

KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

Paula Guerra and Thiago Pereira Alberto (eds.)

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10.4. Punk's not Dead, towards forensics of iconography: Transgression and resistance in intersecting counter-cultures' identities

Lynn Osman²⁵⁴

A b s t r a c t

The research examines the role of iconography, visual, performance and sound, as means of resistance and transgression. Control, coercion, manipulation as means of power to maintain hegemony, to fabricate political, cultural or social truths, have been subverted historically through subcultures. I aim to deconstruct layers, through studying the mechanism of representation of specific subcultures. The paper focuses first on transgression in the formation of Punk subculture, and by comparing and juxtaposing it to Christianity at its advent, as subculture, to study the role of iconography, through mutual associations. The constant mutation of visual representation as means of subversion, historically, to claim or to reclaim agency or voice, towards a dominant mainstream culture, which was relatively local concerning Punk subculture, will lead me then to examine contemporary issues in gender and resistance, in other forms of play in visual iconography, in representation within the "Other", where different identities intersect: gender, political resistance, black identity, and heroism. Moving from more local forms of transgressions, from the underground Punk, towards more global or 'post-colonial' issues, the paper moves into more hybrid case studies, to study visual iconography and transgression; from Laila Khaled, Palestinian militant, her rejection of the idealization of her image into a female icon, as form of resistance towards media representation of heroism and terrorism. Jean Genet's hybrid identity, subversion of the notion of iconography by idealizing "anti-heroes" in his works, the dual struggle in gender as a homosexual and politics, and writing and activism as forms of resistance. The last case is Mohammad Ali, boxer, and the role of performance in "black resistance", and heroism. By examining the different representation means of different cases of the "other", and their mutation, I aim to question the continuity of resistance, and the role of subculture in claiming territory and agency in cultural production, Punk's role today, and its immediacy and territory, to raise questions about the most powerful tools of active, peaceful resistance.

Keywords: *Underground subcultures, identity boundaries, historical comparison, iconography.*



²⁵⁴ Academie Libanaise des

Beaux-Arts Academie Libanaise

des Beaux Arts, Beirut, Lebanon.

E-mail: lynnosman@hotmail.com

1. Introduction²⁵⁵

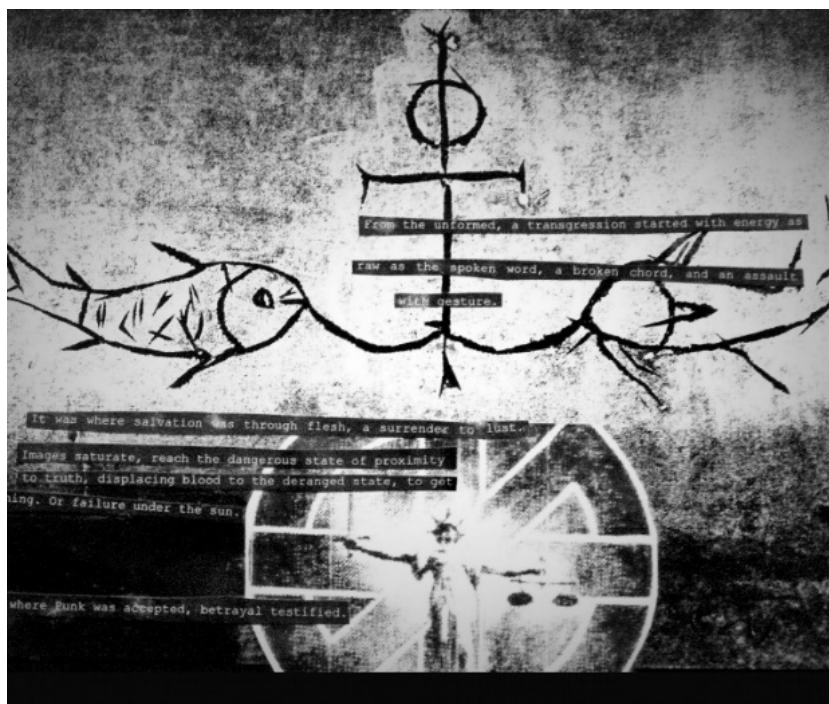
The research proposes a perspective on the limits of historically framing punk subculture, through a comparative study between punk subculture and Christianity at its advent, two variably iconographic and iconoclastic subcultures distant in time, that have yet transgressed towards their histories as underground subcultures. The research suggests a deconstruction and reconfiguration of historical frameworks, a comparison through association and overlapping of the intersecting layers of both, to raise questions about borders' definition, and visual production of meaning, and to break the linear historical narrative, and binary comparison methods of historical layers. The overlapping and juxtaposition of fragments of history, subculture theory, reception and interpretation of the selected material, and the method of interpretation breaches canonical and theoretical frameworks, as an analogy of punk gesture that cuts through reality and preexisting constructs, and unfolds questions, subversions, draws openings of texts, collages, cutting and pasting reality into ransom note writing of new meanings and perspectives, disrupting the boundaries and labels upon which subculture theory is constructed. The method of analysis is similar to a *punk subversion*, a writing breaching and operating on preexisting texts (as representation), iconography, and fragments of historical narratives, and perceived reality. The proposed method is a catalyst to explore the grey zone that emerges through the distance and transition from linearity and binary methods, and through the rupture into transgression.

