, Žižek suggests that the masochism of the Ed Norton character (he is really only beating himself) provides an example. In confrontation with his boss the Norton character begins, in the interests of blackmail, beating himself, thereby creating a scene for the security guards on their way to escort him off the premises. Via such masochism, Žižek argues, the Norton character gives body to the true but hidden desire of his boss; if Norton's boss cannot bring himself to act on his desire, Norton will do it for him. He is also giving body to his own desire, insofar as he wants to shatter his universe:

[t]he pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation, when I allow/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support which could confer a modicum of dignity on me. (2002: 252)

In this way, Žižek writes, the Norton character releases himself from the bond by which he was submissively attached to his employer. I am not so sure. It is fairly clear in this scene that the rather utilitarian motive of blackmail is at work<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, even if we were to accept Žižek's analysis, what does it – and here I speak of Žižek's political persuasions generally insofar as he repeatedly asserts the 'ethical' dimension of the drive (1991: 272) – entail for collective political movements? Can a *politics* of the drive be articulated?

Insofar as we are subjects of capitalism, narcissistically bound through fantasy and kernels of enjoyment to its operational logic, some form of 'self-beating' is probably called for. Again, there always exists the potential of some sort of revolutionary chain reaction. However, Žižek does not mention *Fight Club's* focus on the suffocating aspects of consumption in the context of this scene. He does write, more generally:

In contrast to the humanitarian compassion which enables us to retain our distance towards the other, the very violence of the fight signals the abolition of this distance. Although this strategy is risky and ambiguous (it can easily regress into a proto-fascist macho logic of violent male bonding), this risk has to be taken – there is no other direct way out of the closure of capitalist subjectivity. (2002: 252)

*Here* is where we should locate the importance of the masochistic elision of the self, and though Žižek does here seem to suggest this, at least, I think it is important – and not simply splitting hairs – to insist on this precision. Otherwise one implicitly advocates any sort of self-beating, such as that performed by 'cutters' in their desperate attempt to regain control over their bodies. There is nothing progressive politically about a young woman engaging in self-abuse as means of liberating herself from the bond of paternal servitude, even if in so doing she is acting out her, and her father's own fantasy, thereby gaining a minimal distance towards it. Or, one succumbs to endorsing Sid's self-destructiveness, of which a tour manager provides an amusing if gruesome account, while the Sex Pistols stopped for a

bite to eat on tour in the American South:

The cowboy says, “[so] you think you’re a fucking tough guy,” and puts out a cigarette on the back of his hand. His girlfriend frowns at him. The cowboy stares at Sid and beckons, “Come on, punk.”

Everyone braces; Sid does not back down from a direct challenge. He stops eating his rare steak and runny eggs, picks up his steak knife and slashes the back of his left hand twice, deep.

The blood drips down his fingers and arm and makes his eggs even runnier. The cowboys look at each other and know they’ll never one-up that one. (Monk 1990: 206)

Not only do they know they shan’t be able to compete in this tourney of self-destructiveness, Sid has realized their fantasy of beating him up. As with the cutter this is not, however, particularly radical: how might one distinguish the self-beating that may *become* revolutionary from that which enjoys masochism as end in itself?

A revolutionary subject strikes out against capitalism, *concurrently* at the self insofar as this self is trapped *within* the fantasy constructs of capitalism. Such violence could be argued to be “divine” to the extent it is not guaranteed or authorized by the big Other, but, on the contrary, renders and reveals the impotence of it. In *Violence*, Žižek contrasts this violence to that of the *passage à l’acte* which only reveals its *own* impotence insofar as it *is* ultimately grounded in the big Other (2008: 201). To some extent, this divine, revolutionary violence was already punk’s modality. Though the shift to drive punk insisted upon was a general cultural condition, punk was its spectacular display, its expression. Cutting through the clutter of resurgent, knee-jerk xenophobe fantasies, in fact intervening against their diffusion through the culture, punk also called into question – traversed – some of what remained of desire and fantasy. It might well seem, then, as though the punk were a pure subject of drive. In *The Filth and the Fury*, however, Rotten suggests that ‘you don’t record a song like “God Save the Queen” because you hate the English race. You write a song like that because you love them, and you’re fed up with them being mistreated’. Though punks lived – in a society – with ‘no future’, the outward display of this condition could be taken to betray a desire for something else. Certainly it involved the desire for recognition, for the social order to take stock of its fate. Punk was drive, but at no time was it not also a desire for something Other. What this ‘something Other’ entailed was never articulated, of course, nor would it have been possible: punk’s desire, enmired in drive, was to confront society with the impasse of desire, the fact that the screen of fantasy was failing in its function. This suggests that at the level of collectivities the traversal of the fantasy always already entails some form of desire.

