

2.2. Locked because of a look. The different risks you take when you look like a punk in West and East Germany (1977-1982)

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Abstract

Fashion has always represented a crucial dimension within the punk movement: The boutique SEX, run by Malcom McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, was the place where the Sex Pistols met. To exist socially and to express themselves, all punk scenes need not only a venue to hold a concert; they also require the development of specific clothes. The politics of style, highlighted by Dick Hebdige, involves in itself a strong value given to clothes and to the way the scene's members look. We aim to analyse the fashion's dimension of the punk scene, extending the studies of music scenes to consider the intersection between music and other cultural fields. By focusing on two scenes from the same era—East and West Germany (GDR and FRG)—between 1977 and 1982, we will show how punk clothing and looks played a crucial role regarding the main musical and ideological issues of this movement. The look is used to express dissent and resistance against the consensus. But it also allows for the development of a common and visible identity for the scene. The two scenes examined in this paper are, of course, a lot different from one another. The risks involved by the punks are not on the same scale. In the FRG, the main danger was the commodification in which the mainstream media quickly used the punk look as a way to sell new brands. In the GDR, the danger was to be arrested in a society where the State took social appearance very seriously. Thus, the meaning of the same look can vary according to the specific context in which it is integrated. Through these two specific scenes, we expect, thus, to bring forth a key hypothesis about the punk scenes at large, regarding issues related to their look in the face of processes such as mainstreaming, sociallabelling or identity-building.

Keywords: punk, style, dissent, commodification, social appearance, fashion.

Introduction

When thinking about punk, one of the first things that comes to mind is its appearance. Punk scenes can be recognized by attire. Leather jackets, ripped T-shirts and safety pins play a key role in the identity of the scene. In fact, fashion has always represented a crucial dimension within the whole punk movement: The boutique SEX, run by Malcom McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, was the place where the Sex Pistols met (Savage, 2002). People continue to dress in a punk way to express the fact that they belong to this scene. To exist socially and to express themselves, all punk scenes need not only a venue to hold a concert; they also require the development of specific clothes. However, despite this importance, analyses of the punk scene often tends to focus on its musical aspects. Even in an exposition entitled 'Punk Aesthetics' (Kugelbert and Savage, 2012), only a few pages were devoted to the fashion topic.

In this paper, we aim to address the many unquestioned issues related to punk fashion. First, we will enlighten the importance of fashion for the punk scene itself. How can it help the process of building a community? By provoking the rejection of 'common people'? By developing a distinctive look? Then, we will ask what punk expresses through its fashion. Is the look used to express dissent and resistance against the consensus? Can we find a political statement within the outfits? Finally, we will stress the dangers involved for people dressing in the punk way. Dick Hebdige already identified these dangers. In *Subculture the Meaning of Style* (2008, p. 19), he stated that the recuperation process could adopt two different forms. The "commodity form" transforms the subcultural signs into standardised consumer items. The "ideological form" enforces a new definition to subcultural practices to suit the political agenda of the media and the state. However, another kind of danger is more obvious. By dressing outrageously, punks put themselves at risk of suffering state repression.

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We will address these topics through two historical contemporaneous cases: The first-wave punk scenes in Germany from both sides of the Wall between 1977 and 1982. By comparing these scenes from the same era but in opposite terms of political orientation and state structure, we will be able to analyse whether or not the meaning of punk attire differs, depending on the specific context in which it emerges.

The meaning of style

The title Hebdige's famous and still relevant book about punk that is quoted above already stressed the importance of style. As a quick reminder, for Hebdige, the subcultural politics were not expressed through literal dissent, as in counterculture, but through symbolic resistance (2008). If style may not be confined only to visual and fashion aspects, then this notion highlights the strong value given within the punk scene to outfits and the ways in which the scene's members look like. This fashion's aspects embody the way they perform their relations with society.

In fact, the outfits play a crucial role within the punk panoply, besides other elements such as music played rudely and pogoing at concert. It even sometimes represents the reason why people join the punk scene. In many testimonies, former punks remember, thus, how they decided to become punk after having seen a picture representing some punk. This is the case for both scenes analysed in this paper. In West Germany (the FRG), many punks stated that the first time they saw a punk in London or in their own town was a turning point for their life (Teipel, 2010). In East Germany (the GDR), the state control restricted any relation with the punk scene from Western Europe or London. Even interaction with West Germany was very scarce. But people from the GDR still had an unexpected chance to discover punk. An official publication intended to show to East Germans how much their capitalist neighbours were decadent by displaying pictures of young punks (Boehlike and Gerike, 2005, p. 120). The effect happened to be quite opposite, as many punks discovered punk because of this publication. The shock that they felt led them to become punk.