Departing from the premises that subculture productions are *texts*, we deconstruct the notion of difference by proximity, crossing the borders of subculture definition. This dialogue proposes that 'punk subculture' surpasses then its initial framework, and is redefined outside its initial history and boundaries through an alternative reading across the visual production, iconography (visual and sonic), performance, footage, rituals, sound, and space.

Elements of both countercultures echo each other, and intersect; I will approach the layers of transgression, underground space, iconoclastic gestures and destruction, ritual resistance, anti-establishment, text and signs as catalysts of social change, iconographic formation, catharsis, darkness and light, flesh, violence, prophecy of the iconography, the hero and anti-hero central figures, subversion, binary oppositions, heresy of faith, the linearity of history and No Future, sacrifice, the body, codification, the 'Other' and the mainstream.

The paper will then examine contemporary issues of gender, identities and transgression, in the contemporary Palestinian cause specifically, taking case studies of iconography and resistance, in the formation of 'other' identities.

²⁵⁵ Note from the Author: All the figures are from my zine's pages (The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013) based on my research, and is at Marguerite Duras Public Library Fanzines! And Tokyo Art Book Fair (2013). Techniques: collage, photo-transfer, etching, lettraset.



Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

2. Another Shadow

Christianity at its advent and punk subculture were, against history, moved by gravity. What is left by the erased and cancelled iconography of subcultures throughout history, are gray areas. For when icons are not erased, they self-destruct only. And a shadow has leaked, and has haunted the written history to me. Some text was left raw. There are meanings that could be revealed by proximity. Images from both subcultures would lead to a lost place of reminiscence, and an unrecorded vision. Between violence and certainty of pain, there are proofs of rituals, explicit yet unspoken, a prophecy of an iconography encoded with its own destruction. From the unformed, a transgression started with energy as raw as the spoken word, a broken chord, and an assault with gesture. It was where salvation was through flesh, a surrender to lust. Images saturate, reach the dangerous state of proximity to truth, displacing blood to the deranged state, to get nothing, or failure under the sun. From history, an interpretation becomes a bad shade. Subversion was given a bad name. Then, we are no longer searching for the in-between gray. It is where punk was accepted, betrayal testified, a bad shade of grace over a once oral history, being written.

There is a common, unspoken, hidden text in-between the lines of history of Punk subculture, and Christianity at its birth, as subculture. As if there is a space for another shadow connecting those, distant in time, yet very iconographic and sparking in their transgression towards their histories.

