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Punk's dead knot: constructing the temporal and spatial in commercial punk imagery

Abstract: This article analyses two deliberately constructed visual artefacts broadly classed within the punk style; a photograph from 1976 and a 30 second commercial from 2016. The period of analysis chimes with the current celebrations of 40 years of punk as seen within the city of London. Whilst the article presents overview considerations of punk as a (once) possible confrontational cultural discourse, I also develop a detailed visual methodology looking at embedded visual codes and cultural forms from both the high and the low. By considering the photograph within a flux of differing temporalities, and the commercial as a potential sequence of heavily coded still montages, I examine how the space and time of punk has been twisted for various purposes.

To tell stories of the sort we are most familiar with, one needs objects in the world that can be cut up spatially and temporally into recognisable units. Narrative structures are typically formed with a moving time line, protagonists, and a dramatic structure unfolding over time. (Bowker and Starr 1999: 87)

Photography can be understood as anti-narrative not only in the sense that it interrupts the sequential flow of instances. It is anti-narrative in that it proposes and serves as an alternative understanding of time. (Frosh 2003: 162)

This article examines two constructed visual artefacts manifesting what might be considered as a punk sensibility. The first is a photograph taken (constructed) in 1976 in the centre of London featuring the punk band the Sex Pistols. I develop a critical mapping to show how this superficially announces punk's performative iconoclasm and then look harder to try and destabilise this claim. The second is a television commercial from the Summer 2016 advertising campaign by the fast food chain McDonalds in which a broad brush selection of punk iconography and habitus is both repurposed and reconstructed in what can only be considered as the highest court of punk's enemy.¹ I emphasise the term constructed because, as I hope to show in the detailed analysis, the artefacts are not simply documentations of something that happened. Whilst this might be abundantly clear with the McDonalds commercial, it is less so with the original photograph.

Taken together, both enquiries detail real cultural phenomena, and the methodology developed by Latour (2005: 137) which sets out the practice of taking description further to avoid grasping at premature explanations allows these phenomena to resonate within-themselves and so provide a wider scope of potential evidence towards a greater overarching understanding. At a tactical level Frosh (2003: 20) describes ekphrasis as the 'verbal representation of visual representation' and my analysis of the two artefacts employs such a method, drawing from a mix of high and low culture, to both delve deeper into the artefacts and to illustrate more generally the fluid and slippery nature of visual materials. My consideration of the McDonalds commercial in particular develops visual chains of reference to avoid what Barthes (1977: 42) defines as 'message by eviction.' My concern is with the time and space encoded within the artefacts, and I argue that punk's outset intention to sit outside of time and space as kind of unassailable critical gesture gets caught within a more powerful machination of different temporalities and spatialities that ultimately draw punk back towards being an exemplar visual brand. This notion of time and space is intertwined between the static and moving image as well as between punk and the lineage of subcultures.

At a level outside of the detailed description of the artefact-in-itself I will also 'zoom out' to consider the concept of punk as a cultural construction. The date points of my artefacts (1976 and 2016) coincide with the current Punk London festival, and this article can be taken as both a counter-reading of the festival and a counter-reading of the oppositional reaction to this festival.²

All Stood Still: The Sex Pistols, Carnaby Street, 1976 by Ray Stevenson

Fashion's aggressiveness, whose rhythm is the same as that of vendettas, is thus disarmed by a more patient image of time; in that absolute, dogmatic, vengeful present tense in which Fashion speaks, the rhetorical system possesses reasons which seem to reconnect it to a more manageable, more distant time, and which are politeness or - the regret - of the murder it commits of its own past, as if it vaguely heard that possessive voice of the slain year saying to it: Yesterday I was what you are, tomorrow you will be what I am. (Barthes 1985: 273)

I begin by considering in detail Ray Stevenson's image of the Sex Pistols ([Figure 1](#)), taken as part of the commercial campaign to promote the band who had formulated many key facets of the punk identity whilst being keenly aware of the potential threat from other nascent punk bands. The photograph is taken in April 1976, evident through the short sleeves in the background. The year would progress as having one of the hottest summers on record, embedding itself in the national psyche. The photograph is time-stamped to earlier than February 1977, since it features Glen Matlock who left the band around this time. Matlock's departure from the group became one of the first of the many strands of mythology that surrounded their tempestuous history, with suggestions of disagreements, the subsequent provocation and manipulation of those disagreements by Malcolm McLaren, and the using of Matlock's dismissal/departure from the group as a cipher for buttressing various claims against the torrid vacancy of pre-existing musical forms (notably the accusation of Matlock being a Beatles fan thus making him incompatible to the membership of the Sex Pistols).³ Certainly Matlock looks out of place, and also looks like he knows he is out of place. His comportment is akin to Wittgenstein's multi-stable rabbit-duck illusion in that he is both relaxed and not relaxed at the same time. He has taken the relaxed pose of a popstar going through the motions of a publicity photograph but it clearly seems that he is out of step with the posed anti-comportment of the rest of the band. There is a kind of hierarchy at work, with Johnny Rotten at the front executing the extreme of punk theatricality, Steve Jones doing his best to mimic Rotten two steps behind and to Rotten's right, Paul Cook (partially obscured) and in line with Jones, whilst Matlock drifts a pace further back seemingly watching Jones watching and imitating Rotten.⁴ Matlock looks smart and sensible, almost as if heeding parental advice to keep his jacket buttoned up, and so looking out of place.⁵ It is a disorienting picture since he appears to know his time is running out, but at the same time he gives the impression of lingering with admiration and anticipation, an adumbration of what is to come evidently with or without him.

Stevenson frames the shot with two intersecting perfect orthogonal lines. Firstly, there is the obvious foreground to background with Carnaby Street's clustered, raised facades dotted with vertical signs forming a vanishing point that suggests a not vanishing in that the style shops drawing on a stratigraphy of accumulated British pop culture could go on for ever.⁶ Secondly there is a left to right line is formed by the small constellation of people immediately behind the band composed of a young woman attempting to photograph two women positioned at the front edge of a table under a



Figure 1 - Sex Pistols on Carnaby Street (Ray Stevenson / Rex Features)



Figure 2 - Valley of the Shadow of Death (Roger Fenton)

Watney's Red parasol. The photographer and photographed are equidistant from the edges of Stevenson's photograph creating a near perfect symmetry of composition, and the sight line of the photograph within the photograph forms the orthogonal to Stevenson's vanishing point.

