

6.9. Sing it yourself! Uses and representations of the English language in French popular and underground music

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Abstract

This article aims to show how French underground and local bands used the English language in their music. Seen as a hegemonic language in economy and pop culture, English, however, remained appropriated in a very subjective, negotiated and intimate way. For French bands, this appropriation was enhanced by anthropologic elements such as loud technology and group impact, and revealed a contentious relationship with the French language and culture, as well as with the French mainstream market. The language choice then had and still has a strong impact on a band's career, creation and production process. Besides, if bands have used English as a tool to draw the public's attention to the music more than to the lyrics, it has also been a way to renegotiate the traditional French identity, implying gender and race issues.

Keywords: music, underground, English language, French identity

Until very recently, almost no French band could sing in English and expect to achieve success in France, unless it became famous abroad first. This has been the case for French mainstream disco music, with artists like Patrick Juvet or Patrick Hernandez, or the so-called *French Touch*², who had to get recognition from Anglo-Saxon audiences and media before getting real attention in France. In the past, the French mainstream industry has used English as a marketing tool to cross borders and make profits beyond the national market. This strategy has always favoured a politically correct English. In the case of disco, English was used to sing about dominant cultural values, for instance a passion for the United States ("I Love America") or heterosexuality ("Where Is My Woman", "You Turn Me On"). The major record companies also created English-singing "ghost bands" in France, such as Jupiter Sunset (1970) or Time Machine (1971). These bands did not exist as stage bands, only studio outfits. Unlike the underground bands I am dealing with in this article, the use of English for "ghost bands" did not take part in the *ritual* of the rehearsal and only aimed at a marketing-oriented, short-lived imitation of foreign bands.

Indeed, the use of English by underground and amateur bands implies aesthetic and social representations that are not necessarily commercially oriented, it also has a cultural value that remains to be examined. A part of this value consists in a reaction to the mainly French-sung mainstream music and, more generally, in a contentious relationship with the French language. This is why I argue that this use of English is political at a micro-social scale, despite

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² A group of French house music producers and two rock bands (Air and Phoenix).

the fact that the bands' lyrics are not necessarily politicised. Here I will consider the question from a historical perspective, examining different examples of the use of English in French popular and underground music.

Horde and technology

During the 1920s and 30s in France, when the major popular musical format was the variety show, there was almost no use of any language other than French. The image of otherness in music was mainly a caricature aiming to make the audience laugh or dance (Josephine Baker perfectly embodies this phenomenon; Perault, 2007). At that time, France was still a colonial empire, which was a convenient position from which to mock other cultures. Besides, the variety show technical apparatus became more sophisticated and moved the centre of attention from the lyrics and singing (café-concert style) towards the lights and dancers. The bigger the spectacle, the less attention is paid to the lyrics and the language. This technological aspect remains important as it can be related to the use of loudness in the emerging genre of rock music.

However, during the early rock and roll period in France, (1960s and early 70s), even if the technology (amps, electric guitars, etc.) already allowed the bands to reduce audiences' awareness of the lyrics (and the language), and despite the desire of many bands to sing in English³, the traditional record industry did not produce any English-singing French bands. French producers forced bands to sing in French, often telling them exactly what and how to sing. The *modus operandi* was to standardize the young artists through "mentor" relationships with older music hall artists (opening for them and getting technical tips from them). This musical standardization also affected the language (in its semantics and in its formal aspects). In the end, the French music hall producers translated English rock and roll by removing all of its subversive aspects (Morin, 1965). Although original blues and rock could be sung in a rough language, their French early translations used a rather soft language. Even the singers were probably too old, nice and white to represent a real social or aesthetic subversion/corruption, as they did in the US and the UK (Guibert, 2006, p. 112).

Thus there were, on the one hand, the authentic and original rock bands, singing in English and coming from abroad (The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, etc.); and on the other hand, there were their French versions (Les Chaussettes noires, Les Chats sauvages, Les Sunlight, Les Players, etc.), produced by music hall industry standards, which meant a central and clear voice and a minimum of noisy sounds coming from the accompaniment. This original situation of rock is called the "great division" (Guibert, 2006, p. 132) and, from my point of view, is related to the common idea that the French language makes rock music sound silly or cheesy. At that time and for many years later, there were almost no references of recorded music roughly sung in French with heavy instrumentation. Meanwhile, when it came to the music, at that period English was the language of the rebel and the hip, a language that old people did not really understand.