The place that disclosed is where a concert becomes judgment day, where sacrifice for filth or purity becomes life-threatening, a dark path to the underground literal, profaning as a counter-history to catacombs, non-transmitted antecedents. Oppositions are vertical, with a fallen angel in limbo, diffused by gravity, unaware of a catalyst. History is linear, and "No Future" is as close and scaled down to fear as an apocalypse. Absent authors are relegated



Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

to vacuum. Anticipated vision and fate in the certainty of the sacred and of antiestablishment chaos, are anchored in a performative state. Pain is a residue, ritual, a transgression, work, a punishment. Figures oscillate between saviors and anti-heroes, flirting with redemption and remaining at the liminal. The heresy is that of faith, and healing is through catharsis. It is a call for destruction. Truth, is a disillusion from a secret buried in codes, themselves destroyed and left in the dark. Light is a revelation, light a disillusion, burning eyes until they become as pure and blind as faith.

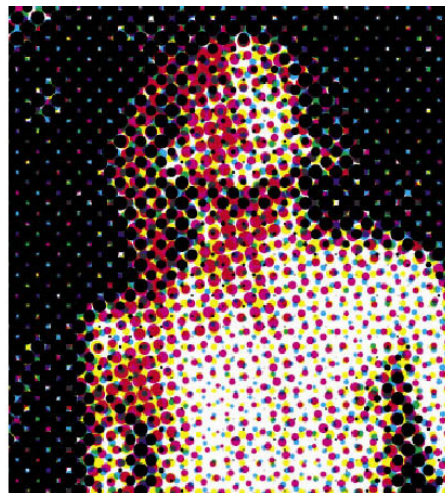


Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

From the places rewritten through proximity and comparison, questions start to unfold, about iconography as departure to study the limits of representation, the power of the image as means to draw a subculture territory; thus opens a space to cross borders of history and visual representation in the transgressive stage of writing history. The presence or absence of a shadow to the iconographic text determines the ambiguity of representation. The gradual associations reveal as well the dangerous stage of iconography where it self-destructs, by defining itself in binary opposition to a dominant center. The comparison suggests therefore an alternative reading and experience of Punk subculture, outside its initiating definition, to question historical labels, which proposes a definition of Punk that is not a univocal manifestation.

Where sacrifice for filth or purity
becomes life-threatening

H.



Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

3. Punk and Early Christianity as Subcultures

Punk and Christianity emerged as subcultures towards their histories, by relativity to a dominant preexisting mainstream. Punk was retrospectively coined as subculture by sociologists, while retaining the initial drive of subverting establishments, not proposing a fixed alternative, rather a chaotic gesture towards a non-place, a subculture that was recognized by its image, iconoclasm, its forming iconography and fluctuating identity. Christianity spawned and spread with a gradual codification of iconography and started as underground subculture from the unformed to become an establishment itself. There could be something beyond the Antichrist disclaimer at their respective transgressive stages, outside history. They both present a rupture towards the mainstream, recognized as subcultures resisting the dominant power at the historical moments. This moment recalls Lacan's mirror stage: the subcultures recognize their image in the mirror as "Other" and as a cohesive identity yet were still fragmented (Lacan, 2001). They oscillate between the symbolic dimension of their identity, formation of meaning and representation that starts to cut through the real and to breach constructs by creating borders by exclusion, preceding the stage of self-referential identity, thus reinforcing or inducing difference, gray zones holding detectable frames of representation. They become a transgressive "Other", threatening hegemony.

4. Sacrilege to the Mainstream Sanctuary

Transgression acts as the moving gravity of both subcultures, and discloses overlapping layers. Bataille notion of the transgressive and the informe is the "anti-rationalist, anti-idealizing embrace of the shapeless, detritus of being human, of excrement, filth, and decomposition" (Bataille, 1929).

