What Do I Get?
Punk Rock, Authenticity and Cultural Capital.

After years of alternately being declared either dead, irrelevant, or simply too outrageous to be accepted into the fabric of American culture, and almost thirty years after it first reared it's mohawk'd head in public, the musical genre known as "punk rock" has finally been accepted as part of mainstream American culture. This is unfortunately not the result of changing musical tastes or a growing acceptance of subversive subcultures on the part of the American audience, but rather, is due to a single factor loathed by most participants in (the wide and diverse variety of) insular punk communities, the increasing ubiquity of the music itself in television commercials.

While using popular music identified with the counter-culture in advertising is nothing new (the controversial use of the Beatles "Revolution" in Nike commercials is a notorious example), still the use of a genre as universally identified as being against the values and political identity of mainstream America is a new, and some would say, disturbing trend. The use of songs by punk stalwarts such as the Buzzcocks, Iggy Pop and the Stooges, Black Flag and The Minutemen, bands who were closely associated with the DIY movement (literally "Do It Yourself"— a term applied to the creation of production and distribution networks within the community and outside the influence of major labels and distributors), as well as "alternative" bands such as The Cult and The Smiths, and even the use of club and dance identified music by Air, Dimitri from Paris and others, could be seen as simply the inevitable commodification of subcultures by the

mainstream. But, perhaps there are more positive connotations to this phenomenon to examine. In this essay I will discuss the most recent co-opting of underground music and analyze the negative, and surprisingly positive, implications of "punk rock" advertisements.

Punk Rock and Style

In recent years, there has been a renewed academic interest in the cultural implications of punk rock as a social movement. Most authors take Dick Hebdige's seminal work Subculture: The Meaning of Style as their template for examinations of punk rock. According to Hebdige, musical-based subcultures in general, and punk in particular, are engaged in a constant struggle for identity with mainstream culture where meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Subcultures such as punk try and create an identity set in resistance to the dominant culture and the dominant culture in turn tries to reintegrate the aberrant subculture, or at least place it within the dominant framework of meanings.[1] As Hebdige notes, British punk in particular adopted symbols and forms of musical expression from other outcast cultures (such as the reggae music of Rastifarians and the suspenders and boots of post-World War II working class culture) and synthesized it into something uniquely their own. At the same time this process is taking place, the dominant culture tries to make sense of subcultures though various means, including news reports and articles in the mainstream mass media that identify the new subculture within a historical context, and by taking aspects of the culture such as fashion and commodifing them.[2] (An example of this was the "safety-pin chic" promoted by designers such as Betsy Johnson.) According to Hebdige, commodification is the

inevitable end result of this process of negotiation. Safety pins, leather jackets and ripped jeans are taken out of the context of rebellion and translated into runway fashion, selling for thousands of dollars at ritzy boutiques.

The most recent works of scholarship that analyze punk rock as a subculture, most notably the volume edited by Roger Sabin Punk Rock; So What?, try to reevaluate punk rock within the parameters of cultural studies.[3] In an article by Frank Cartledge, "Distress to Impress: Local Punk Fashion and Commodity Exchange," punk rock can not be seen so much as a resistance to mainstream culture, but as a sort of virus whose "success" can be measured in terms of "introducing new forms of dress and behavior."[4] In this construct, punk rock functions as an active agent, or in the words of Douglas Rushkoff, a "Media Virus," that infects society almost subliminally with aspects of its worldview. I believe that while Cartledge's view is much more realistic and optimistic than the usual dissections of punk's legacy, it fails to break with the usual British cultural studies' identification of punk rock as a uniquely British phenomenon based on British class structure. While it certainly is true that the British version of punk rock was intimately based along class lines, this simplistic version fails not only to recognize that punk rock is primarily an American creation, but also is distinctly American in its relationships with both taste and the generation of cultural capital.