The photograph, by virtue of its composition, invites an initial temporal interpretation. Throughout the article I will introduce various temporal regimes associated with the captured image. Firstly I draw on the work of John Berger who is concerned with the apparent instantaneous nature of a photograph - its claim to capture the briefest moment. Berger (2013: 20) argues that 'true content is invisible, it derives from a play not with form, but with time... it isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum.' Thus, at first glance, this continuum is offered to us: Rotten and his entourage seemed to have walked the length of Carnaby Street gurning and goofing, both intruding and going unnoticed (beyond the presumed immediate impacts of their sequence of intrusions) if we study the faces and positions of the crowd in their wake. We assume they have walked through the sight line of the photograph-to-be immediately behind them, though the people involved in taking/posing for the photograph do not seem to be overly concerned. Stevenson's photograph bears an uncanny resemblance to Roger Fenton's 1855 photograph *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (figure 2), said to be the first iconic photograph of war. In his detailed study of the work, Morris (2011) debates the complexities at play in deciphering the staging of the photograph, though the image itself shows a tapering path littered with (possibly staged) indexical traces of devastation. One could easily imagine Rotten and his band members photoshopped into the immediate foreground of this haunted image. This image of the troubled road creating a vanishing point has an unsettling quality, inviting us to search back against the spontaneous time of the photograph and imagine what might have happened. It seen at its most obvious with Nick Ut's famous 1972 image of children fleeing a napalm attack, through to the eerie, abandoned cityscapes constructed by Thomas Struth as part of his late 1970s series of depopulated street-scenes.⁷

Though Jones could be said to form the central object of attention by being positioned on the line of the vanishing point and directly under the sign proclaiming 'Carnaby Street Welcomes the World', and indeed Jones is doing his best to cut a pose with his brothel creeper shoes and cocked back hat in the classic British 'kiss me quick' urchin-at-Margate style, it is without doubt Rotten that forces the attention. Rotten's advanced theatricality dominates the picture, part of punk's tactic to draw from historical English illegitimate entertainment such that Adams (2008: 470) describes the punks as 'heirs to the crowns of Arthur Askey and Max Wall, operating outside the "legitimate theatre" and characterized by clownish outfits, silly walks, smutty jokes, and cocking a snook at the Establishment.' His posing formulates a powerful studium in Barthes' classic deconstructing of the photographic order, whilst the search for the punctum—whether that be Matlock's fastened button or the Watney's Red advertising as a reminder of the beer that was a staple fixture of the decade - is delayed and made difficult through Rotten's hogging of the frame. Barthes' idea of the punctum - the unexpected surprise that emerges to puncture the viewer - is a concept in debate as to whether it can be registered and shared from one viewer to another, potentially problematizing the tradition of photographic exegesis such as I undertake here. Elkins (2011: 38) provides the most vibrant critique of this method as a mix of 'deliberate eccentricity... a self-consciously aberrant pensiveness... the tourism of the overlooked.'

Beyond the band members and the immediately discernible general public the location of Carnaby Street starts to resonate, unfurling the pop-cultural archaeological detritus of the previous decade,

flashing into life in the swinging sixties when Carnaby Street became the commercialised version of the meeting point between art scenes (Peter Blake's pop, Bridget Riley's op, the democratic psychedelic art style) fused with the powerhouse pop delivered by the Who, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Kinks, and wrapped up in the national fervour of the 1966 World Cup victory. This lingers on to give a troubling reading of the scene, returning to Latour (2005) in two ways. Firstly his recommendation of a description taken further invites a muddy clash between the synchronic and diachronic both extending into the distance - spatially the shops seem to go on within the moment (synchronic) and at the same time we can imagine the holdings of each shop containing intra-dimensional archival nooks that extend their cultural significance back in time (diachronic) with mothballed trinkets from all musical eras kept in the event of a genre (hippy, psychedelia, mod) making a brief comeback. And of course, within a couple of years of this photograph, punk would be well represented in Carnaby Street in the form of branded artefacts and gubbins depicting new popstars and designs. Furthermore, Latour (2005: 108) also talks about 'reversals in causality' and the agency of both the camera and the object 'Carnaby Street' in collaboration start to bear down on what we see. Rotten and his Pistols are there to say 'we aren't welcome here, we are not part of this, but here we are', whilst the tourists in the background and the actors in the orthogonal composition of their own photograph are celebrating the sense of place and cultural stature, of being there and being part of the accumulated pop history. In Latour's thinking, Rotten, the other Pistols and the tourists are not posing for the camera, but are posed by the camera.

Rotten performs what Fried (2008) calls theatricality, developing this mode from painting into photography through the interplay of its opposite (anti-theatricality) and its re-emergence (objecthood). Thus, Rotten acknowledges the camera and performs for the camera, even if not looking directly into the camera he immediately draws in the eye of the beholder. His performance is geared to negate everything that Carnaby Street stands for, with Rotten representing both the Sex Pistols and the nascent punk movement. He compresses both his stature and physiognomic features in an attempt to annihilate the rules of engagement of the pop process laid out an infinite number of times in this very spot under this very sign. He adopts his now well-travelled 'Dickensian street-urchin image' (Smith 2015: 490). His dirty old man trousers (echoing the then-current British sitcom figure of old man Steptoe) are hitched high, his moth-eaten cardigan is torn apart and pinned back together with its too-short sleeves comically elongating Rotten's puny forearms and wrists to simian proportions. As Court (2015: 416) determines regarding Rotten in general, this is a 'contextually aware construction of himself as cultural contrarian.'

I'd now like to consider an alternative understanding of the construction of the photograph, against Berger's invitation to construct a temporality and fluidity of movement going into the photograph; to read the photograph without considering any concept of before and after that seeps into the photograph itself. The photograph can now be considered as a precisely posed document with the four punk musicians reminiscent of the crouched figures of Captain Kirk and his *Star Trek* crew materialising on a hostile, alien planet with their phasers at the ready to deal with the subcultural detritus that might turn on them at any moment (figure 3).⁸

Whilst the notion of the inauthentic and staged can be associated with both temporal unfolding (in terms of acting) and momentary stillness (in terms of posing) it is the latter that invites questioning of the image's truthfulness. The indeterminacy between document and picture comes to bear here, an ambivalence explored at length by Edwards (2006) and stated precisely by Company (2008: 62) as



Figure 3 - Star Trek landing party

flickering between the 'taken and made.' By considering the photograph as a posed moment, something it clearly ascribes to, we question whether Stevenson is capturing the course of actual events or whether he is capturing something else. Rotten's presence becomes what Scannell (1996: 58) calls a 'performative paradox' that haunts the documentary and its impression of sincerity.⁹ We have only a posed documentation (Sex Pistols invade the enemy territory Carnaby Street) that collapses into a documentation of posing. It is the latter that prevails as a useless truthfulness.