As often happens, however, one can rally Žižek against Žižek. In *The Ticklish Subject*, he tries to answer the question of what happens after the traversal of the fantasy through developing the notion of the ‘desire of the analyst’. Against religious or mystical entreaties that propose abandonment to the self-enclosed circuit of drive, Žižek writes:

Lacan, however, insists that ‘going through the fantasy’ is not strictly equivalent to the shift from [desire] to [drive]: there is a desire that that remains even after we have traversed our

fundamental fantasy, a desire not sustained by a fantasy, and this desire... is the *desire of the analyst*... This unique desire is what, even after I have fully assumed the big Other's non-existence' – that is, the fact that the symbolic order is a mere semblance – prevents me from immersing myself in the self-enclosure of drive's circuit and its debilitating satisfaction. The desire of the analyst is supposed to make possible a communal 'big Other' that avoids the transferential effect of the 'subject supposed to... [know, believe, enjoy].' In other words, the desire of the analyst is Lacan's tentative answer to the question: after we have traversed the fantasy... how do we none the less return to some (new) form of the big Other that again makes collective coexistence possible? (1999: 296, italics in original)

Needless to say, this community of psychoanalysts is difficult to imagine outside of psychoanalytic conferences and Lacanian retreats; as soon as one broadens the scope to the wider culture, it is nearly impossible to think a society without fantasy. And yet, we have arguably already seen it in punk – an argument that will come as less of a surprise to the extent that the narratives and structures of fantasy were (and are) already in disrepair. Knowing nothing of Lacanian psychoanalysis young punks knew, at the level of drive, of the self's disintegration, and of the sham and artifice of any 'subject supposed to...'. Perhaps most importantly, they "knew", they realized, that the lack at the heart of the social edifice was concomitant to the lack of self, that, in the same moment as the Other did not exist, neither did they.

This entailed a profound boredom, as there is indeed something boring about the eternal return of the drive. (The etymology of boredom includes "to bore" or "to pierce", slowly; boring through something slowly, of course, is boring...) To declare oneself bored, however, is to express a desire for desire, which is desire in its pure state. Though in slavishly following Sid's "example" punks often allowed themselves to be immersed in the self-enclosure of drive's circuit, there was always also this tendency towards pure desire.



Classic Johnny Rotten.

Does he not pierce, bore with his very eyes? One gets the sense that Rotten is not simply staring intently, but that there is something in him, beyond him, also gracing the stage through his iconic glare. A death mask? If Rotten in this way performs as a kind of subcultural psychoanalyst, inducing anxiety rather than ego-stroking comfort, this was not a role he consciously adopted. As noted, his glare, and his hunchbacked style of singing, were largely the result of his childhood meningitis<sup>4</sup>, traits Rotten *did* nonetheless nourish from his earliest performance auditioning for the Sex Pistols in McLaren's shop. Looking at Rotten one gets the presentiment of the Gaze of the Other, that there is a point, a stain, in which the image is staring back at you, capturing and shaming you. I do not want to suggest outright that Rotten embodied the desire of the analyst. Given the difficulties of imagining cultural formations not rooted in fantasy, the simple possibility that Rotten, the Sex Pistols, and punk maintained a desire free from fantasy is intriguing – and perhaps a necessary development given the demise of fantasy generally. In *The Filth and the Fury*, Rotten ruminates: 'I don't think you can explain how things happen, other than sometimes they just should, and the Sex Pistols should have happened, and did'. The preceding has been an account, an interpretation if not 'explanation' of this *ongoing* necessity. Forever of the order of the *contretemps*, standing out of time, meaning and identity, standing out, insisting, punk – that is, the punk of the Sex Pistols scene – continues to judge the present as lacking. It continues to refuse (its) integration (not least in tracts of cultural studies), while calling attention to this refusal<sup>5</sup>: a foreign object, at the core, on the surface. The spirit of punk,

*punktum*. Can there be a better riposte to the platitudes of the current self-help era and subcultural industry than this spirit, this *punktum*? Not a `response', of course, not a situation of dialogical agents in dialectical encounter, but a cutting through, a judgment, an expression and a negation.