In the early 70s, a few English-singing French bands tried their hand in the popular music market, but with very mixed results. Les Variations (1966-1975) got a contract with Pathé and toured around the world with big bands like Led Zeppelin, but their only single with significant

³ Most of these bands started playing music by playing covers in English and were fascinated by British and American music.

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sales was their one French-language song: *Je suis juste un rock'n'roller* (7th in the French charts). Dynastie Crisis (1970-1974) started singing in English, then signed a contract with EMI and changed to French. Chico Magnetic Band (1969-1972) gained attention from the media and signed a contract with CBS, but the label did not put any money into promotion, the band did not sell any records and they split soon after (which was typical at that time, even for French-singing bands).

Rock and pop critics were another source of conflict for these small rock bands. Many critics considered them as a translation/imitation of foreign bands (Vassal, 1971), and therefore lacking authenticity, which was more likely to be found in the singing-songwriting of artists like Georges Brassens, considered to be a true French artist. Moreover, the few journalists willing to talk about those bands had to face the fact that their records were very hard to find and that a French band making the cover of a magazine would sell a lot less than an American or British pop idol benefitting from heavy promotional support. During the same period, the only other examples of linguistic resistance to the French-singing mainstream industry were to be found in the experimental underground French scene, especially that produced by the jazz-oriented record label BYG. First there was Gong (1967-present), a progressive rock band with an Australian singer stranded in France because of a visa complication. And Magma (1969-present), another progressive/experimental band, well known for its invented language (Kobaïan). If the language choice was related to the way the music was produced and distributed (in BYG's case, a "do it yourself" way), the aesthetic ideology also had something to do with it: jazz amateurs focus more on the music than the lyrics, which makes it easier to sing in whatever language in whatever way.

So what would lead a rock or punk band to keep using English to sing at that time? Among those bands, we find the early hard rock band Shakin' Street, who played at the punk festival in Mont-de-Marsan in 1976 and 1977. Singer Fabienne Shine had studied English at a secretarial school and through movies and music. She had a great passion for the United States, where she finally went and met Jimmy Page. About the writing process, she declared:

When I used to write with Shakin' Street, I was writing with a full impact of the five members, I felt more aggressive, more delinquent, outlaw. We were like a family, like a gang. (...) French music sucks! All the rockers in France know that, and by the way I am very grateful to my fans in France who know the difference!⁴

Thus there was a "horde" effect in their music (the "impact of the five [aggressive] members") that was related to the use of English, especially when the sonic impact was so important that meaningful words were almost not needed anymore. The voice was still there, though, being the "popular" element of the music. And this "English voice" had a dangerous and powerful dimension. In this case, if we look at the lyrics, there was no protest song-like reference but more an American-influenced anger, a *collective* and *technologized* energy that could not be translated into French without losing its authenticity in the eyes of the singer. In fact, in regard to the "horde" dimension of the foreign language choice, it appears that there were no French solo artists singing in English at that time, only bands. And even today, it is not common to see English-singing solo artists in the indie or amateur French scene.

Even if this use of English seemed not to be politicized when it came to the lyrics, the bands still expressed class-consciousness through their social origins (Parisian suburbs for Shakin'

⁴ <http://www.earcandymag.com/fabienneshine.htm>

Street, Lyon suburbs for Ganafoul, Le Havre harbour for Little Bob Story, etc.) and also by the fact that they did not always know the language very well.

Indeed, the use of English also existed beyond the collectiveness of the band. It had a connection to the audience's body that could also be found in disco music through dancing. For rock and punk rock, it was more a kind of physical release, where sensuality (the hip shaking) alternated with brutality (the pogo during punk rock concerts). It is this relation to the body that diminished the semantic power of singing. The English language thus became a partly "dramatic and meaningless" aesthetic object "within the consensually validated norms" (Hall, 1993, p. 71). Using English did not fit the habitual conception of the authentic performer who was supposed to sing in his/her own language and, in this sense, these English-singing bands "breach our expectancies" (Hall, 1993, p. 71). Yet the injunction to use clear, unambiguous language is intimately related to dominant conceptions of social order: "the limits of acceptable linguistic expression are prescribed by a number of apparently universal taboos. These taboos guarantee the continuing 'transparency' (the taken-for-grantedness) of meaning" (Hebdidge, 1979, p. 91). This is why the major record companies, seen as representative of dominant cultural and social values, completely ignored these bands in the first place or forced them to sing in French. Nevertheless, this ideological frame towards language norms does not seem to apply to English-singing French disco music, which was easily produced and distributed. In my opinion it can be explained by the fact that the lack of meaning in the English singing was compensated for in some way. The music industry's first goal was still to make profits, so going through a more internationally-oriented and easy-listening music production would make that possible. Only in this way was singing English acceptable and encouraged. In other words, French artists could not sing in English if they did not clearly claim they wanted to "conquer" an international audience.