The posed event then invites a second temporal regime, and immediately erases it. The deictic concerns the time of the production of the artefact, or what Bryson (1983: 87) calls 'the locus of utterance.' Whilst previous photographs of punk musicians were generally tied to live events, anchoring their time of production, Stevenson's photograph of the Sex Pistols is a staged publicity shot that becomes a stock photograph for the idea of punk.¹⁰ As Frosh (2003: 165) states, stock images are equally about 'actuality and potentiality... (inviting) temporal collapse - the compression into a single instant of the period between the reference time of the photographed object and the moment of viewing.'

Scouring the historical punk resources it is evident that Stevenson was commissioned to prepare a stock folder of images that cemented the Sex Pistols to various attributes of punk rock. Savage (1991: 157) documents McLaren's intention to have a clear publicity strategy of photographic portraiture following a rejected photograph session directed by Peter Christopherson.¹¹ The interview with Stevenson for Savage's book is later transcribed in full (Savage 2009: 415) and the photographer

reveals that 'wandering round London was what the music papers wanted at the time'. The Carnaby Street photograph is included in Lydon's latest autobiography where it is captioned 'forced fun doing photos for Malcolm', accompanied by a photograph taken boating on the Serpentine lake. A further photograph of the four crammed into a London phone box became a well hyped advertising symbol, and Savage includes another common photograph where Rotten sneers in close up and gives the finger to a Beatles picture sleeve as part of a grid display in a Soho shop window of apparently rare import singles from 60s pop bands.¹²

The nature of the posed moment as stock photograph - a collapsed temporal instance instigating the unanchoring of the deictic - leads to a third regime of temporality that is also deliberately unhinged. This concerns the temporality of the photographic object itself (the Sex Pistols) considered, or constructing themselves, as an atemporal subject. The choice of Carnaby Street links to McLaren's obsession with the curtailed tangent of subculture, his desire to take the situationist possibility of early subcultural gangs (mods, rockers, teds) to a different place. Subculture considered as a smooth filmic motion was not in a good place in McLaren's eyes, with the 1970s seeing the rise of prog rock such that no smooth transition to a viable alternative could be made without a radical break - to stop the film by throwing a spanner in the works. At the same time Carnaby Street represented a photographic and archival motion of subculture, a series of snapshots and promotional film stills that sanitised the highlights of what had gone before and stored them in plastic packaging to be browsed over and purchased as novelty.

The photograph tries to set out McLaren's deliberate positioning of punk as against the process of accumulation of all music genres and stylistic connotations and manifestations that have gone before. The creation of an unarchivable photograph. Rotten and his cast attempt to appear as unknowable (noumenal), outside of space (exogenous) or outside of time (atemporal). Similarly Garnett (1999: 17) positions the work of the Sex Pistols, their imagery, their songs, their performance, as to be 'singing from somewhere else, someplace that hadn't existed before and that only existed for a brief moment in time. It was a zone that was neither high nor low; it was a space between art and pop.'

However, in creating a stock photograph the atemporality of punk as its own powerful subject is lost to the deictic unanchoring of punk as object - we have an image that serves as cultural fodder across all time and space. The tourists and the Sex Pistols (and McLaren and Stevenson) are drawn to Carnaby Street; they are united in the sense that Carnaby Street exerts a power. Even the absence of the Sex Pistols needs to be stated with their presence. We are here to say that we aren't here. However, they cannot escape time and space, and this comes back to haunt punk 40 years later.

Action Time Vision: McDonalds commercial, summer 2016

The multiple is not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways.
(Deleuze 1993: 3)

Today, there are no longer images that are beautiful, there are chains of images.
Philippe Parreno¹³

The relationship between film and the still image is complex, intersecting with notions of cinematic time. Whilst photographers such as Hiroshi Sugimoto create single photographs of an entire film

teasing out an image of time passing to document the act of passing time, earlier work from Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey uses different techniques to achieve a simultaneous accumulation of the instantaneous arrest of time.

A further crucial difference between the photograph and the film concerns another realm of temporality outside of the subject (photographer) / object (photographed) relationship that I plotted with the Stevenson photograph. Metz (1985: 84) bridges the gap with his suggestion that the photograph is 'an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time.' Whilst Metz implies that the photograph takes a piece of the past and allows it to persist in the present (and into the future), it is possible to take this further. The photograph becomes a new object for the beholder, the viewer of the photograph. A photograph is viewed in the present for as long a duration as is required, with the option of returning to it to invest more time in viewing it. A film is viewed as a continuous sequence - much is missed regarding the nuances, background and structural considerations. As Company (2008: 86) argues: 'translation of film into an illustrated text opens up an interpretative gap. The fixed duration of film is converted into the more private time of the reader.'

My consideration of the McDonalds commercial, below, draws on this process of breaking the film into a stream of shorter sequences and still images. To stop time and move around the frame and investigate what might be going on. As the quotes that precede this section intimate, the commercial is made up of folded sections - outsides nested within insides - that refer to other images in a rhizomatic flux. Whilst not all of my observations and suggestions will be intentional on the part of the creative teams associated with the instigation and production of the commercial, my own intentions are to examine the ubiquitous, neutralised and atemporal representations of punk that resonate within the images and actions.

