

## 2.7. “Fallen fallen is Babylon”. Polish punk rock scene in the 1980s

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### Abstract

The 1980s were in Poland a time of crucial changes occurring in society. It was when Solidarnosc, a trade union and a democratic opposition movement, emerged, and when the communist regime introduced martial law to stop democratic transformation. Poland faced economic crisis and almost a million of its citizens chose emigration, both because of economic and political reasons.

In the background Poland experienced then an extraordinary boom for rock music. It was also a time of huge popularity of punk rock – crude, uncompromising music. In my article I want to bring nearer a production of chosen bands of Polish punk rock music from the 1980s, among them Dezerter, TZN XENNA, Brygada Kryzys, Smierc Kliniczna, Siekiera, Moskwa. I will focus especially on selection of the lyrics of these bands. I will show how these bands criticized the social reality of that time, and what alternative visions they created in their artistic production. After Stephen Duncombe (2002), I assume that Polish punk rock music in the 1980s was indeed “a haven in a heartless world”, a way of escaping from politics, as well as a means to set free a feeling of discontent with dull reality, but on the other side it created, in spite of the censorship, some kind of a “free space”, a place where new language and new meanings could emerge, as well as where communities might be built.

**Keywords:** Polish punk rock, cultural resistance, DIY, communism

Poland after World War II became a satellite country of the Soviet Union, but in the 1980s it experienced important social changes. The growing economic crisis caused by extravagancy of Edward Gierek, who governed Poland as a first secretary of the PZPR (Polish United Worker’s Party, a party that ruled Poland from 1948 to 1989), caused the emergence of Solidarność (Solidarity). Built in Gdańsk shipyard, it was a first independent trade union in communist Poland, and at the same time one of the most important centres for democratic opposition. The emergence of Solidarność brought about an astonishing boom in Polish rock music and materialization of punk rock, new uncompromising form for musical expression. Although the period of “carnival”, how the tremendous time of legal Solidarność was known, lasted only until the government introduced martial law in December 1981, Polish underground music continued and productively developed its “spaces of freedom”. It appears that rock musicians criticized the government and distanced themselves from the conservative “Solidarność”, too. It may be seen in the first version of Dezerter’s song “Half-baked generation (analyzed below) which in English translation goes as follows: “There’s no hope, no future, either in the party, either in Solidarność” (Grabowski 2010, p. 8-9).

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In this article I refer to the produce of some most renowned Polish punk rock bands of the 1980s. Using an interpretative analysis of the cultural texts (McKee 2006) I will demonstrate, on the basis of the lyrics, how the bands such as Dezerter, TZN XENNA, Brygada Kryzys, Śmierć Kliniczna, Siekiera and Moskwa criticized the social and political reality of these times and what kind of alternative visions they created. While choosing particular songs I tried they were of semantic and stylistic variety. All the songs come from the early 1980s. I regard punk rock music as a form of cultural resistance, which "...is used consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structur" (Duncombe 2002, p. 5).

But before the analysis itself, I want to say few words on the genesis of the Polish punk rock music.

## The beginnings of punk rock in Poland

Although the zenith of Polish punk rock took place in 1980s, the beginnings of this (sub)culture may be traced back already in the 1970s. The Polish public discourse witnessed first mentions of punk rock in 1977. According to Remigiusz Kasprzycki (2013, p. 113) Polish youth learned about this revolutionary current in rock music from: official press that was mostly hostile to punk rock, western music magazines (despite the fact that they were almost unavailable and written in English which was not commonly known as it is today), Polish Film Chronicle – a newsreel shown in cinemas prior to the film, Polish radio (punk rock was occasionally broadcast on Channel 3), western radio (for example Radio Luxemburg), accidental visits to Great Britain – the motherland of punk rock, and local exchanges of long plays, very popular in Polish cities. Such exchange offered not only a possibility to buy western music, but also was a place of real swap of information and thought and therefore served to materialization of certain cultural communities around music (Kasprzycki, 2013, p. 123).

One of the first punk rock bands in Poland was Deadlock, founded in Gdańsk in 1979 (Lizut 2003, p. 49). In 1981 the band recorded their only LP "Ambition". Thanks to the French journalist Marc Boulet, it was published in France by Blitzkrieg Records in the same year. Boulet was a punk rock fan, who travelled across Eastern Europe and searched for bands that could not get through to the western music scene, for obvious political reasons. It is worth mentioning that Boulet published this music without legal permission of the artists. It was the case of Deadlock, as well as other punk rock band, Warsaw-based Kryzys, which did not authorized Blitzkrieg edition until this day (Chosiński, 2012).