Trance, subversive diversity and cultural ideology

Following the punk wave coming from the United Kingdom, many local punk and post-punk bands emerged around France. Each big record company tried to find its own alternative band: Téléphone for EMI, Bijou for Phonogram, Starshooter for CBS. All those bands sang in French, but many bands from the era still had a strong connection with English, either in their name (Asphalt Jungle, OTH for "On Tenter Hook") or in song titles ("Betsy Party" from Starshooter, "Love Lane" from Asphalt Jungle, "Lady Coca Cola" from Metal Urbain). Even the press became interested in this new phenomenon, but this enthusiasm did not last long. The major record companies decided they had produced enough of this "punk rock" fashion, thinking that regular pop music (*variété*) was more appropriate for the French market. For the rest of the "new" and "young" music, there was the Anglo-Saxon catalog (Guibert, 2006, p. 157). Paradoxically, by giving priority to this catalog (with bands like The Cure, U2, Police, Depeche Mode, etc.), which actually represented more than half of sales in France⁵, the industry favoured a more authentic conception of English as a singing language for "new" music. Most new French bands displayed a tendency to respect this linguistic mimicry, especially in their early years, by making covers. When they started composing their own songs, most of them strategically switched to French, because it was easier and also because most of the labels (even independent ones) were more interested in French singing.

⁵ B.I.P.E., L'économie du domaine musical (as cited in Guibert, 2006, p. 158).

However, a significant number of bands continued to sing in English in the country's emerging scenes: Marquis de Sade (1977-1981) in Rennes, Stinky Toys (1976-1979) in Paris, Kas Product (1980-1990) in Nancy, Thugs (1983-1999) in Angers, Dau Al Set (1983-1985) in Toulouse, The Brigades (1981-1989) in Paris, Burning Heads (1988-present) in Orléans, etc. Looking at these bands' interviews, there was no clear claim to "make profits" or "to please everybody in the world". Most of them preferred to talk about "being understood" or about the "beauty" of the language, which proves that singing in English was not about marketing and had a more complex cultural and social meaning: "We used to sing in English for the standing, to be understood internationally. But it was also about how the words sound. English is better for rock. I find it more beautiful, more melodic. French sounds jerker"⁶ (The Brigades, in Rudeboy, 2007); "I sing in English because it's the most suitable language for our music style. If you want to sing in French, you really need to really assimilate the language if you don't want to sound ridiculous or cliché" (Dau al set, in Rudeboy, 2007).



Figure 1 - Kas Product (1980) – Mind, 7", Punk Records.

Source: http://www.spirit-of-rock.com/album-groupe-Kas_Product-nom_album-Mind-l-en.html

For some reason, many bands seemed to find it difficult to sing in French. Even with more recent bands, I have encountered this idea that French is a difficult language for singing, often because musicians perceive it as the language of classical literature they had to study at school, while English was for them a language of pop songs and movies, an easy and colourful language. In this way it became a more instinctive and spontaneous language.

⁶ "On chantait en anglais pour l'aspect rayonnement, pour pouvoir être compris au niveau international, et le second aspect concernait la musique des mots. L'anglais est plus favorable pour faire du rock. Je trouve ça plus beau, plus mélodique que le français qui est plus heurté."