In summer 2016 the multinational fast-food franchise McDonalds launched a campaign for a new product line entitled summer wraps, calling upon a montage of punk iconography and sounds. The first commercial set the theme and goes under the generic name of 'live bolder', inviting the customer to encounter a bold choice in meal and to be served by an edgy punk girl with a supersonic sense of hearing who takes great pride in exercising immense virtuosity in making a pulled pork wrap (a peri-peri chicken wrap is simultaneously prepared by a non-edgy non-punk member of staff who is fleetingly featured sliding the product under a hatch to the punk girl). There are various motifs and themes launched here that carry across into the second commercial, but the main difference is that the first commercial used what appears to be an unknown soundtrack, whilst the second commercial uses a punk classic by the Buzzcocks.¹⁴

'What Do I Get' was launched in February 1978, the third single from the Manchester band following a debut ep a year earlier under the previous incarnation featuring Howard Devoto on vocals. Whilst Devoto would go on to form Magazine and enjoy something of an arty cult status though more limited immediate success, Buzzcocks released a series of short and high intensity punk-pop songs energising a pseudo-situationist vocal narrative that drew from both the mundanity of everyday life and the eventual disappointment to be found in relationships (an anti-thesis to the common fare of love in pop songs). Each single featured a modernist design picture sleeve utilising limited colourways and block prints. The single would be the first by the band to break into the top 40, the normal standard-bearer for music success in the UK.¹⁵

Its reoccurrence in 2016 to advertise McDonalds comes as something of a shock, though this is slightly neutered with the opening shot as the camera takes up an external position viewing a pristinely presented and preserved red Ford Capri entering the service section of drive-thru. The sound of the music is heard at a distance and through an enclosure, and this immediately invites a diegetic reading. We are hearing from the point of view of the position of the camera, hearing the actual sound, music - punk music - playing from within an interior, nearby space. Within the same moment the temporality of the scene is disturbed; the car and the soundtrack are from the later 1970s, but we are in the here and now. We assume that the car is a preservation project of the adult (father) and the fact that it is left-hand drive, rather than making us both temporally and spatially confused (is this the UK?), fits with its specialist preservation nature.¹⁶ It then becomes clear that the left-hand drive is a plot device to allow the (non) dialogue to occur between the teenage boy passenger and the staff behind the window. The music powers on from within its own space - the car or the hatch of drive-thru - it is not yet clear.

The camera angle switches to the view looking into the passenger window, at the well-groomed teenager who struggles to speak and his father who starts the order. There is a short switch back to original angle to show a brief comedy moment as teenager and father speak on top of each other. The music remains stifled and muffled suggesting it is not coming from within the car, since we have been privileged with a view into the car and experience no change in sound quality or volume.

After a short frame clip showing a long view with the red Capri and pristine approach and environs of drive-thru we are then given a moment of close up at the teenager as he recoils in awe at something that catches his eye. A further pair of anachronistic gestures are played as, firstly, the film trips over itself and shows a frame-by-frame jarring motion indicating a pre-digital technology, and secondly, the film zooms from the teenager via a Sam Raimi style telescopic zoom culled from his early 80s work with the *Evil Dead*. But it is not an emaciated entity or dismembered figure that we see; it is a zoom into the piercing eyes and sneer/smile of the punk staff member positioned at the back of the workroom preparing food. Here we have another multi-stable that plays within the anachronistic tension - punk as (then) horror versus punk as (now) respectable spectacle. How are we meant to feel, how did we used to feel, what has changed?

As with the first commercial, it seems that the preparation of the order is underway instantaneously. The camera is now stationed within the kitchen area and the music attains clarity and volume, solving the diegetic riddle and suggesting that the staff are enjoying loud and raucous music on the premises. A tortilla flat bread is marked with three pumped sauce trails from a dispenser switching to an overhead shot for the bread rotating on a turntable to resemble a 7" record with suitable new wave artwork. This short sequence barrage of punk effects is topped with Jamie Reid derived day-glo ransom note lettering fixed over the image declaring the product name.

The next sequence includes a low angled view back to the punk staff member coolly grabbing a component of the wrap in a kind of celebratory and styled boredom (referencing another key Buzzcocks song from the 'Spiral Scratch' ep) and then jumps to a front view as the girl turns slowly to add lettuce garnish whilst her two male (non-punk) colleagues are filmed in stop-motion automated movements (figure 4).¹⁷ This is a powerful motif, giving the impression that she exists in her own time whilst she shares a space with others working at a different temporal level, or that a space is split into two overlapping spaces. In some regards this splitting of time and space echoes the entire



Figure 4 - A different time and space (McDonalds freeze frame)



Figure 5 - Another time and space (Buzzcocks freeze frame)

commercial. We have clearly moved on 40 years from punk rock and the Ray Stevenson Carnaby Street photograph, since the commercial is set in the present, but at the same time this present has become 1978, just an advance of two years.

Grossberg (1992: 80) defines a Deleuzian temporalizing of space and spatializing of time which can be applied here with regard to the differences, identities, stabilities and mobilities are conjured in both the short sequence composing the movements with the space/time frame, and also the wider framing of the commercial. The montage of the foregrounded staff member and the backgrounded staff members also evokes two apt moments from the punk and new wave lineage; the Buzzcocks video for 'What Do I Get' and a sociological presentational trope of certain new wave bands. The Buzzcocks video is an understandably basic piece of film which simply provides a rote presentation of the song in diegetic form with a possible further reading of laconic intent.¹⁸ The film is shot in a single location with the band performing in front of a plain white backdrop that merges floor to wall much like the dust sheets of a painter and decorator. The Buzzcocks were not known for their daring and debonair punk imagery, dress sense and manner, and instead take up a kind of hyper bored mop-top variation of the Beatles. Midway through the track the singer-guitarist and lead-guitarist vanish as part of a jump cut leaving the drummer and bass-player to provide the instrumental breakdown. In a second jump cut the four band members are reunited but Pete Shelley, the singer-guitarist, attempts to remain frozen and step outside of time whilst the lead-guitarist and bass-player that flank him affect a mock-punk dance of muted jumping and leg-kicks, linking itself to the McDonalds commercial (figure 5). The punk dance exhibits a kind of nihilistic busy-ness, contradicting a reading between the denoted and connoted drawing on both the energetic and the laconic. Savage (1991: 177) defines the pogo as 'the frozen leap, as though on a pogo stick, to gain a view: an action born out of the necessity of the club's packed space', inviting a further link between the filmic and photographic: punk as a live spectacle viewed as a series of linked snapshots glimpsed at each apex of the jump.

Elsewhere, new wave bands such as Devo developed various looks that traded upon robotic uniformed staff performing synthesised music as a kind of service provision (themselves clearly parodying the robotic nature of much of the work in the contemporaneous era) or designed an image with a dynamic frontman and a seemingly ultra-ordinary band member standing behind (here I am thinking of Soft Cell or Yazoo as archetypical). Often the 'boring' band member would embody some kind of highly visualised technical virtuosity symbolised by a complex tower of keyboard and cables whilst the singer would embody a more primal and performative virtuosity - a dance and a haircut. Thus, whilst the key figure - the punk girl - is something from another spatial and temporal zone coolly working a shift in the drive-thru, the regular staff who are working what is often considered to be a 'McJob' attain some kind of status as cool but geeky band members in a new wave set-up.