Even a cursory look at the formations of punk, as demonstrated by recent works such as Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's Please Kill Me,[5] and Clinton Heylin's From the Velvets to the Voidoids,[6] reveals that the origins of punk rock clearly lie not only in the late 1960's aggressive rock of the Stooges and the MC5, but also in the self-consciously artistic Velvet Underground, who's alliance with Andy Warhol and debt to

Delmore Schwartz and Lamonte Young reveals punk rock to be a creation of the well-educated and art-school trained upper classes. Thus, the American version of punk rock can be seen not simply as a reaction against the decaying economic system of Great Britain, but also as a self-conscious pose to identify one as outside the mainstream of "normal'" rock and roll. As punk pioneer (and well regarded poet and novelist) Richard Hell famously said, "punk made it possible to completely reinvent yourself."[7]

The punk look in America became a recognizable set of signifiers that was used to set oneself apart from the mainstream. Stuart Ewen noted in his book All Consuming Images that punk itself became a form of conspicuous consumption, one where those who chose to identify themselves as punk could adapt mainstream commodities to create a sense of identity not based on the British punk "uniform" but by using (at least during the early days) disparate styles to self-identify as punk.[8] The baggy overcoats of Pere Ubu were as punk as the leather jackets of The Ramones, and as punk as the flightsuits and goggles of Devo. However, this applied not merely to fashion, which was one of, but not the most important signifier of punk. In fact, the most important signifier of American punk rock was also the most ephemeral of all concepts, taste.

In America, taste, or liking the correct bands in the punk canon, became the dominant signifier of punk rock. American punk was far too geographically diverse to form the closed communities of style that marked most European punk. If there was no set dress code, the only way to identify fellow punks (especially in the days when school dress codes were more rigid in most of the country) was by wearing the correct button, scrawling the correct band names on a notebook, or wearing the right band patch provided passwords and codes that only the initiated understood. As American punk

positioned itself intentionally outside of the mainstream of American music, and even increasingly outside of the major label dominated music industry, having the correct taste in bands became a sort of cultural capital, or form of "musical currency" that legitimized those in possession of the necessary knowledge. (An example of this, although based on a British book, is the movie "High Fidelity," where record store employees obsess about music and define a proper customer by their breadth of knowledge and musical taste.) Thus, becoming a punk involved learning a canon of "acceptable" music, and in a very real sense, becoming not just a purist, but also a musical elitist.

American punk rock really was always about taste, about defining oneself as outside the mainstream, not through economic situation or a mythologized class consciousness, but through a secret society of musical taste where ones' identity was validated through what one accepted and rejected as legitimate forms of musical expression. In many ways, this is no different than other forms of musical fanaticism, but punk rock's canon of authenticity was by no means a static one. The canon was always capable of revision as endless debates of what was and was not "punk" began to dominate the 'zines and public discussions about punk rock. In a way, punk rock became similar to dance culture and club culture where the music is also seen as having a canon, but capable of (and in need of) constant evolution and adaptation, although it is doubtful that dance culture has become as relentlessly doctrinaire as modern punk culture. Punk bands that have achieved a modicum of mainstream success such as Green Day were seen as derivative of the original canon and also as "selling out" by a community that tries to avoid major record labels and access to widespread audiences as a conscious decision. Variations in musical style were not overt considerations in whether a band was

considered authentic or not, rather a dedication to the ephemeral "principles" of punk rock were the main criteria. Maximum Rock and Roll, a 'zine often considered the "bible" and chief validator of authenticity for punk rock once tried to sum up the punk aesthetic simply as "honest music, not money making."[9] Likewise, the recent plethora of advertisements using punk rock seems on the surface a direct challenge to the closely guarded authenticity of punk rock, and another inevitable step towards the commodification of a subculture. However, this time the danger comes not from without, but from within.

Advertising and Punk Rock

The prevalence of punk is no doubt due in part to a simple change in demographics. A new generation of advertisers, weaned not on the counter-culture of the 1960's but on the punk rock and new wave of the late 70's and early 80's, now dominate the industry. The new generation, many of who enjoyed punk rock, but like most music fans, ignored or resisted the alternative ideology of punk, may have simply wanted to use music they were more familiar with and enjoyed more than the constant recycling of 60's songs that dominated advertising throughout the '80's. In a sense, this was just a natural musical evolution. The new generation who now dominate the creative departments of most major advertising agencies want to use the music of their youth, rather than the music of their supervisors' youth. This is also a result of most musical communities not connected with the ideology of the music, just as most Public Enemy fans, a good percentage of whom were white middle class youths, could dismiss the occasional anti-semetic outburst