In Le Havre, the proximity to the United Kingdom led to the creation of various English-speaking bands (City Kids, Bad Brains) connected to the label and record shop Closer. In Nancy, the band Kas Product became a local post-punk leader after being praised by the media, especially Jean-Eric Perrin who conducted the “Frenchy But Chic” chronicles in *Rock&Folk*. The same happened to Marquis de Sade in Rennes (Perrin, 2013). In both cases, the bands’ members did not consider themselves as belonging to a national territory. Kas Product singer Mona Soyoc pictured herself as a “traveller”, not interested in the “French rock” category⁷, because French was too “down-to-earth”, while English could lead you to a more transcendental state, or “acid state” (Seca, 2001), that is typical for underground musicians. In this case, English was mainly about using the “aesthetics of incomprehensibility” (Szego, 2003), which consist in compensating for the lack of comprehension by a more intense emotional commitment in the music. If you do not understand the words, your attention is transferred to other musical aspects (rhythm, flow, tone, etc.), which enhances the *trance* feeling. Marquis de Sade were also known for their mystic and intense shows. Moreover, they were not ashamed of claiming their “Europeanness” (Perrin, 2013, p. 115), aiming to symbolically deconstruct national barriers and rebuild a new space through their art.

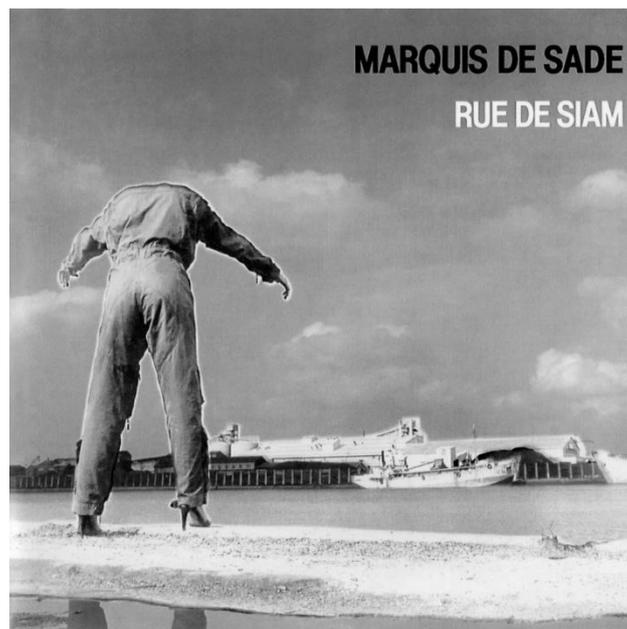


Figure 2 - Marquis de Sade (1981) – Rue De Siam, Vinyl LP, EMI.

Source: <http://www.discogs.com/Marquis-De-Sade-Rue-De-Siam/release/866246>

In opposition to this intellectual or even spiritual attempt through English singing, Thugs was a much more modest and “do it yourself” band, playing extremely loud for a French band, and claiming not to cultivate any fascination for the US or the UK (Manet, 2013, pp. 106-107). Their early-shoegaze noisy sound and loud live performances made them noticed by the American label Sub Pop. Would have been the case if they had sung in French? It is a difficult matter to solve. What can be said is that their English was marked by a deep French accent,

⁷ Les Enfants du rock, 1987. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0aH8fOkHk>

but in their case, it probably added an exotic feature to their music that was already well received. Moreover, despite the fact that the French accent was often considered as amateur; in punk, grunge and hardcore styles, it is more likely to be seen as positive, because it is a proof of authenticity. In the Thugs case, keeping the accent showed that the members did not seek to hide who they were. In fact, they were well known for their integrity and their rejection to any kind of showing off. In terms of lyrics, their message was clearly political, “between lower class and anarchist” (Manet, 2013, p. 33), criticizing nuclear plant programs for instance.

So the appropriation and diffusion of a foreign and hegemonic language was, first, a part of a complicated process in which the artist perceived this language as more authentic, more socially efficient and more aesthetically adapted. Later, this language took on a function of encryption of the artist’s subaltern position, which is why some bands continued to use it despite the hostility of French record labels. For instance the punk band members of The Brigades had to create their own label, Rock Radicals Records, in order to keep their music in English and produce other bands like them (Rudeboy, 2007).

If English could be seen as a mainstream music language, it also was the main language of alternative music (from abroad), while French was *mainly* a language of mainstream music. The first punk bands singing in French did not reach a large audience, like the Sex Pistols did in the UK. Metal Urbain was probably the major and most radical figure in France, but was blacklisted in all the media. It was only in the late 80s that a more significant number of alternative bands singing in French gained real attention from the media (Bérurier Noir’s radio hit “L’empereur Tomato Ketchup” was in 1986). The interesting point is that, unlike the major record companies, most of these bands did not employ a dogmatic use of French and were liable to borrow from different foreign languages. A noteworthy example would be Mano Negra, which became an essential band from the *rock metis* era (Lebrun, 2009), singing in Spanish, Arabic, French and English.