The term McJob is said to have emerged around 1986 and derives from employment that requires little or no training, attracts little loyalty, and is often regulated by officious management.¹⁹ Whilst as a politicised social categorisation the term McJob is being replaced by the term precariat, no doubt pleasing McDonalds who had fought to have the term removed from various official dictionaries, it retains a certain cultural status for use in films and fiction.²⁰ The characterisation of the boring and pointless job has been a meme of resistance and critique in many films such as Alex Cox's *Repo Man*

(1984) to The Simpsons occasional but recurring character known as 'squeaky-voiced teen' who is often depicted serving in a drive-thru fast-food chain.²¹

The music then stalls midway between the application of lettuce and cheese - possibly as a cue to imagine a stuck groove on a 7" single as the 'get' of the chorus is repeated three times (though the time frame for the event of this triplicate repeat is about one second whilst three rotations of a stuck groove would take four seconds)²² hence suggesting a skipping CD, and not necessarily breaking the diegetic possibility of the music actually playing in the workspace (in that it would be unfeasible for the staff to have a 7" record player playing Buzzcocks and other punk numbers which come in at short durations so plenty of distraction unless you have a stacker and auto-changer).²³ Furthermore, drawing attention to the jumping grooves of 7" single recalls the first Buzzcocks ep 'Spiral Scratch' (January 1977) which ironically references the facticity of its own meagre existence stripped away from aesthetic specialness and aura - simply a spiral shaped scratch in a circular vinyl tablet. The punk rock spiral scratch sits between the macro of Robert Smithson's earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (figure 6) and the micro of Man Ray's visually disorienting photograph *Dust Breeding* (1920) (figure 7) which captures the dust gathering on Duchamp's epochal work *The Large Glass*. Punk records were, along with their rock'n'roll forebears, aggressively played, fingered, scratched and smudged - the spiral scratch thus became a harbinger of human activity. Cheap record players with worn styluses, vinyl coated in make-up grease as part of the ritual of frantically playing records whilst getting ready to go out and look your shocking best. Whilst *Dust Breeding* obviously points to an inactivity, it is the close attention to the surface that links across here to the punk vinyl 7".²⁴

A glimpse of the girl's tattooed neck and sublimely healthy skin is shown briefly, her green hair poking down from her regulation cap and heavily mascaraed eyes gently closed as she is seemingly softened in spirit and repose by the final product and act of presenting. The green of her hair mirrors both the rebranded uniform of McDonalds and the modernist design of the original single, a two colour design with an off-corner diagonal split balanced by the words Buzzcocks (with their overlapping double Z signature) and the word What, printed in a sans serif italicised capital font. This punk and new wave penchant for contrast colour design was executed throughout the early part of the Buzzcocks' oeuvre, and discussed in an art context in Myers (2007: 39) as providing a strong visual motif that works at various levels of pop culture nostalgia; a longing for the punk and new wave era which in itself evoked an aspect of the rockabilly era.²⁵

There follows a montage of wrap choices with an associated punk titling revealed as a tearing effect between products such that the remnants of the underneath image are revealed. This effect might be considered as reaching further back to the proto-punk collage work of Eduardo Paolozzi and the recent political montage of Peter Kennard, but it suggests something else; a statement of collage's facticity, a mode of urgency, impatience, dismissal and destructivity. The collage exposes and expresses its rips and tears - these are as important as the iconographic objects to be collaged.

The camera returns, now in the car on the left hand (driver) side, as we see the teenager receiving the product from the punk girl, herself framed in the serving hatch by clinical colours and patterns and a pristine interior extending back behind her, accentuated by a series of square lights seemingly extending in to the vanishing point - a depth of space that clearly didn't exist in the previous shots used as the food is prepared. Once again we have a momentary impossible space - temporality and