Through this reading, the redefined subcultures become tangential to their historical narratives. A mayhem resistance deconstructs the preexisting authority's forms of representation. Christianity called for the physical destruction of paganism, while catacombs became the sanctuaries where raw iconography started to form, iconoclastic in gesture towards the present time. Punk iconography appropriated, subverted or disfigured the established icons of values deemed as sacred (the Queen, the Church etc.). In Punk subculture, with its diversity, there is a riot subversion of existing signs and icons. Punk practices subvert everything that is "sacred" to the mainstream.

CALL FOR DESTRUCTION

"Overthrow their altars, and break down their statues; burn their groves with fire, and break their idols in pieces. For thou shalt not adore a strange god." (Deut. 12:3)

1,2,3,4

726

ICONOCLASM

Healing through oastharsis



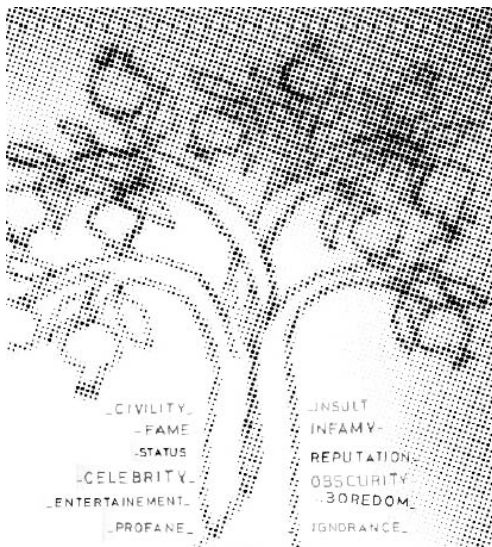
There is a constant profanation of what is consented as “sacred” given: political, social, religious, cultural, and aesthetic... For instance, Crass's symbolic and iconographic references reclaim authority through negation, which is anchored as well in the D.I.Y ethics. The sacred is displaced, and acquires permanence through transgression. In Christianity, iconography holds the sacred. The sacred and the divine inhabit the image, is present in it. The referent and the image are equal in icons. Through iconoclastic gesture, the sacred is present in the destruction, absence of the image or figural representation. Punk becomes iconoclastic in presenting the icons, always present but deformed into the level of the “informe” (Bataille's term). Punk's mechanism of representation is to using preexisting images and icons and the profanation of those images, to create a new iconography, emptying the sacred. The Christian mechanism of representation is through idealizing religious figures to the level of icon, to conjure the divine. While codes of representation were recognizable, sparking from the shapeless, they were still in the dark underground, secret and recognizable by the subculture or cult. It is a point where the deliverance from the dominant culture arises. It is also the place where the dangerous state of identification of subculture as ‘Other’ materializes, that “Punk” is predisposed to death and to be desecrated in its turn, because of its own mechanism of representation, while Christian iconography was consolidated, and the saturation of iconography led to iconoclasm.

***Your god is your chains
reject your god reject your system
Do you really want your freedom***

Amebix (1986). No Gods, No Masters.

5. Risen transgression

The subculture's transgression resonates across the historical gap. The definition of underground space corresponds to the codification of the images and creating borders and claiming power. Transcendent, transgression through ritual resistance and repetition is rootless and is a rupture, a text written yet not deciphered. The moment of the subculture in negation creates a stimulus and a non-place, escaping identity definition. The space is transgressed through the body, in Punk subculture through performance, violence, riots, Pogo dance, mutilation, explicit anti-authoritarianism, danger, as G.G. Allin embodies it. The icon is self-sufficient, explicit and saturated with the sacred: the divine is autonomous. It leaves only a space for an afterimage. The shadow is then separate as “Other”. The presence of sacred iconography and rituals transgress the profane space. Fire, blood, noise, sacrificial blood, light and darkness, violence and rawness prolong iconography.



