

## 2.6. Peripheral subcultures. The first appropriations of punk in Germany and Italy

Mara Persello<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The migration of subcultural definitions from the traditional research fields to peripheral contexts raises some questions about the existence of core definitions and about the importance of local interpretations of global phenomena. The theories of cultural imperialism and globalisation do not take into account the peculiarities of each local scene. A semiotic stronghold regards the power of the receiver in the interpretation of the message, and each message needs to fit in a context through connections that can vary in structure as well as in content. The constellation of meaning developing around a text is not definable through general macro-sociological aspects, but only through the filtered reality of the cultural actors who receive and readapt the new incoming texts. I will make an example based on the first understanding of punk in Italy and Germany basing on its local appropriation following its emergence in the national media.

**Keywords:** punk, Italy, Germany, local identity, media.

### Methodological premise

Before introducing the topic of this paper, a comparison between German and Italian understanding of punk at its origins, and the first forms of its local appropriation, there are two theoretical premises that need to be done.

First, the present analysis moves from a semiotic point of view. This has consequences on the understanding and the definition of the social field in general and on the research object particularly. The object of semiotics is the meaning and its production, and if the production of meaning is a shared one, than the social field is correspondent to the cultural field. Social actors are also cultural actors (Lorusso, 2008). These actors produce texts. Textual semiotics is grounded in the idea that every phenomenon has to be read as a *text*. The definition of text is not the literal one derived from linguistics anymore, but is still based on the communication model. Every experience of the world, to become a text, has to be filtered by the social cultural mind. The text is a theoretical construct whose existence is the product of the intersection between the theoretical eye and the meaningful extension of the object in the eyes of the interpreter (Lancioni and Marsciani, 2007). This concept of text underlies the importance of the point of view of the observer in reading and defining the world at the same time (including observers operating inside the scientific field) and humbly states the methodological impossibility to reach some mythical objectivity. A text is then some meaningful fragment of reality without intrinsic qualities. It includes not only texts literally, but objects, practices, behaviours and postures, seen as significant from an interpreter in and through a social context (Fabbri, 1998). The word context itself, then, has to be specifically described as a web of texts connected to each other to form a whole social, cultural – meaningful – environment. This model is bond to the concept of *semiosphere* introduced by semiotician Jurij Lotman (1985) and to the Geertzian definition of culture as a web (Geertz 1973).

The second theoretical premise, following from this model, is that the connection between texts happens through communication, and a new text can be integrated in the existing context-web only if some connections can be done between the new and the pre-existing meanings. For Lotman every communication is a form of translation, the receiver can understand a text only if she/he is able to include the new content in the constellation of texts that already form his/her world-view as provided from his/her *semiosphere*. Every new information undergoes a process of filtering whose result is its inclusion in (or expulsion from) the context. This filtration is the translation.

Incidentally, if we accept these theoretical premises, then the debate about cultural imperialism appears as an ineffective simplification. The translation as connection to new contexts means a repositioning of the text, in any

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Potsdam, Germany.

case: a sharper way of describing the spreading of certain texts from an original context to new ones in needed and has to take a methodological account of the translation model.

Moving from the theoretical level and approaching the operative part of the analysis, the definition of the text as formal object of inquiry and of the context as a web of communication has consequences on the selection of data that may be used. Only those data filtered through the understanding of the social cultural actor will be valid. This means that the macro-sociological elements can be contemplated only if included in the contextual cognition of those who produce culture through the filtering, translation and interpretation of new texts. In other words, to define punk a political reaction to Thatcherism is acceptable only if those cultural actors adhering to punk had an intentional reaction to what the politics of Thatcherism had contextually created. Surely political decisions and economical conjuncture have a great influence on the development of a lifestyle, but many other factors are included, bound together in a constellation of personal experiences and historical events whose effects are intelligible only through the life *text* of every social actor.

## Spreading the punk word

### National definitions: Italy and Germany

To be coherent to the theoretical premise of historical facts being significant for the analysis only if they have been significant for the cultural actors themselves, in the (first) definition of punk in Germany and Italy it has also to be considered how to define the two countries taken as example.

The political boundaries of the two countries are clear and stable, based on bilateral agreements, indicated by signals along the streets and in the maps. But a nation is a social fiction (Dickie 1996) which includes also other characteristics, like customs, traditions and language, that have a stronger cultural aspect and whose boundaries are much fuzzier.