Thus, punk fashion sometimes represents the first step toward joining the punk scene. Furthermore, it is mainly used to fix the identity of the community. The outfits allow punks to recognize their peers. The activity of the scene is not confined to concerts. Being a punk means also drinking beers at pubs and spending time in the streets and parks. When no music is played, outfits can be used as a rallying sign. Thus, fashions play a key role in the building of the punk community. It allows punks to feel that they belong to the scene and to identify others in it. This issue of recognition appears to be so important that fashion might be the most constant feature of the whole punk repertoire. The comparison between the punk scene from East Germany and that from West Germany reveals a lot of differences, in terms of music composition or political involvement. For instance, Eastern punk use a very homogeneous way to play music, with very few variations in rhythms or regarding the instruments played, whereas punk bands in Düsseldorf quickly tried electronic devices and explored more pop and experimental compositions (Teipel, 2010). But through analyses of hundreds pictures of punks (bands and audiences) from both scenes taken from different archives (Substitut; Pop am Rhein; MFS), we can observe a quite strong constancy. The same codes are present on both sides of the wall: black leather, ripped shirts, clothes reworked by collage and Mohawk hairstyles, to name only the major ones. The only difference lies in the means available. Punk clothing or the raw materials to create them become easier and easier to get in West Germany, whereas in the GDR punk had to do with limited resources, forcing them to develop more creative or D-I-Y practices. Pankow, a punk from East Berlin, stressed this difference: "I was never interested by the West. And western punks even less because they just had to go to a store to buy their leather jackets and their nails-bracelet" (Boehlike and Gericke, 2005, p. 31).

We will not address the issue of cultural hegemony or westernisation in this paper. But we would like to state that both scenes are a part of a transnational cultural movement, which does not mean that they are only reproducing the same model. They appropriate the punk panoply. Regarding East German punks, they do not naively only want anything that comes from the West. The last quotation clearly expresses this concept.

One other reason to dress as punk embodies one crucial dimension of community: fun. Before addressing topics such as political dissent, it is important to bear in mind that people were dressing as punks because it meant a lot of fun for them. They enjoy creating clothes, dressing how they want and not as their parents want them to, feeling that they belong to a scene, being original but also—what may sound like an insult for some punks—hip. We must recognize that people were also becoming punks because it was cool. This was even the fact in Eastern Germany. In a surveillance report written by a punk informant (MFS BV Magdeburg Abt. XX 4223 ZMA), it was stated that

most punks wore this kind of clothing because it was new and 'modern'. This fun represents one of the reasons why young people joined together and built a community within a scene (Stearns, 1994).

Break social etiquettes

But punk was not only fun. As most youth cultural practices since the end of World War II, it embodied revolt and entertainment at the same time. Alex Schildt and Detlef Siegfried have shown it in their well-titled book: *Between Marx and Coca-Cola. Youth Culture in Changing European Societies* (2007). Since the sixties, culture has been associated with values of social change, revolution and opposition to youths' parent's society. But it was also experienced through hedonism and the consumption of new cultural products, which led to the opening of a new—quite profitable, in fact—market.

Punk is an heir from this development of modern culture. Even if it wants to break with former musical genres, it still reiterates the codes of fun and hipness. This is at last strong in its early years. But the fact that punks had fun and were kind of hip with their fashion experimentation doesn't prevent them from expressing dissent and revolt. All fun is not the same. What matters here is the specific form taken by fun and fashion within the punk scene.

And indeed, the clothes were chosen with the intent to shock the rest of the society. This is what Hebdige (2008, p. 21) describes as a scandal toward the silent majority. The punk appearance represents a dissent from any principle of unity or social cohesion. As pointed by John Savage (2002), punks wanted to break the post-war consensus. Both Eastern and Western society happen to be then marked by a strong social consensus. It's what Jürgen Teipel (2010), a punk from East Berlin, points when he explains that West German punk interested him because it was situated in a very conservative country. In the GDR, this consensus was far stronger and was harshly organized. The state paid a lot of attention to the control of its citizen through surveillance by the Stasi. The whole social life was regulated through regular rites (Fulbrook, 2008).