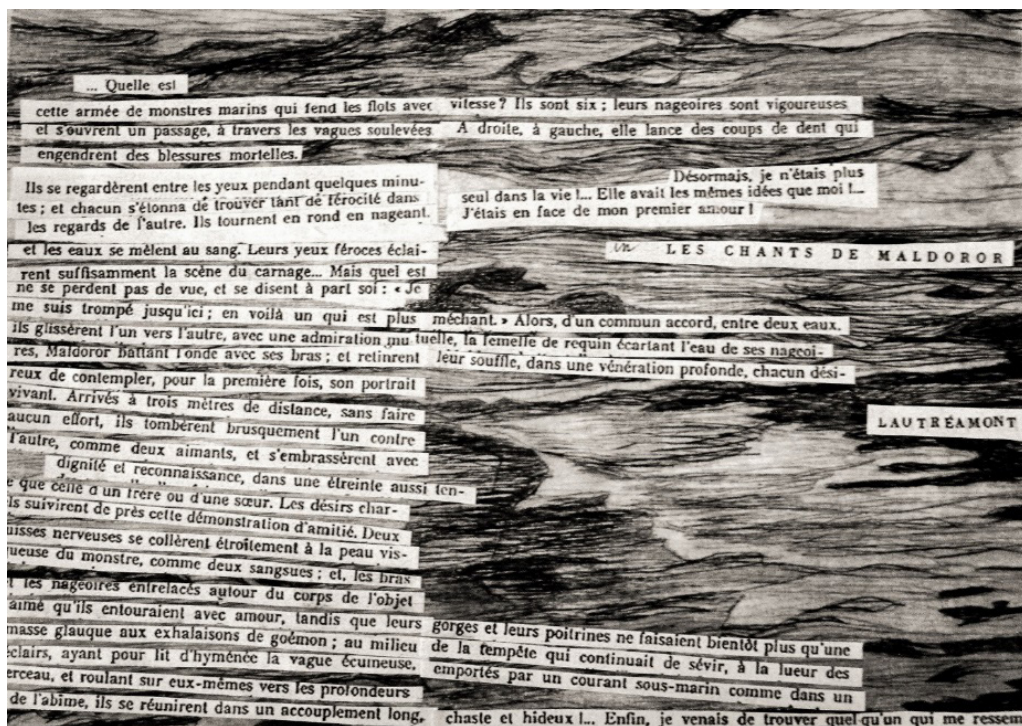
good . evil
heaven . hell
angel . demon

Oppositions vertical, with
a fallen angel in limbo,
diffused by gravity, unaware
of a catalyst

Ignorance
is bliss

Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

G.G. Allin's physical transgression recalls sacrifice, for filth or purity, and transforms the body in a judgment day, saved and sentenced to revolt and to surrender of the body. Salvation through flesh, violence, rhythm, noise, in a cathartic performance resonate Christian rituals and the passage of the body. Embodied with faith anchored in the certainty of the sacred or of anti-establishment and anarchy, ritual is heretic. Transgression is anticipated by absent authors from the void, from the rootless, spawned with the seeds of text. Both subcultures are resolved into the notion of savior, central figure, or the cancellation of heroes, remaining at the threshold of the subculture. Pain through rituals becomes a residue, in the linear history fixed into an apocalypse, maintained at the scale of fear or a "No Future". Truth is abbreviated and ambiguous. Oppositions are vertical, gravity of the real absent. Darkness and light reveal the disillusion of truth.



Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

The subcultures are rooted in their transgression, gesture, and negation, escaping a fixed identity, more than in their forms of iconographic representation; representation has decided the turning point of decline or surrender. The hegemonic system absorbed again the subculture, appropriated it as mainstream symbols, to decide of its survival and death. The excess to mainstream lead to the appropriation and cancellation the initial subculture, as such iconoclasm erased iconographic representation.