"Ambition" was actually published in Poland twenty years after its initial edition, in 2003. It is a mix of postpunk, reggae and ska. Its crude, uneven rhythm of percussion, crude unturned guitars, singing out of tune, together with poor sound realization, give the album a strong garage character. The most renowned piece from it is "Ambition", that takes a lot after reggae. Its lyrics warn in simple words against consequences of looking for prestige and fame which the author of the text perceives as something sacred, a kind of modern (today we would say: postmodern) religion: "Ambition, it's your fucking religion, ambition is your god. Your ambition kill you baby". Deadlock ceased to exist in 1983, so it did not continue long at the underground scene.

As Robert Brylewski, a legend of Polish musical underground and long-time leader of Kryzys, later Brygada Kryzys, brilliantly pointed out, what Deadlock did was "a spark thrown on a flammable material" as "the punk wave moved from Gdańsk and covered the whole

country" (Lizut 2003, p.49-50). The songs of Kryzys: "Television", "Star wars" or "The Dolls' valley" entered into the Polish rock canon. In the same time KSU was formed in provincial Southern-Eastern Poland, a band that soon became a legend of Polish punk rock. The punk rock was also promoted during Jarocin Festival – an event that every year gathered thousands of rock fans. It was the biggest rock festival in Eastern Europe, and it took place even in 1982 – half year after introduction of martial law in Poland. It witnessed many punk rock performances made by Dezerter (primarily named SS20, after Soviet missiles), Siekiera, Śmierć Kliniczna and Moskwa (Lesiakowski, Perzyna, Toborek 2004, p. 14-37). The selected lyrics of these bands, together with the lyrics of TZN XENNA and Brygada Kryzys, are analysed in this article. All of the aforementioned formations were created in the early 1980s, some of them are still active (Dezerter, Moskwa, Brygada Kryzys, TZN XENNA).

## "Our world"

Most of the texts of the punk rock formations from the 1980s relate to existential problems of the young. One of their topics is the alienation and loneliness in the world of the adults, which the young perceive as "the world of apparent, archaic and unrealized virtues" (Pęczak, Wertenstein-Żułwaski 1991, p. 264). Such a vision is manifested in the lyrics of "Grey reality", song by Dezerter. The leitmotiv of this text is the inner emigration that constitutes a tool of contestation, and rebellion towards the alleged "grey reality". Furthermore, the lyrics creates a space of independence and freedom: "I don't need you, wanna be alone. Leave me alone – get the fuck of! I have what I have, I want what I want. Leave me alone – Get the fuck of! I don't think as you do, I'm not what you are. I don't give a damn about your thoughts nor dreams. This grey reality, your reality. I don't give a damn. Get the fuck of! I don't give a damn what you think of me. Get the fuck of! I want my own life. Leave me alone, don't want your stupid advice. I won't do you any harm, just wanna be alone!".

In this song the resistance consists of escape from the grim world of the adults, whereas another production of this band, titled "Brothel", indicates also its direct opposite: different character of the young, manifested with irony, unconventional look, lack of humility, susceptibility to conflicts and eager questioning of social roles. "I am stupid and fucked up. Wearing earrings, all messed up. They complain 'bout me a lot. So I Cash with them All Day long. [...] Won't be working in any office! Wont' be wearing any suit! Won't be going on the buses! Nor work only "'cause it's my lot! [...], Mother, father, I am different. Will you beat me up for this? My brain is swollen, I'm fucked up! Like a beast I feel nothing. I only wander and consume. I think nothing, I do nothing. My brain is all messed up! They don't like me. I incense or frighten people. They want do me lobotomy, as I'm abnormal for them! Yes, I'm all the wicked idler".

The world shown by Polish punk bands is the world where there are no perspectives. It a repressive, schematic world that is lacking feelings. This pessimistic and decadent feeling fills "Dark room" by TZN XENNA and "Half-baked generation" by Dezerter. The "dark room" of the title in this first song may be seen as a metaphor of the gloomy world that young people struggle with every day. Although sometimes the door of the room opens and a little bit of light (metaphor for hope) comes in, it is soon cut by the "dark lords" (those in power): "Dark room, closed room, dark walls, dark sky, dark people, dark earth, dark around, you see nothing. Somebody cried: Open that door!, but the dark lords won't let it. There's no day, no

night – all we know is this dark world. Sometimes a small ray of light comes in, then you see how dirty is our room, but soon the door gets closed, shut with the heavy boot.”