If cultural studies still cannot account or figure for one of its earliest objects of study, then despite the hegemonic ascendance of the field in the university the terrain of cultural analysis remains open to other approaches, including Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rather than dividing and sub-dividing historically and contextually specific identities, and employing methodologies sure to find them, the always already `ex-sistent' demise of identity and meaning should be affirmed, wherever it be "found". Although we may not be able to do away with identity as such, it is equally clear this does not mean we should project it everywhere. Indeed, it is those moments in which identity's precariousness – along with its intrarelation with Capital – is *ex-pressed* that harbor the greatest potential for scholarly interpretation, and that allow for a genuine passage, and passing off, to the space of politics proper. To delimit punk's "resistance" to the forces of "domination" is misplaced, indeed displaced. Punk is not political; it expresses the failure of the political. Correspondingly, the interpretation of the subculture – and, I would hazard, of subcultures generally – is not political, is not a practicing of that nebulous though nice-sounding domain of `cultural politics'. It is just that, interpretation, having no direct bearing on the space of the Political. Which is not the same thing, of course, as saying it has no bearing at all.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more than any other cultural grouping youth subcultures, to the extent they found themselves with an inordinate amount of time in need of wasting, most acutely felt this demise of Symbolic efficiency. In a desublimating universe, time becomes a problem, indeed *the* problem. No longer subsumed into the forward march of history, progress, or even something as banal as basic employment, one is left with a seemingly infinite amount of time in which to mull over just 'what went wrong'. In this sense subcultures are a uniquely postmodern phenomenon, though it should be noted that the boredom involved in 'doing nothing' (Corrigan 1976) to waste time is a problematic that emerges with modernity. As people move away from the rhythms and cycles of rural life into the cities in search of time-sensitive employment, and experience the phenomena of 'waiting' and electric light that 'extends' the time of the day around the clock, time becomes a problem. But it is not yet *the* problem as it becomes in postmodernity when Symbolic efficiency – and so one's sense of belonging, of integration into an organic whole – suffers its demise.

Jon Savage suggests that punk embodied – and we should stress the absolute, street-level *embodiment* of – three negations: no feelings, no fun, and no future (1991: xii). With the future closed off, the kids who would become punk lived in an absolute present, but unlike the American Beat Generation of the 1950s they did not see much to *experience* in this prolonged moment. The Beats at least had an open road and a desert to drive through; walking up and down the King's Road in London, on the other hand, could only open up so many new vistas. If, as John Leland writes, the Beats asserted a will to believe despite the valueless abyss of modern life (2004: 148), punk rejected this existentialist ethos, realizing, instead, the absolute worthlessness of belief in the face of the Bomb, massive unemployment and (more locally) a garbage strike in a summer heat wave that seemed to know no end. For the punk the will to believe was the ideological imperative of the day, that, in effect, put the blinders on truly comprehending the – profoundly stupid – situation. Left only with an absolute present that hardly seemed beatific, that disabled the space for self-improvement, whether via consumption or the accumulation of 'experience', punks were bored shitless, Savage writes, gorged on sixties excess but without its accompanying idealism (1991: 61). Absent the comforting supplement that they were engaged in a Revolution – the protest against the Vietnam war having provided an alibi for enjoyment – punks were left only with empty time.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (2008), 214-217.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek uses the book to suggest this dimension of fantasy is present. That would be fine *were* he discussing the book, but he seems to want to transpose the scene from the book into the film, which is obviously inappropriate. The film must stand on its own, in which case the link between the self-beating and fantasy of the boss is precarious.

<sup>4</sup> Lydon states that his illness eradicated the memory of the first years of his life, and that he had to learn everything anew. How did this affect his sense of self, his unconscious investments, his desire? One wonders if his subjective attitude as a Sex Pistol was in some way preconditioned by this loss of memory – or *assumed* amnesia. Since this amnesia was a general cultural condition, perhaps his illness allowed or helped him to realize the situation.

<sup>5</sup> I consider this refusal to be more effective than that of *Bartleby's* 'I would prefer not to', which Žižek repeatedly praises. It is difficult to comprehend the political import of individuals saying they would prefer not to. At a macro level, how might one distinguish this form of refusal from diffuse apathy? What kind of chain reaction might be spawned by the assertion of this statement? Perhaps in response to this sort of criticism, in concluding his recent *Violence* Žižek proffers the fictional example of a majority of citizens spoiling their

ballots: 'The voters' abstention is thus a true political *act*: it forcefully confronts us with the vacuity of today's democracies' (2008: 217). But were this to occur in the real, would it confront us so? Could one not imagine it would only be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the current crop of candidates, or even that a technical malfunction were the cause (i.e. 'hanging chads')?

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