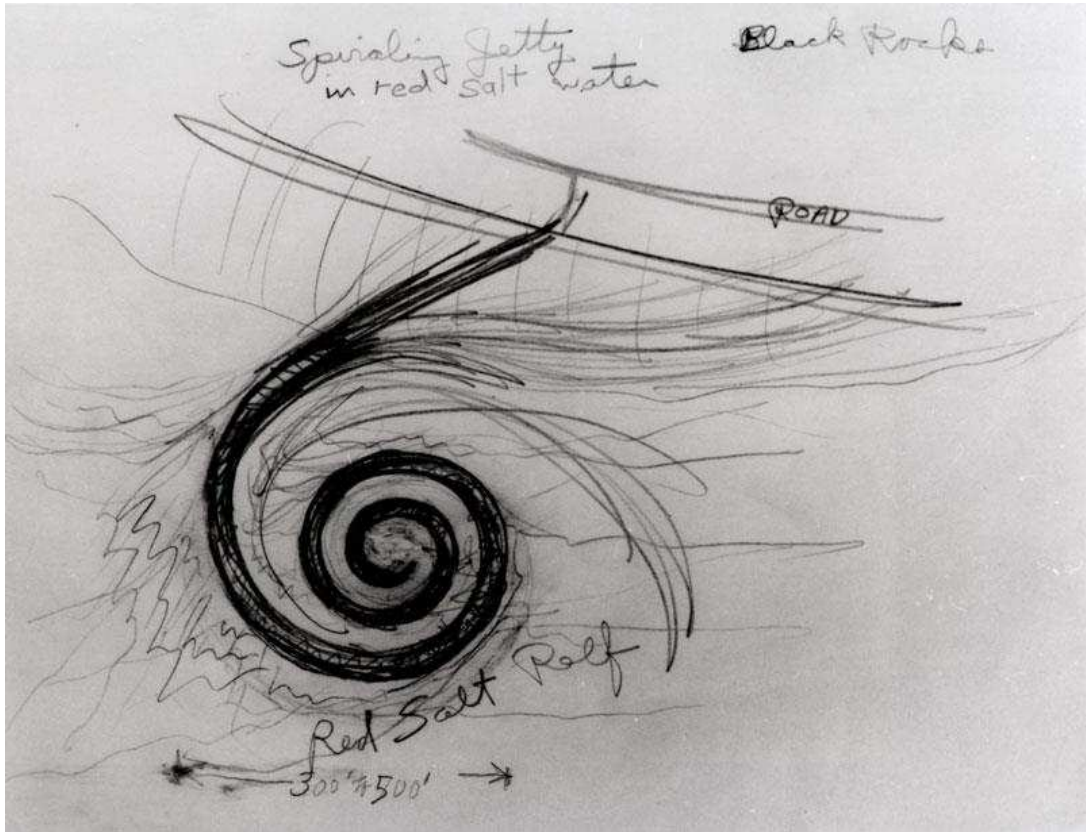


Figure 6 - Robert Smithson - Spiral Jetty



Figure 7 - Man Ray - Dust Breeding

spatiality is in flux. This is a minutely composed view that achieves a kind of synthesis of Dan Flavin and his work with commercial fluorescent lights and the repeating cuboid modularity of the mundane explored by Sol LeWitt, two artists who hover close by to each other but are seemingly forever in different conceptual spheres.²⁶ For this brief moment the punk girl is part of a new wave tableau, a picture sleeve for the first album graduating from a series of 7" singles.

The closing sequences echoes the first view across the front of the car, the girl coolly smiling at the teenager in a controlled and controlling manner, the teenager transfixed, the adult disinterested, the green and yellow/green of the branding reflected in the window of the car, its own red paint recalling the original branding of McDonalds as it arrived in the UK. This red is returned to for the closing image of the commercial, as the ripping collage effect is briefly revisited to show the McDonalds twin golden arch 'M' logo set on its red background.

Indigestion

Clearly such an unholy alliance between McDonalds and punk elicits an immediately hostile and cynical response.²⁷ The viral pattern of discontent then moves on to the Buzzcocks, with YouTube hosted clips of the band marked for scathing comments with punks old and new disowning the band.²⁸ This tradition of decanonizing punk artists due to making unsavoury commercial decisions is something that stretches back across the unfolding history of punk, post-punk and particularly anarcho-punk - a genre encased by a rigid ethical carapace.²⁹ What hasn't emerged from this alliance is a majoritarian voice of the disgruntled and disgusted public of McDonalds customers outraged at the linking of punk and the safe, normative environment of McDonalds.

Punk at its outset stated various claims to disrupt cultural, social and historical forms and habits through a multitude of methods; subversion and altercation as a direct affront, the frontier sense of splitting away and creating afresh, or to simply create a black hole via fostering a nervously twitching pulse of anti-incorporation. This final category, the creation and maintenance of an absence, was part of the dwindling vapour-trail of the genre, and formed some kind of epistemological bedrock as to punk's authenticity - a litmus test of how punk something is in terms of its ability to be eschewed by orbiting cultural systems. Chambers (1985: 184) defined punk as a genre absence: 'its own rhetorical practice was largely built around an absence, a refusal to be defined'. Thus, punk could be considered as creating a series of absences with regard to normative cultural practices around attachment to other media practices and streams (television appearances, endorsements). The absence (or otherwise) served a purpose, which is a register of the strength of punk's iconoclasm, its cultural indigestibility, its selling point of seemingly being unsaleable. It was the reversal of this indigestibility that caused consternation amongst those who attempted to protect the critical heritage of punk.

At the level of academic discourse, punk provided the emergent discipline of subcultural studies with a new object of theorisation. It seemingly embodied a different set of circumstances, made complex through the stated (staged) intentions of punk, and the attention given to this genre through the emergent schools of sociology that had been applying a class-derived antagonism to music through the 1970s. Punk provided these subcultural theorists with a kind of threshold, what Bracewell (2011: 24) calls 'modernity reaching critical mass', challenging the structure of the class-derived theory itself by embodying a maximisation of posed negativity and nihilism. Hebdige (1979: 113) teeters