Punk, however this word is to be defined, is everywhere. It crossed national boundaries and formed communities in different constellations, from local to global; for this reason it is not possible to mechanically match national identity and punk identity, as the two texts are not necessarily connected. Nevertheless, in the attempt to establish a comparison between local understandings of punk, some sort of distinction has to be made. Ortoleva suggests a geographical differentiation based on the media diffusion

The development of modern media determines a geography of communication which adapts to the map of existing communities but which, at the same time, continually reshapes it. The media contribute to the maintenance of pre-existing social arrangements but they also, more or less explicitly, define their boundaries and the direction in which they change. Ortoleva 1996, p. 187)

And Appadurai (1990) introduced five possible landscape dimensions through which social and cultural areas can be divided: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, ideoscaples and mediascaples. Here it has been chosen to refer to the mediascape as defining the national boundaries between Germany and Italy, also because punk reached the two countries crossing boundaries mostly through the media<sup>2</sup>. It is then the media, their diffusion and positioning that design the national area that will be taken into account.

### Mediascape: Bravo and Odeon

Punk reached Germany through a teen magazine called Bravo: first published in 1956 and still appearing every week in the newsstand, in the 1970s Bravo had a circulation of more than a million copies in German speaking countries. Its topics are music, but also sexuality, work and everyday life problems regarding the youth. The issue number 41 published on the 30 September 1976 was the first reportage about punk to appear in Germany, and punk was presented through the Sex Pistols. The magazine included a poster of the band, colourful graphics to integrate a shallow and sensationalist description of a group of young males looking like a street gang, and the instructions on how to dress like a punk.

<sup>2</sup> Many traditional narratives report personal contacts and travelling experiences, as the present understanding of punk and its rebellious myth tries to hide this mainstream origins. But the punk word expanded at first thanks to the most popular and mainstream media, and was supposed to be an ephemeral trend. Cf. Philopat (2006); Schamoni (2005).

In Italy the first magazine specifically targeted to a teen audience appeared in the 1980s. In the mid-1970s the most effective, and popular, information medium was television. The first contact with the new shocking trend from England came from the television program *Odeon*, broadcast on Tuesday the 4 October 1977 just after the evening news on the second national channel (at that time there were only two, a third one and the private television channels followed some years later).

The Italian television offered a quite complete report about the music and the punk style, some bands were filmed on stage: Sex Pistols, Heartbreakers, Slits and Eaters; an interview with the Slits was translated into Italian, the journalist Raffaele Andreassi proved he made some research, he talked about the music, the style, the dance forms, he referred to the bands as artists and observed the important part the audience played in the scene.

The punk message entered different contexts in Germany and Italy. The closer context of the magazine *Bravo* was that of music, for sure, but also of the typical problems of the teens: in the same year 1976 the first article about punk was published, there were articles about sex and contraception, about secondary school education and professional training, advertising texts inviting to join the army, and even a complete reportage about how the taxation of the salary is calculated. In the issue number 41 already mentioned, the front cover reports a special about punk rock, pictures of kittens and an interview to the teens-sweetheart Shaun Cassidy, but there is also a front story about a pregnant young girl pondering about an abortion. Such topics were addressed to an audience still in their teens, but facing adult problems and personal responsibility.

The palimpsest in which the program *Odeon* was broadcast on Italian television was completely different. The second national channel was mostly devoted to cartoons in the afternoon and light entertainment in the evening. *Odeon* was a sixty minutes weekly TV-magazine talking mostly about movies, stars and trends, broadcast after the news, at 20.15 p.m., and not specially targeted to a young audience.

The television report of Andreassi focused on the creativity and artistry of this new phenomenon, and if any political content was to be acknowledged, it was the point of view of an artist.

To a broader context, punk reached young people but different audiences: in the case of Germany, the message appealed teens who bought a magazine on purpose, conscious of being the special target of its texts; in the case of Italy, the new trend reached youngsters casually sitting in front of the television on a weekday evening in company of their parents or other family members.