Even Noir Desir, today famous for their poetic French lyrics, used English a lot in their early days. More generally, the linguistic malleability of this period in the French underground was also a musical one. For instance the label Boucherie Productions was characterised more by its independent manner of producing and distributing than by a specific musical style. There were punk rock bands (Les Garçons Bouchers), crossover alternative bands (Los Carayos, Mano Negra), French solo singers (Clarika) and metal bands singing in English (Witches and Hoax). Bondage Records was also in the same position, with famous bands like Washington Dead Cats (psychobilly in English), Parabellum (punk rock in French), Nonnes Troppo (French *chanson*), and Kortatu (ska punk from the Basque Country).

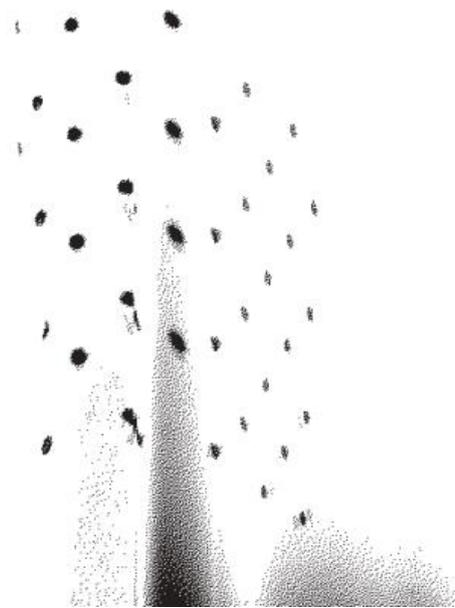




Figure 3 - Les Thugs (1996) – Strike, Vinyl LP, Roadrunner Records.

Source: <http://www.discogs.com/Marquis-De-Sade-Rue-De-Siam/release/866246>

Some of these bands achieved significant sales in the late 80s and early 90s, attracting the attention – again – of the major record companies. Mano Negra signed a contract with Virgin and was criticised for it. But the *Putas Fever* album released with Virgin kept all its authenticity, being subversive both linguistically and politically, in the sense that it was using foreign languages to perform a new type of otherness in French music. It was completely new for a large audience to see a French band with such a hybrid identity, without the usual exotic connotation of “world music”. Nor was it a coincidence that the languages were Arabic (because of France’s postcolonial state), Spanish (immigration and political relations, antifascism, etc.) and English (rock and punk tradition, globalisation).

Other bands followed the path of signing contracts with major companies (VRP, Wampas, Sattelites), all of them singing in French. Bands playing in English, for instance metal and hardcore bands (Condense in Lyon or Cut The Navel String in Angers) all stayed in the underground, while the extreme metal French scene (also mainly sung in English) organised itself in a very autonomous and genre-oriented network (Listenable Records started in 1990, Holy Records in 1992, Season of Mist in 1996). Other English singing alternative bands finally switched to French, like the Little Rabbits, claiming it was a more mature and natural way of making music (Guibert, 2003). But most of them just disappeared when the commercial radio channels, which had been a very important media to discover these alternative bands, were suddenly forced by law⁸ to broadcast a certain percentage of French music – music in French, to be more precise.

During this period of musical and linguistic diversity, the imposition of a 40% of francophone music on French radio came back to the idea that “French culture was in

⁸ See “Le fondement juridique des quotas” on the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel’s website: <http://www.csa.fr/Radio/Le-suivi-des-programmes/La-diffusion-de-chansons-d-expression-francaise/Le-fondement-juridique-des-quotas>

danger". If the French language was an essential part of French culture, not using it therefore meant that you did not represent that culture. The use of French language became a marker of national authenticity.