**Yes that's right, punk is dead,
It's just another cheap product for the
consumers head.
Bubblegum rock on plastic transistors,
Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters.
Cbs promote the Clash,
But it ain't for revolution, it's just for cash.
Punk became a fashion just like hippy used to be
And it ain't got a thing to do with you or me.**

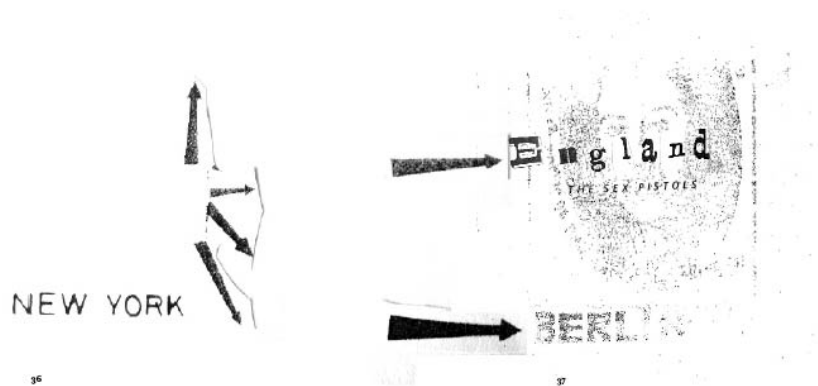
**Movements are systems and systems kill.
Movements are expressions of the public will.
Punk became a movement cos we all felt lost,
But the leaders sold out and now we all pay
the cost.
Punk narcissism was social napalm,
Steve Jones started doing real harm.
Preaching revolution, anarchy and change
As he sucked from the system that had given him
his name.**

**Well I'm tired of staring through shit stained glass,
Tired of staring up a superstars arse,
I've got an arse and crap and a name,
I'm just waiting for my fifteen minutes fame.
Steve Jones you're napalm,
If you're so pretty (vacant) why do you swarm?
Patti Smith you're napalm,
You write with your hand but it's Rimbaud's arm.**

**And me, yes I, do I want to burn?
Is there something I can learn?
Do I need a business man to promote my angle?
Can I resist the carrots that fame and
fortune dangle?
I see the velvet zippies in their bondage gear,
The social elite with safety-pins in their ear,
I watch and understand that it don't mean a thing,
The scorpions might attack, but the systems
stole the sting.**

Punk is dead. Punk is dead. Punk is dead (,.).

Crass (1978). Punk is Dead.



Source: The Gospel According to Lucifer, 2013 by Lynn Osman.

The subculture has written its own history and alienation and raised the questions about the limits of representation. Its juxtaposition to early Christianity as negation suggests that transgressive acts are a-historical and rooted in repetition. Representation reaches a time where the image frame and its mechanisms of representation are destroyed through an iconoclastic gesture, emptied from its transgression, anarchy and rebellion and removed from its historical context. Punk subculture's, signs and images circulate and the transgression prolongs outside its initial culture, it is present in other histories, that of Christianity. Therefore the same cultural drive can have different forms of representation, in different histories, with similar acts of transgression.

6. Discontinuity from conformity, answers almost known

Another gap discloses, amid the saturation of Punk subculture: from the negation into positive values we will examine the case of Amebix, and of Hardcore Punk.

Amebix exemplifies the escape from labeling (Crust Punk term in this case), the band that emerged during the condemning of Punk through the saturation of the scene. The sonic texture and drive of the band disrupt the subculture labeling

RB: You are cited as creating crust punk. How does it feel like to have made such an impact?

Rob: I don't feel comfortable being tagged with that label. I think Amebix was always a band that stood apart from our contemporaries, in our approach, attitude and unwillingness to conform to 'scene' parameters. I think the term 'crust punk' is not something that we consider ourselves to be part of. Crusty was a term used in Bristol to denote the punks who were really living on the street- not the studs and leather guys who would spike their hair

up on the weekends, but that is all. People seem too ready to adopt a packaged lifestyle complete with uniform and prescribed political belief structures that I personally find very claustrophobic. We are not interested in being defined by a genre. If anything, we are in our own selves complete and don't need to be labeled. We rose from the original punk scene to define our own music in our own way. Motorhead are just Motorhead, Killing Joke are Killing Joke, and Amebix are just Amebix. We don't need to feel secure in our nest (in Butler, 2009).