Meanwhile Dezerter shows in its lyrics the feeling of being a lost generation that dominated among the young in the 1980s. All the attempts to change the social world was buried and the young were left with their frustration and a feeling that they are a members of the bankrupt generation: “No satisfaction, too much frustration. This is my generation. No aims, no future. No hope, no freedom. We’re half-baked generation. [...] You wanna fight, wanna change something, wanna stamp out all the evil. There’s no chance, All is gone. Your generation will be over. Half-baked generation. [...] You watch TV, you know what the crisis is. Iran’s war, Western gold. Your future is destroyed. Your generation is lost. Half-baked generation”.

In punk rock lyrics the emphasis is also put on the schematic and mechanic character of the society. “Standardization” of *Śmierć Kliniczna* manifests that this world is lacking feelings and spontaneity, and reminds the vision of Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World”. The band sings about automatic procreation and masturbation, automatic sexual relations, children behaving like perfect machines, synthetic dreams that are shown on TV, programmed nerve impulses, and encrypted conditioned reflexes. This terrifying vision of the soulless world encounters in the song a opposition in a recurring lines: “Yes, I’d like to move beyond the schemes, do something against the plan. I cannot, they won’t let me. Human machines under remote control.”

Despite all the dullness and cruelty of the world manifest in punk rock lyrics, in some of the text we may find certain elements of hope. In “Fallen, fallen is Babilon” *Brygada Kryzys* foresees the decline of this totally repressive reality. Babilon is a symbol of the system that represses people (in Polish context may be identified with communist regime), but it cannot win with the love people have in themselves. Love is a remedy, love sets people free: „Fallen, fallen is Babylon. [...] And the wall of Babylon is fallen. Love is the shelter, love is the key. Love is all creation. Reality is living free. Love is our liberation. Fallen, fallen is Babylon.”

As the 1980s are the a climax of military competition between the capitalist West and Soviet-controlled East, a time endangered by the nuclear war and holocaust, those topics are present in the analyzed lyrics as well. “Atomic holocaust” by Dezerter is blaming politicians on both sides for the arms race: “We need more arms. We cannot let them outrun us. New atomic bombs. They make the Earth smaller. They build new atomic bomb. They build new neutron bomb. More brand new missiles. Scoundrels of West, scoundrels of East. Atomic death comes from both sides, atomic death is on both sides”. *Moskwa* recorded “Light” in which similar apocalyptic vision is articulated. The band emphasizes tragic consequences of the atomic bomb and the fact we cannot defend ourselves from its devastating power: “Atomic light kills children’s sight. Bodies are quiet and covered with blood. Atomic light squeezes the brain. Bodies are quiet, one step from death. Bombs, mines, weapons and tanks. It’s history now! Atomic explosion, atomic cloud. We can’t protect ourselves!”

This rhetoric is present also in a song by *Siekiera* titled “The war is coming”, probably the most warning in the Polish punk rock music. It manifests an apocalyptic poetics that refers in the suggestive visions to Hieronim Bosch’s paintings, and visualize the coming of a slaughter: “Warm human blood is covering the stairs. A gnome pulls woman’s dead body – that is what he likes. Oh, my god! Just look at this! Death and blond is everywhere. War is coming. War is coming. Slaughter’s coming. A head lays on the field and there’s a rat’s corpse. An insect rapes a crocodile. A dog bites a monkey. The war vampire is close. War is coming. War is coming.

Slaughter is coming." Perhaps in a less psychedelic or even less poetical way, but still with a force Brygada Kryzys sings about war consequences in their song called simply "War". Extermination, pacification and pillage are some of the most typical characteristics of the war in this song. In the lyrics blame is put on paranoid visions of politicians: "War! The slaves are marching. War! They'll hunt for you. War! They'll kill you! War! They'll exterminate you. Paranoid hallucinations. Political degenerations. War! They'll be invincible. War! They'll burn and rob you. War! They'll destroy your house. War! They'll pacify!"