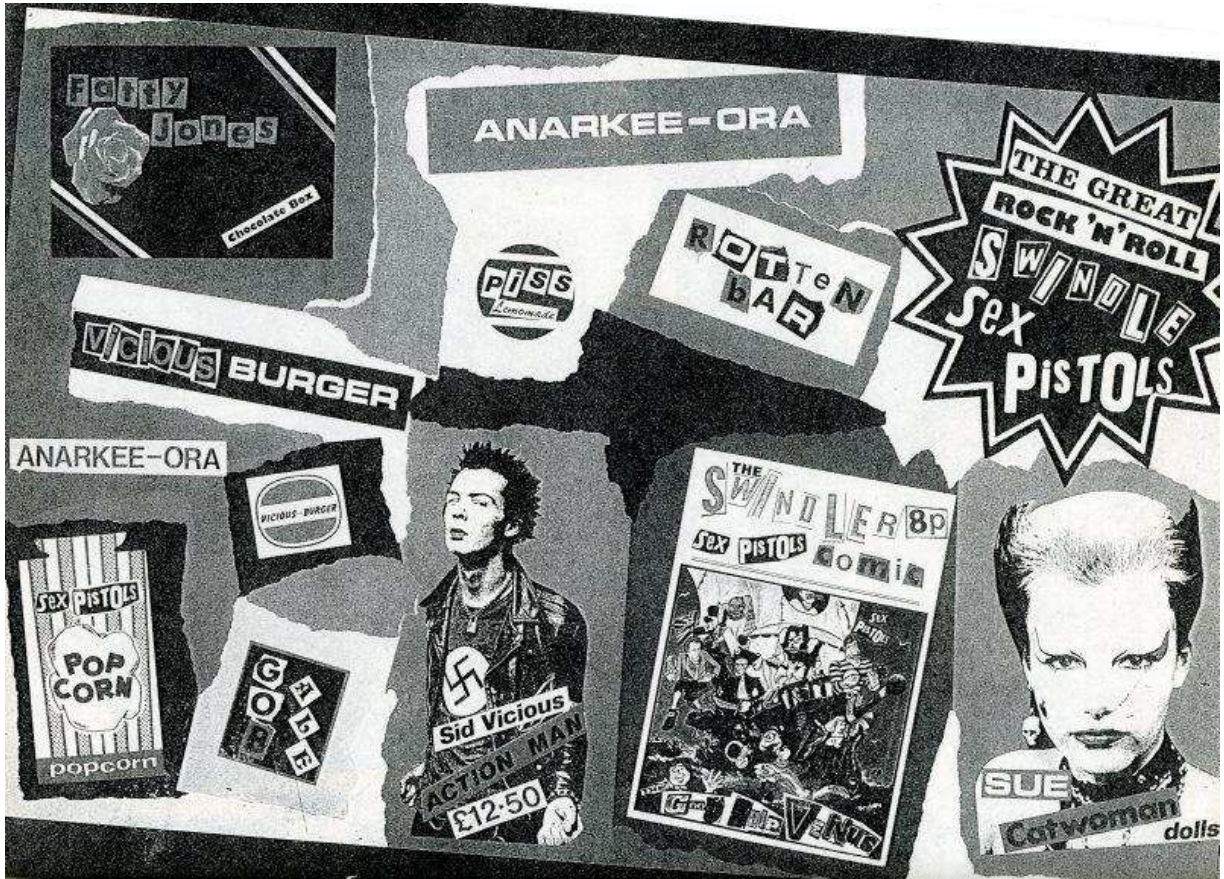


Figure 8 - Final Sex Pistols artwork by Jamie Reid



Figure 9 - Punk fonts on McDonalds products

between embrace and critique, describing punk as reaching the terminus point of the polysemic nature of commodities by 'signifying chaos at every level'.

At times punk and its visual strategies went on the offensive, declaring war on the cultural status quo and the image-drenched consumer society. Towards the tail-end of the Sex Pistols, following the death of Sid Vicious and the impending release of McLaren's film project *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*, a by now tired and disillusioned Jamie Reid developed a visual strategy based upon a pastiche of fast food associated with cinemas and entertainment, used as a kind of mise en abyme in which a film-going scene was placed within the film itself. This involved popcorn for the release of 'Silly Thing' (March 1979) and a hamburger (the Big Mac to come) for the release of 'C'mon Everybody' (June 1979), followed by piss lemonade, gob-ale, Anarkee-ora and the rotten bar (figure 8).

Punk's other method of visual activism involved an affront of symbols, styles, characters and events that were taken to be a dangerous supplement, pushing the system of subcultural semiotics towards a network of negative feedback loops. The dangerous supplement is borrowed loosely from Derrida's work in *On Grammatology*, taken broadly here to examine an additional aspect that is both beneficial and harmful to a unity of presence.³⁰ Punk administered its own dangerous supplement by drawing on more and more outré elements, not least from visual culture culled from Nazi iconography, the crude imagery of violent left wing groupuscules and factions, pornography and niche sexual practices.³¹ Accessorization for the sake of fashion extended into the taboo regions of dirt and what Douglas (1970) would class as 'matter out of place' with bin-liners, pins, chains, razor blades and tampons.³² Reid developed his iconic day-glow ransom note letters to emphasise the sinister connotations of punk, creating what could be considered as an imprimatur for punk. This style is repeated at the heart of the McDonalds campaign (see figure 9), such that the previous critique of the fast food concept and its literal indigestibility is rendered invisible, whilst the ransom note is rendered culturally digestible. Punk, as a series of visible codes and markers, is both everywhere and ever present.

By simultaneously borrowing from the past and destroying the past, punk affected pop in that '(its) linear time was shattered forever' (Savage 1991: 478). This gesture was not enough to place punk outside of time for all time. McLaren's commissioned stock photographs such as the Carnaby Street posing prefaced new methods linking subcultures and the commercial, not least in fashion photography itself. Rocamora and O'Neill (2008: 192) document the emergence of a 'staged quality of reality' with punk a particular target since it 'functioned best as a mediatized image.' The 40 year gap between the Carnaby Street image and the McDonalds commercial is rendered unintelligible as a Euclidean narrative of straight line time. The commercial celebrates the culmination of the process allowing it to escape time as a fixed narrative within itself (we see time jumping around from scene to scene) and also to extend the time of punk into new pasts and possible futures. It is a thought provoking counter consideration to Punk London.

¹ McDonalds was seen by the anarchist wing of the punk movement as a kind of maximised bundle of everything that can possibly be wrong with capitalism, and featured in the lyrics of bands like Crass ('Smash the Mac') as well as being part of a concerted campaign by London Greenpeace activists with an incredibly long libel case. See <http://www.mcspotlight.org/case/pretrial/factsheet.html> for the original 1986 leaflet.

Appropriation of punk imagery and soundtracks for products and services of multi-national companies is now common practice.

² See <http://punk.london/> for details of the festival. Bestley and Ogg (2015) offer an initial ontological critique of the festival in terms of what it isn't, whilst various popular media reactions offer hermeneutical views on why it shouldn't be. The most publicised was the attack by Joe Corre in the Guardian (see <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/16/malcolm-mclaren-son-joe-corre-burn-punk-memorabilia-punk-london-queen>) which elicited 421 comments in eight days, with a response by Sean O'Hagan who drew upon punk's supposed situationist origins and elicited a further 700 comments in three days.

³ The written contracts for Matlock's departure from the group were included in the recent British Library exhibition that dovetailed with the 40th anniversary celebrations of punk in London.

⁴ John Lydon took the name Johnny Rotten for the duration of his time with the Sex Pistols and I refer to him as Rotten when discussing the contents of the photograph. I refer to him as Lydon elsewhere when discussing the machinations of the punk and the Sex Pistols.

⁵ Lydon's dislike of Matlock is evident in much of the conflicting and overlapping histories of punk. It is of note here to refer to Lydon's suggestion that Matlock regularly telephoned his mother after the Sex Pistols gigs, the implication of which insults twofold - Matlock as a too-serious musician and Matlock as someone who was still heavily under the direction of his mother (Savage 1991: 127).

⁶ Platt (1985: 133) briefly documents the shifting focus and consumer architecture of Carnaby Street through the 1960s.

⁷ Struth originally referred to these as central perspectives and worked a key series of images in New York in 1978. However these were preceded by initial works in Germany (1976) and a project in London (1977) - linking him temporally and spatially to the punk miasma. As Struth's recognition increased the series was renamed unconscious places, indicating a switch from inviting an objective to a subjective reading of the work. This could be considered as a key gesture in separating himself from his teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher.