While Punk as subculture was based on transgression, negation and on the absence of permanence, and iconography, the rupture was continued into a positive gesture through 'Hardcore Punk', strongly relying on rawness, social change, positive attitude, creation, activism, new signifiers of social change. Rawness and return to the reclaiming voice and power, proposes a sociological change and action beyond transgression. Issues such as animal rights (band Antisect), social justice, environmentalism, DIY ethics are foreshadowed in the messages of the bands.

*I am an animal with wires in my head
Sometimes I think that I would be better
off dead
Humanity is allowed to kill me or damage
my brain
Why am I subjected to this unbearable pain
Why.....Why must I die (Antisect
-Tortured And Abused)*

*Well we've all heard the sermon seen
The preachers or worshipped the stage
Heard the new manifesto? It's all questions
no solutions at all
Well, you're out on your own now, always
have been
Just look at your friends
Break the surface to daylight
Strength will flow through our unity.*

*There is a traitor in our midst
And when we rise we will be betrayed
They are the wolves in sheep's clothing
Take the place at the back of the fold
All this talk about freedom
Will be tainted with blood (it's your life)
Put this cross on your back child
Tread the long weary trail to the top of
the hill*

ARISE! GET OFF YOUR KNEES!

*There's some hard times coming down
There's the smell of revolution on the wind
Well, we're grinding down our axes
Telling tales round the bonfire at night
We will set out with a fire in our hearts*

***When this darkness gives way to the dawn
In the light we're united as one
For the kingdom of heaven must be taken by
storm!***

***ARISE! GET OFF YOUR KNEES!
STAND UP!***

Amebix (1985). Arise!

7. Contemporary issues on identities, gender and resistance

The research examined the role of iconography, visual, performance and sound, as means of resistance and transgression, by deconstructing layers, through studying the mechanism of representation of subcultures. Control, coercion, manipulation as means of power to maintain hegemony, to fabricate political, cultural or social truths, have been subverted historically through subcultures. Transgression played a role in the formation of Punk subculture. And by comparing and juxtaposing it to Christianity at its advent, as subculture we can study the role of iconography, through mutual associations. The constant mutation of visual representation as means of subversion, historically, to claim or to reclaim agency or voice, towards a dominant mainstream culture, which was relatively local concerning Punk subculture, will lead us then to examine contemporary issues in gender and resistance, in other forms of play in visual iconography, in representation within the "Other", where different identities intersect: gender, political resistance, black identity, and heroism. Moving from more local forms of transgressions, from the underground Punk, towards more global or 'post-colonial' issues, we move to more hybrid case studies, in visual iconography and transgression. Laila Khaled, Palestinian militant, undertook high jacking operations, and had a rejection of the idealization of her image into a female icon. This was a form of resistance towards media representation of heroism and terrorism. She had plastic surgeries to not be recognizable in the next high jacking operations. Jean Genet's had a hybrid identity, and subverted the notion of iconography by idealizing 'anti-heroes' in his works, the dual struggle in gender as a homosexual and politics, and writing and activism as forms of resistance. His affinity to Black Panthers and the Palestinian resistance added layers of complexity to his identity. The last case is Mohammad Ali, boxer, he portrays the role of performance in "black resistance", and heroism, and his affinity to Palestinian cause through actions. By examining the different representation means of different cases of the "other", and their mutation, I aim to question the continuity of resistance, and the role of subculture in claiming territory and agency in cultural production, Punk's role today, and its immediacy and territory, to raise questions about the most powerful tools of active, peaceful resistance.

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