## Local understanding and new interpretations

### A year later in Italy: the Great Complotto

At least at the beginning, punk was perceived in Italy as a cultural trend. A year later, in 1978, the renowned film director Comencini made a reportage interviewing some punk teens from the province of Tuscany. He asked: "what are you protesting against?" the answer, after a shy and incoherent mention to the queen, was clear: "I personally don't have anything to protest against, I just like the style"<sup>3</sup>. Whatever the reason and interpretation of the punk message, punk had landed.

The first genuine Italian punk scene started in Pordenone. A very small and peripheral city actually, population 50,000. In the autumn of 1977 a group of young men met in Pordenone, while fulfilling their compulsory civil service to help the region damaged in 1976 by a serious earthquake. They were born in Pordenone, but as it happens in small cities with very few cultural infrastructures, some of them had already left the city before, despite their young age. Ado Scaini had been living in London for a while, working as a roadie for local bands. Fabio Zigante was a student at the University of Bologna. They moved back to Pordenone and while clearing rubble by day decided out of boredom to start a band to spend their free time in a meaningful way. They used an empty flat belonging to the family of Ado Scaini to meet. It didn't take much time, and the flat turned into a rehearsal and meeting space for a growing scene. The instruments were hired, and all the bands playing there were supposed to pay part of the rent for the musical facilities and for the flat bills. More and more punk interested teens show up at the rehearsal-flat, and as the only way to get in is to be in a band, a lively scene quickly forms, to the point that they become some sort of small society and decide to give themselves the collective name of Great Complotto (great conspiracy). The first product of this scene, let aside some concerts in the area, is a self-funded split by the two

<sup>3</sup> Comencini 1978, my translation.

bands Tampax and Hitler SS. It is the first ever self-funded record in Italy, and it was recorded, appropriately, in an 18 minutes session. The band members searched the yellow pages for a recording studio, and eventually fixed an appointment with a studio located in the north of the region, specialised in folk music (Mazzocut, 2005). The sleeve graphics follow the punk tradition: handwriting and black and white pictures of the two bands, Hitler SS posing with their instruments and Tampax portrayed inside a car. This second photo is disturbingly put upside down on the cover. The inner sleeve is all text, mixing hand- and typewriting, and everything, also the band contacts, are in English. One sheet is made to be cut out, in smaller pieces delimited through a hatch. Every piece includes a short text, like for example "someone has told me I walk like Marlon Brando" or "Who are the Beatless?"(sic). The copy owner is invited to "write on the walls the Hitler SS slogan". The songs on the record are horribly recorded pure '77 raw punk, the titles of the songs: Slave, Naked, Punk is dead no solution (by Hitler SS) and Ufo Dictator and Tampax (in the cunt) (by Tampax) are much more provocative than the lyrics themselves, which are meaningless and based on an approximate knowledge of English. But the Great Complotto was more than a musical scene: their cultural production included a tourist guide with a map of Pordenone, whose name was changed into Naon city, a fanzine, a radio program, and a big adventure in London, where Tampax and Hitler SS organized a "cartoon concert", a pirate concert in Portobello Road in 1979, where the bands played cardboard instruments producing the sound of the instruments with their voices. Obviously Time Out referred to it as the worst concert of the year. The artistic nonsense actions of the Great Complotto, their fervid creativity and a Dada interpretation of the punk philosophy derived from the personal experience of the arts student Zigante (frontman of the band Hitler SS), who had been in contact with the student protests and the free radios in Bologna; probably the London experience of Scaini brought to the idea of the Portobello Cartoon concert. Even if Scaini and Zigante are still credited as the initiators of the Great Complotto, it has not to be forgotten that two persons alone cannot start a scene, and the history of punk has gone through a process of glamorisation that tends to hide the popular origins of punk to underline its artistry instead. The fact that the peripheral Pordenone has been theatre of such a unique and experimental interpretation of punk has in this sense an actual meaning. There was no place for punk concerts in the politicized scene of Bologna. Italian punk bands not singing in Italian were not allowed to play in the first Italian squatted spaces, which were mostly intended for the political discussion. Hitler SS and Tampax, apart from having quite inconvenient names to present to a left politicized and feminist audience, had nothing in common and wanted to have nothing to do with the Italian political songwriters of their time, who they considered boring and inconsistent. The quiet atmosphere of Pordenone allows the building of a cultural lab far from the heavy political context of those days, made of student protests and assaults to opponents from militants of the left as from the right wing. Red Brigades, political kidnappings and bomb attacks were everyday news. In Bologna, where Zigante attended the university, during the student demonstrations in March 1977 a young communist militant had been shot by the police. On top of that, the members of the bands involved in the Great Complotto were experiencing themselves the devastating consequences of a severe earthquake in a rural and poor region marked by a centenarian consuetude to emigration. Nevertheless, no political or social topic entered their lyrics and actions.