of the group's "Minister of Information," Professor Griff, so too could punk fans enjoy the music of The Clash, perhaps, without realizing their strong leftist credentials. It is no coincidence that their most overtly political album, Sandanista, was also their weakest both in sales and critical acclaim. The people working in advertising agencies who introduced punk to the mainstream via ads for cars using bands such as The Buzzcocks (Toyota), The Smiths (Nissan) and The Minutemen (Volvo), were most likely not part of any conspiracy to plunder the underground for mainstream fodder, but instead were simply using the music they had grown up with to sell the commodities their job required. And if the advertisers had found themselves abandoning their punk roots to sell products, their target audience suddenly found themselves in need of products to buy. As Devin Gordon pointed out in a recent article in Spin Magazine, "those Smiths fans, arbiters of cool in their youth, are now in their late 20's and early thirties, right about the age when people make their first 'serious' car purchase."[10] Except for a few diehard fans, most punks find that they must reintegrate themselves into the real world and in doing so end up purchasing many of the same commodities they once scoffed. Nor are the bands themselves blameless either. Clearly no one held a gun to the head of Iggy Pop (who advertised for Nike) or forced Black Flag to sell their classic song "Rise Above" to a manufacturer of video games. What happened was simply that a generation came of age and infiltrated the industries they once derided. Advertisers, being fairly astute, tried to create a connection between the (presumed) counter-cultural activities of their audiences' youth in order to identify consumption with rebellion. And, as with Nike's use of "Revolution" a decade earlier, some fussed and cried sellout, but many may have been simply amused to see the music of their youth used in this fashion. As Simon Frith notes,

rock music has always "articulated the reconciliation of rebelliousness and capital."[11] Likewise, Douglas Kellner has also pointed out that advertising itself is part of the active process. As Kellner wrote, "all ads are social texts that respond to key developments during the period in which they appear."[12] The fusion of punk rocks' subversiveness to the imperatives of a market economy can then be regarded as almost inevitable. Naturally the punk 'zines, bulletin board and listservs were aghast, but for most of America the protest was marginal.

Implications

What are we to make of the use of punk rock in mainstream advertisements? On the one hand, this could be seen as the usual commodification of a subculture by the mainstream, exactly what Hebdige described over twenty years ago. But this perspective ignores the American version of the punk rock narrative, the narrative where punk was not a community based on class, but rather on taste. Perhaps this is actually an example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital, although Bourdieu identified it as exclusively a function of the dominant classes reserving specific art forms for their own privileged uses. Nonetheless, it seems logical that specific subcultures can, over time, develop cultural capital of their own. The cultural capital of punk rock is the closely guarded canon of music, which provides entrance into the mysteries of punk to those immersed in the "correct" music. Punk allowed itself to become a closed community of elitists, and in a sense the punk community became as restrictive as the mainstream culture they supposedly opposed. Punk zealously resisted the commodification that mainstream exposure offered, but at the same time it kept the best parts of the movement, the

propulsive and almost organic music, at the core of punk, for itself. In doing so and resisting mainstream methods of distribution, punk rock closed itself off from the rest of the world, espousing a supposed philosophy of liberation, but for only a few thousand adherents, bound together by a rejection of all things mainstream, and a rejection of those who sought to join without benefit of the proper forms of initiation. By the turn of the century, a movement that was supposed to have been all-inclusive became elitist.

This is why I believe there are positive aspects to the new rash of advertisements using punk, alternative and even club music to sell products.[13] While we may rightly decry the sheer ubiquity of advertisements and a culture founded on advertising as a way of life, we cannot ignore the pervasive influence and vast reach of advertising in general. The exposure of punk to a wide audience in this light can be seen as a way of spreading punk's cultural capital into the mainstream, which has long resisted the punk movement, and surely a commercial in limited release reaches many millions more than all of the college radio and underground distribution networks that punk relies upon combined. As Gina Arnold noted, while punk has become the perfect target market, the potential is still there for co-option of the very products being advertised.[14] Also, as Keith Negus has noted, there is not necessarily a connection between who controls a product and how it is consumed.[15]

What I am saying will no doubt seem like heresy both to those who eschew advertising as an environment and those within the thick of current punk culture. Those who do wish punk to be distributed to a wider audience often point to new technologies, such as Mp3 and new modes of distribution like Kazaa, as a logical and more promising extension of punks' DIY aesthetic. This hope is somewhat nebulous at the present.