In the analyzed lyrics there is also a critique towards the national institutions. In "Education-copulation" of *Śmierć Kliniczna* Polish educational system is being condemned. School is shown as a place that does not allow for independent thinking nor interest in the world. It is permeated with vulgar knowledge, conformism and discipline. Teachers treat youth with contempt, while all the independent reflections are laughed at. *Śmierć Kliniczna* sings: "If we want it or not, we know everything by heart. Professor likes it. Education-copulation. We don't think anything new, 'cause headmaster would be screwed. Discipline and order. Education-copulation. They don't believe what they hear. But still everyone agrees. And for better notes proceeds. Education-copulation. [...] Those who suck up to the teachers. Get promotions, privileges. That's our life till its end. Education-copulation. [...] We want to know something of life. But professor keeps us in dark. Bastards, morons, bandits. Education-copulation. [...] We're slaves at school. Our brains are drilled. Get lost with such education!" The recurring „Education-copulation” suggests that learning in Polish socialist school is a „mechanic fucking bullshit”. Such form of education may only destroy young brains: "Our brains are drilled with this stupid edu-fill."

While *Śmierć Kliniczna* criticizes school as an institution, *Dezserter* in „Ask the militia man” (in socialist Poland the police was called *Milicja Obywatelska*, MO) mocks this repressive force. The Poles perceived *Milicja* as a means to sustain communist regime for it took active part in pacifications of demonstrations in the whole country. Its most brutal force, and therefore most hated by the society, was so called ZOMO. People dubbed it "a beating heart of the party (PZPR)". Militia man is a figure that *Dezserter* is ironic about in their song: "Which way is right, according to law and order? Who leads me to happiness and praiseworthy duties? Ask the militia man. He'll tell you the truth! Ask the militia man. He'll guide you through! [...] I wanna get to know the world. But I don't know how. Who will help me? Who will show me? Ask the militia man. He'll tell you the truth! Ask the militia man. He'll guide you through! [...] How to become perfect? Manly, handsome, strong? Which way should I go? And remain unspoilt? Ask the militia man. He'll tell you the truth! Ask the militia man. He'll guide you through!"

## „To the future”

Of course, this analysis of lyrics deals only with part of production of Polish punk rock in the 1980s. In this article I focus on showing the most recognizable bands and the topics present in their texts. The analysis demonstrates nevertheless that Polish punk rock in the 1980s was, as a form of cultural resistance, what after Stephen Duncombe (2002, p. 5) we would call "a haven in a heartless world", an escape from politics and a way of liberating the discontent. The social world manifested in these texts is grey, dull, dark, brutal, schematic. All the attempts on spontaneity or creativity are repressed. It is also a world without future nor perspectives for better time. In this world inner emigration is one of the strategies of survival. What is more, this world lives in the edge, is threatened by war and even by an atomic holocaust.

But on the other hand, despite the censorship in communist Poland, punk rock created a kind of “free space” (after Duncombe 2002, p. 8), where new language and new meanings, as well as a cultural community, were born. Many of the analyzed texts are filled with metaphors. “Babylon” and “Dark room” are symbols of repressive system. There are also blasphemous comparisons: education – copulation, or irony (as in “Ask the militia man”). Some of the lyrics may be easily called poetry (“War is coming” of Siekiera) which is a challenge to the common notion of punk rock as a simple music accompanied by screams. Polish censorship was often helpless when dealing with metaphorical, ironic, poetic forms of punk lyrics. It is also worth mentioning that the omnipotent censorship institution was one of the means of shaping the punk rock lyrics with all their veiled meanings.

Although the analyzed punk rock lyrics are already 30 and more years old, they did not actually become out of date. Despite the fact that in 1990 communist Poland ceased to exist and the country started its democratization, soon a new kind of repressiveness appeared – “neoliberal Moloch”. A new, this time colourful not grey, Babilon gradually “commodifies” all the aspects of our lives, developing a myth of “brave new world”. Dezerter in 1993 recorded a new version of their song “To the future”. In the 1980s its lyrics was a mockery of socialist propaganda: “Our dear brothers, cherish your lives. Cherish them with us! Like steel in blast furnace. [...] Let’s do it together. Unite all our forces. Your country waits for you, my dear comrade!” In new version the lyrics changed to mock the capitalist propaganda: “Our dear brothers, cherish your lives. Cherish them with us! How to gather capital [...] Let’s do it together. Unite all our forces. Your country waits for you, my dear capitalist.”

Summing up, I would like to state that Polish punk rock music was indeed anti-systemic, but not only in a political sense. This subculture should be rather treated as a form of a generation rebellion. I would suggest that punk rock was a “third force” in Polish opposition – contesting both the regime and the main democratic opposition organization – Solidarność. Its characteristics is not a mere political revolt, but rather a discontent with the worlds of the adults.

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