In the purpose to break all social etiquettes of these social consensuses, punks from both scenes used clothes that were rejected and despised by the majority of its citizen. We can list at least two main categories: The first one gathers basic clothes that are ripped and dirty. The aim here is to use artifacts associated with poverty and trash. The reshaping through scissors and collage reinforces this aspect. We can name here white t-shirts, old jeans, and boots. Besides poverty, the second category is related to other marginalized practices. With the use of leather, for instance, there were a clear reference toward sadomasochism.

With this extensive use of clothes bound to practices seen as deviant by the social norms, the punks aimed to draw a clear line between them and the bourgeois society. All social etiquette is turned to its contrary. That way, the punk scenes stated that they refused to belong to the consensus. They took what society saw as trash or deviance and turned it into clothes. Punk fashion, thus, allowed participants to situate the punk scene in direct and evident conflict with the dominant society. This will to shock bourgeois can take different paths. It leads sometimes to the use of the most forbidden taboo, such as the presence of the Swastika symbol. In post-war Western Germany, in a society marked by the culpability of Nazism, it perhaps represented the biggest scandal. In the GDR, it was the West that embodied the number-one enemy, blamed and criticized in every official discourse. So it is FRG symbols, such as brands' names and logos, which were written or affixed on clothes (as described in the Stasi archives, MFS BV Magdeburg Abt. XX 4223 ZMA).

But dissent can also express itself through literal positive political statement, as is the case of discourse and watchwords printed or handwritten on shirts. We can think of the anarchist symbol that appears repeatedly on clothes in both scenes.

We can add that both of these paths were already present in the British punk scene with the inclusion of the swastika and the famous white shirt with the pro and cons of the Sex Pistols (Savage, 2002, p. 114–115). This enlightened the role of British punk as a common root for both German punk scenes.

The dangers of fashion

Until now, we have stated that punk scenes used fashion for inside purposes (fun and to build a common identity for the community) and for outside goals (expressing dissent, breaking the consensus). But to determine the concrete political meaning of these cultural practices, we need to situate them in their specific context. To

understand the strength, the limits and the dangers of this dissent, we must relate it to issues such as repression or the precise character of each consensus.

In West Germany, even if there was a strong conservatism, the country had experienced many social struggles in the seventies (Reichard and Siegfried, 2010). It was still facing left violence with the *Rote Armee Fraktion* when punk emerged in Germany (Steiner and Debray, 2005). The government, despite its lack of promotion and its disdain towards youth culture, did not forbid any kind of cultural practise. Since the sixties, many art schools have been established. For instance, in the city of Düsseldorf, a lot of influential artists, such as Joseph Beuys or Bernd and Hilly Becher, were teaching in art schools. It was, in fact, in this city that the first major punk scene in West Germany emerged (Teipel, 2010).

Punk in West Germany faced no specific police repression or surveillance in the late seventies or early eighties. After having consulted the police archives of the Land and the Bundesarchiv, we can assert that the West German State did not see punk as a danger to fight, punk being only mentioned briefly in delinquency cases about drugs. Furthermore, in a 1981 federal report (B 138/30183), the authority states that punk must not be considered as a political struggle. It must be confined to an issue of youth integration. The recuperation process takes here an ideological form. It enforces its own definition of punk, denying it any political meaning. It erases its revolt potential.

As culture and punk were not considered to be a societal problem, they faced another kind of danger: commoditisation. Fashion expresses itself through artefacts. It is also the case with punk, as we have been able to list different types of clothes. Punk fashion was born in a shop. Even if it was then appropriated by a lot of punks who made their outfits themselves, punk remained at this shopping origin. Some former punks from Düsseldorf were even participating in this process by actively selling band t-shirts (*The Ostrich* (1977), n°3). It was then easy to bring such attire to mainstream stores. We can observe this process in the German mainstream newspapers. After the first wave of moral panic (see, for instance, the *Spiegel* from 1978, whose cover stated 'Punk, culture from the suburbs. Rough and hateful'), it was then quickly neutralised as juvenile entertainment. The teenage magazine *Bravo* (1978, 2) had, thus, many articles and covered punk as a topic. One article even explained to teenage boys and girls how to dress like a punk: "Punk zum spass und aus flippen. Bravo modetip für ihre party" (Punk for fun and going crazy. The fashion advices from Bravo for your party). In that process, the punk scene lost its value of revolt and D-I-Y and was incorporated in the mainstream market next to ABBA and John Travolta. Mainstream stores reacted quickly to this wave and began to sell punk look-a-like clothing.