Napster, for example, was the target of much legislative lobbying by major record labels and eventually shut down. As authors such as David Marshall have pointed out, the Internet may be evolving into a network model, following a pattern that he identifies as "access, excess and exclusion," where large corporations crowd independent voices into the margins.[16] So, while those avenues are closed off or marginalized, it may be that punk rock can reach a wider audience by using the mainstream as its carrier. At its best, this form of cultural capital could act as a virus or meme, infecting the mainstream and allowing greater access to the music, and perhaps even some of the fertile anarchistic genius of punk, than both the major record labels or even the insular punk community have previously allowed.

Conclusion

Of course, whether this will be ultimately beneficial is by no means certain and there are many disadvantages, none the least is the fact that punk communities are notoriously picky about whom they accept as members in the first place. Also, the music used in commercials is not identified by artist and most people will certainly not know to whom they are listening, but then again this is the case with most radio stations who do not identify artists immediately after playing a song. There is also the danger that many people will either miss or turn off the commercials, whether they know the music or not, because it is just another annoying interruption of "Friends" or "Buffy." All of these are very real problems and require greater analysis than an article of this length is able to discuss. But if punk is to be legitimized, it needs to stop hiding behind a mask of purity and start to make overtures into the mainstream, to let some of its closely guarded

cultural capital out into the real world. With mainstream radio and MTV still closed (and becoming more restrictive on a daily basis), and the future of the Internet in turmoil, it may be that what most people regard as commodification is a blessing in disguise. At the very least, it may allow some people to actually experience punk rock in a non-judgmental way, without the attendant baggage of punk's codes and rituals. Also, any exposure to "underground" music, with all the accompanying elements of style and taste, helps to refresh the mainstream from becoming stale. In short, the introduction of punks' cultural capital, and of the virus of punk rock into the mainstream via commercials, may do more to affect culture in general than twenty-five years of self-imposed marginalization. Although some suggest that one of the main principals of punk is its uncompromising stance towards co-option by the mainstream, this principal can also lead to calcification when taken to its logical extreme. If punk rock is to remain a vital force both as a (somewhat amphoras) political movement and as a musical community, it must learn to engage the mainstream, rather than pretend that it simply does not exist. If commercials are the first step in this process, then ultimately the "commodification" of punk may open more doors than it closes.

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[1] Hebdige, Dick. Subculture the Meaning of Style, England: Routledge, 1979. pg. 86.
[2] Hebdige, *Subculture*, pg. 94.
[3] Cartledge, Frank. "Distress to Impress?: Local Punk Fashion and Commodity Exchange" in Punk Rock: So What, Roger Sabin, Ed. London: Routledge, 1999. pgs. 143-154.
[4] Cartledge, *Distress to Impress*, pg. 151.
[5] McNeill, Legs and McCain, Gillian Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk, New York: Grove Press, 1996.
[6] Heylin, Clinton. From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World, USA: Penguin Books, 1993.
[7] Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, pg. 326.
[8] Ewen, Stewart. All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture USA: Basic Books, 1988. pg. 253.
[9] Fenster, *Maximum Rock and Roll,* pg. 146.

[10] Gordon, Devin. "Car Tunes for New Grownups: Advertisers Tap the Music of a Previously Jilted Generation." Spin 60,Vol. 16, No.6, June 2000, pg. 60.
[11] Frith, Simon. Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop, NY: Routledge, 1988, pg. 2.
[12] Kellner, Douglas. "Advertising and Consumer Culture" in Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction, Roger Dowling and Ali Mohammadi, eds. California: Sage Publications, 1995, pg. 334.
[13] This is not to suggest that the punk community is monolithic or that there is any universally agreed upon definition of selling out or how a proper punk should act. Punk disputes over authenticity are often as controversial as academic or Marxist doctrine disputes; however there is an overwhelming sense that 'true' punk resists commodification and adaptation into mainstream culture. In a sense advertising, in 'zines, which is the main source of revenue for both the 'zines and DIY record labels and also the backbone of punk DIY aesthetic, is only appropriate within the context of the community. It's considered OK to advertise in 'zines, but ads themselves are regarded as suspicious. Many 'zines, for example, will not accept advertisements by major labels.
[14] Arnold, Gina. Kiss the Girls: Punk in the Present Tense, NY: St. Martins Press, 1997, pg. 60.
[15] Negus, Keith. "Popular Music: Inbetween Celebration and Despair" in Questioning the Media, pg. 388.
[16] Marshall, David. "New Media Heierarchies: The Web and the Cultural Production Thesis" Thinking New Media Sydney: Pluto Press, 1999, pgs.1-9.