⁸ The cultural meme of the redshirt - a cast member who is generally dispatched with before the second act of the script - could be applied to Glen Matlock here. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshirt_\(character\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redshirt_(character))

⁹ In a further inward twist of paradox Stevenson reveals that 'there was the pose that they didn't want to be photographed, they saw being photographed as part of the ageing rock star machinery which had to be rejected, at the same time wanting to be photographed.' (Savage 2009: 416)

¹⁰ The Clash were on the cusp of forming at the time Stevenson made these photographs, and whilst this new band were equally driven for strategic shock, visibility and success it is interesting that the first wide scale image of the Clash is temporally and spatially anchored to the band's workaday environment in that the trio of determinedly vacant looking musicians are positioned on the trolley ramp of a warehouse opposite their rehearsal studio.

¹¹ Christopherson's photographs are included in Savage's book, and described on page 151 as making the Sex Pistols resemble 'psychotic rent boys.' Christopherson was part of the Hipgnosis design company and also active in the avant-garde art and punk scenes, co-founding Throbbing Gristle in 1976. Ford (1999: 4-10) links the photographic work to a Larry Clark influence, with the Sex Pistols reimagined as 'wounded young boys' in an unsettling but stunning style that adumbrated Alan Clarke's seminal *Scum* film a few years later. McLaren balked at the photographs, and they were eventually published in *Sounds* newspaper in December 1979 as a kind of historical curiosity. Throbbing Gristle would go on to combine imagery and sound in the service of confrontation, activating a meta-militarism that effectively outflanked punk on a multitude of levels (see Kromhout 2011).

¹² This latter picture is interesting in that the actual everyday and deictic is glimpsed as Rotten clutches a bag of grapes presumably purchased to provide nourishment on what must be an incredibly long day of constructing poses. This can be seen as the impossible glimpse *between* the frames of the film.

¹³ Quoted in Obrist (2008: 13).

¹⁴ Various song identifier applications have failed to locate the provenance of the track used leading to suggestions it was recorded, complete with retro sound and feel, specifically for the commercial.

¹⁵ It reached number 37 on release. The later re-release of 'Spiral Scratch' would reach number 31 but this record on release did not chart. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buzzcocks_discography for full details.

¹⁶ The model is a mark 1 'pre-facelift' Capri which was produced between 1969 and 1974. Left-hand drives would have been manufactured at the German and Belgian factories for the Continental market.

¹⁷ I'm suggesting her work colleagues are male and non-punk (in appearance) based upon their brief cameo whereby they are only seen with their backs turned away from the camera.

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EEPvXITUnU>

¹⁹ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McJob>

²⁰ Detailed study on the sociological and economic aspects of the precariat is now common academic practice, though I'd suggest looking at Cederström and Fleming (2012) for an overview and Southwood (2011) for a short work that links the precariat to pointless and restless motion such as evidenced in the McDonalds commercial.

²¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_recurring_The_Simpsons_characters#Squeaky-Voiced_Teen

²² The record rotates at 45 rpm thus one rotation would encompass one and a third seconds. A stuck record involves the stylus jumping at a set point back into the previous groove. This effect was later utilised in experimental records as a locked groove which could be set as a kind of infinite finale to a track or, in later projects, a dedicated single groove of a one rotation that allowed short sample loops to be set down and used by DJs to create sonic mixing patterns. A skipping record will see the stylus jump across a groove and thus get ahead of itself in the music's flow. It might be plausible for a 'get-get-get' to appear as a natural process within 'What Do I Get' if the occurrences of subsequent 'get's fall at the same circumferential point. Calculating this as an actual possibility is beyond the scope and interest of this article.

²³ The a-side lasts 2:50, whilst the b-side 'Oh Shit' lasts 1:32. There is no stuck moment on the original record. Punk records expressed energy and anger and utilised as short a time burst as possible, part of their weaponry and statement of intent against the preceding prog-rock era of mammoth noodling sessions. New wave records began to experiment with time structures and would incorporate jump effects, a technique that would fully blossom with the birth of hip-hop and the take-up of these sounds in pop music. The best link between punk and the new wave pop movement is Orange Juice's 'Rip It Up and Start Again' which references the singer's favourite song as 'Boredom' (from the 'Spiral Scratch' ep) and reframes a lyrical sample and plods out a performative riff from the opening moments.

²⁴ László Moholy-Nagy's semi close up of a vinyl record photographed as part of his 1925 project *Painting, Photography, Film* could be considered here, but his camera does not get deep into the grooves and dirt. Moholy-Nagy's project does however offer a detailed route into the considerations between filmic and photographic temporalities. Stetler (2008) is particularly useful here.

²⁵ Myers' book covers a one-work approach to a Mary Heilmann pink and black painting and links the colours to a new wave sensibility. Savage (1991: 235) refers to the Clash's pop-art pink and black studio, but Myers does not specify this connection. Malcom Garrett's work for Buzzcocks sleeve imagery is covered in [reference](#) where 'What Do I Get' is shown to be an attempt at creating a wraparound grid that emphasises the Buzzcocks'

strategy of having a side A and side 1. It is also noted that the band adopted flat colour diagonal stage clothing following the design of this picture sleeve.

²⁶ Ratcliff (1980) grapples with this incommensurability between Flavin and LeWitt.

²⁷ The Adturds page is particularly biting. See <http://adturds.co.uk/2016/06/08/mcdonalds-punk-advert-crimes-against-music/>

²⁸ The singer (and contemporary of the Buzzcocks) Morrissey added fuel to the fire by publicly stating his amazement and disgust at the whole thing.

²⁹ I consider this as 'bifurcating chains of castigation' whenever a punk (or anarcho-punk) band sells out in some capacity. The band Chumbawamba took quick action to spectacularly attack the Clash who considered themselves as a leftist political outfit who quickly went against their preaching of being 'bored with the USA' to seek fame and fortune with a depoliticised stadium approach. Years later Chumbawamba signed to EMI and prompted anarcho-punk band Oi Polloi to fire critique at them. A similar dispute over signing to unfolded with the punks bands New Model Army and Conflict (see Bestley and Orr 2014: 180).

³⁰ See Derrida (1976) with particular reference to pages 141-164.

³¹ It also set itself up as a dangerous supplement, an absence waiting to be turned into a presence through the usual cultural and media channels that utilised popular music and so would look to punk as to be part of its usual mode of operation. The classic example would be the Sex Pistols appearing on the *Today* show with Bill Grundy which clearly tipped over into a harmful unity of presence.

³² See Barnard (2002: 138) for an analysis of punk's fashion in terms of intent, reaction and incorporation.