In East Germany, there was no financial development or commoditisation possible for the punk scene. On the contrary, punk had suffered a harsh repression from the state. The GDR power is described by Mary Fulbrook (2008) as "participatory dictatorship". This notion enlightens the fact that this dictatorship not only used repression against opponents, it also asked its citizens to actively participate in public rites. Not participating in rites of consent represented, thus, a revolt gesture in itself. The Stasi represented a strong example of this policy. This Ministry for State Security hired a lot of informants from civil society, including punks (Boehlike and Gericke, 2005, p. 54). The historian Mike Dennis (2003) affirms that this ministry had 91 000 full-time employees and 180 000 informants in 1975. The SED, the only party allowed in the country, not only ruled state affairs, it was fixing rules for different spheres of private life, leisure or education. To every age corresponds a party organization: young pioneers for children between 6 and 10 years old; pioneers for children between 10 and 14 and the Free German Youth for young people between 14 and 25 (Fullbrook, 2008, p. 127).

Thus, every side of life, even the most personal, was politicised by the State, from ethics problems to clothes. Moreover, the State gave a specific meaning to youth because, to its eyes, it represented both the future of the country and was an easy target for the enemies (Kosovoï, 2009, p. 167). The State asked young people to embody the perfect communist and viewed any presence of Western influence as a great danger. In the Cold War context—the end of the seventies signifying the so-called second Cold War—any practices of social dissent were repressed. The historian Julian Brauer (2012) stated that, at that time, the East German government feared a loss of control over society. It was thus extremely careful to prevent the expression of any deviant practises, moreover inside the youth. We are facing a policy close to that of the so-called 'broken glasses'. This expression describes the will of the city of New York to replace any broken windows because they embody visible signs of the fact that the State was losing power in years of economic crisis (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004). In the same way, the East German State was repressing any visible form of dissent to prove that it was still in control.

In 1981, a State directive ordered police to halt anyone identified as a punk (MFS HA XX 19364). Punks were arrested and forced to join the army or were sent to West Germany (Brauer, 2012, p. 82). In the Stasi archives,

there are many files devoted to the punk issue. In 1983, 17 bands had fiches on them and 900 young people were watched because of their proximity to the punk scene (MfS, BV Berlin). In the Stasi files, clothes play a crucial role. Informants and officers described precisely the outfits of punks who were watched or arrested. They listed the colours, shape, and patches on their clothing; there were also often pictures of punks to provide visual proof. Punks were arrested because they represented signs of social dissent. Through their clothes, they differed from the 'socialist personality' (Fulbrook, 2008, p. 315). The East German government decided to destroy the punk scene in a surveillance that was mostly focused on the appearance and, of course, links with Western culture.

The case of the East and West German punk scenes shows how much fashion matters for the existence of a scene in many ways. It helped the punk scene to define a common identity against the society. Clothes allowed it to express the nature of this relation towards the 'silent majority'. But fashion also represents a danger: As an artefact, it is easily appropriated. As a show open to the look of everyone, it facilitates the tracking of, and arrests, by the police. The nature of the danger is related to the form of the society in which the punk scenes emerge.

Both dangers will lead punk scenes to specific fights. On the one hand, Western Punks will try to prevent recuperation by going further and further in the search for radical scandal, and by criticizing pseudo-punks or so-called 'mode-punks' (*mode* means 'fashion'). This last expression stresses the paradox of fashion. The punks did follow a kind of fashion but, in the same time, rejected the very idea of fashion. On the other hand, the direct struggle against the State led East German punks to develop a political strategy, building alliances with other movements, namely churches, thus defining a coherent political discourse. This strategy will allow them to preserve a resistance space within the East German society.

The difference between the political agenda of each scene can, thus, be seen in their distinct use of symbols within their outfits. In West punk scenes, the quest for social scandal led them to use symbols such the swastika and other Nazi-related symbols without taking account of their political and historical meaning. On the contrary, East German punks almost never used Nazi symbols. Their political stance involved not only a literal opposition discourse, but also a social appearance that handled political symbols carefully so that they remained coherent.

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