The law also included a requirement for the broadcasting of 20% new productions, aiming at more diversity in the media. If the French music industry (major and independent) did not wait for this law to have a French oriented production, the law certainly accentuated this phenomenon. However, in terms of diversity, this law failed. Indeed, the same artists and the same songs, usually from the major companies (that are in fact international holdings not very interested in national matters) got broadcasted endlessly, leading to a lower number of scheduled artists (Perona, 2008). Besides, another obstacle to diversity was that English sung music genres such as metal had no chance of being broadcasted, which is why French metal stayed underground for so long. During the 90s and early 00s, singing English was in fact the best way for a band to be underground.

Conclusion

The last decade has been marked by a major change in terms of what being underground means. The Internet and especially social networks such as MySpace offered many bands the possibility of distributing their music on a large scale without any help from a record company. It has now become possible for bands to be autonomous and to disseminate digital records around the world. In linguistic terms, one would think that all this would have increased the number of English-singing bands trying to reach an international audience. This may be true to some extent. But in fact, this "global" audience was unreachable for the majority of bands, or at least for French bands. Labels have maintained an important role in the distribution and production process, which means that French is still the dominant language in both independent and mainstream music.

Nevertheless, the growth of underground electronic music at the end of the 90s also formed a significant linguistic change. Mainly because this seemingly "deterritorialized" music, using voice samples from Anglo-Saxon records, found a very positive echo abroad by exploiting the chic image of Paris (Dimitri From Paris, St Germain). Moreover, their music was mainly played in clubs and commercials (Etienne de Crécy for Renault, Air for l'Oréal, Daft Punk for Sony and Gap, Mr. Oizo for Levi's), where there was no French quota (Jourdain, 2005, p. 123-124). It opened a door for pop-rock French bands Air and Phoenix who could sing in English without any amateurish accent, but still with an indescribable hint of Frenchness and class that made them famous. Their international success opened another door for the French indie music scene which was less and less pressured to sing in French, creating ambivalence towards language choice which is reflected in the bands' ambiguous attitude towards profit, commercial endorsement and deals with major record companies. At the same time, the increasing number of venues (SMAC⁹ and independent venues) allowed many bands to tour, also thanks to digital media support (no quota for them either).

In the end, the language in which a band chooses to sing does not determine its career in terms of mainstream or underground anymore. This is due to the fact that the line between underground and mainstream has been partially blurred. However the language choice still expresses different cultural values depending on the music genre. For instance, most of the

⁹ "Scènes de musiques actuelles", a venue run by an association with public financial support.

French metal bands have kept singing in English, except for the “nu-metal” scene that actually got the most mainstream attention, signing many contracts with major record companies (Pleymo and Watcha with Sony, Enhancer with BMG, Mass Hysteria with Wagram).

The interesting point here is that the “nu-metal” genre became very popular in Anglo-Saxon countries regardless of the language matter. Thus it is hard to argue that French “nu-metal” was popular because it was sung in French. Its proximity to rap music probably made it easier to use French for both technical and cultural reasons. Nevertheless, despite the relative success of “nu-metal” bands, their use of French continued to be seen as too soft, or even gay for some people. A common reaction from conservative metal fans was that “nu metal” was “queer stuff” (“un truc de tapette”). If metal is mainly played by white males, it is interesting to compare it to the French rap scene, dominated by non-white males using French in a very altered way. Indeed, the queer issue about language is also at stake in rap: “rapping is not singing”, a young hip-hop artist once told me, “if you sing in French you have to be careful with your words, otherwise you’ll sound like a faggot”. If language permits musicians to “avoid the queer” in some way, this probably explains the recent emergence of queer-influenced female artists singing in both French and English such as Le Prince Miiou and Christine and the Queens among the French indie pop scene, where masculinity is less invasive than in rap and metal.

The way languages are distributed and categorized in music reveals many symbolic power relations. For a more general young audience, for whom English sung music loses a part of its semantic meaning, this foreign language represents a way to get new definitions of the world and themselves that they could not get with the “too meaningful” French language. English and its lack of comprehension create more space open to interpretation.

English has been therefore used as a stylisation tool, like clothes, haircuts, names, etc. It used to be a “negotiated response” to the mass media mythology, in the sense that it responded to each person’s life and ability to use the language. The young artists “were learning to live within or without that amorphous body of images and typifications made available in the mass media in which class is alternately overlooked and overstated, denied and reduced to caricature” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 87). They were within when using English from the movies or the bands they liked, and without when creating their own music, where “adjustments and textual hybridity” permitted them to build their own “identity” (Guibert, 2003).

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