### **A year later in Germany: Krautpunk**

The magazine Sounds, a well-respected German magazine exclusively specialised in music, reported about the German punk scene in 1978. In the issue 3 of 1978, a reportage about the punk music mentions contextually social conflicts and fascism, and maps the German punk scenes of the different cities informing about their political and social engagement. While the first reports about the emerging Italian punk scene stress its incomprehensible Dadaism, a mere music German magazine feels in need to distinguish the German scene basing on its political engagement. Hilsberg, the author of the article, also introduced the word *krautpunk*, referring to the traditional German dish made of sour cabbage. For Hecken (in Meinert, Seeliger 2013) it was actually the interpretation of the journalists, recklessly comparing political and economic contexts in Germany and England, which directed (or maybe was steered) to an higher social engagement of the German punk scene.

The first German bands to play punk were Big Balls from Hamburg, who sung in English and could count on a record contract with a major label already in 1976, and Male from Düsseldorf, who followed up some months later. In their interview for Sounds in 1978 Male already showed an explicit social consciousness; even if also in this case, as in the Italian one, the cultural actors were young people who probably still did not have any contact with the job

market, they referred to the similarities of the native Ruhr, with its coal mine crisis<sup>4</sup>, to the general English situation. They choose to sing their lyrics in German, and not in English, because they wanted everybody to understand them, as they talked about freedom of choice and oppressive state. The band was made of young people who already had a musical education, whose musical influences were the Stones and Bowie, they were high school and art students, as they themselves feel the need to point out (Kubanke 2014). In 1978 Male played the Mauerbaufestival at SO36 in Berlin, the first punk festival in Germany, a 2-days concert ironically celebrating the anniversary of the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the official opening party of one of the most renowned German punk venues. Berlin, and in particular the Kreuzberg district, where SO36 seats, has a long tradition as a punk district: because of the special political status of the city of Berlin during the years of the division of Germany, the citizens of Berlin, other than all other Germans, did not attend the mandatory military service. This was a reason enough for many young men to move to Berlin. Kreuzberg in particular was a district close to the wall, with many abandoned buildings, where squatting was tolerated (Drissel 2011). The particular situation of this neighbourhood and the politicisation of the punk meaning made by the media encouraged the German punks to become part of a changing society. The squatting in Berlin Kreuzberg started at the beginning of the 1970s through student movements and left wing activists. Then came the punks. They found not only a place to live but a pre-existing web of social support which provided rehearsal spaces, concert venues and audience. There is a continuity between the German punks and the squatting movements of the early 1970s. The melodic songwriting of the hippies Ton Steine Scherben (who wrote one of the most known hymns to the squatting in 1972) influenced the music and also the awareness of Male and other punk bands. Tommyhaus (squatted in 1973) in Berlin does still exist, and is still a fundamental venue for small punk concerts in the city. Back to Male, after the participation to the first festivals in Berlin and Hamburg, they recorded their first long playing in 1979, funded by a local label. It was a long playing with 14 songs, the titles and the lyrics are in German, thematically they generally express a feeling of oppression and describe a grey world made of imposed rules. Titles like Vaterland, Polizei, Haftbefehl (warrant of arrest) refer to lyrics sometimes ironic and senseless, but the audience does not need to understand every single word of a screamed out and fast punk song, they just need to get the powerful message in the refrain to sing along. The sleeve of the album is completely white on both sides, while a second inside sleeve shows the typical punk composition of black and white pictures and typewriting. The pictures do not portray the band, but mostly policemen, with guns or wearing riot gears, and police cars, a group of politicians and two cut outs taken from a women's magazine. The sleeve contains the lyrics of each song. The number of times in which words related to war, violence and fear are repeated is disturbing. And it is always a pointed finger to legal state violence, a political explicit stance.

### **The development of a broader punk landscape**

If we leaf through the history books, it is easy to see that the macro political and social context in the years 1976-1978 was not so different in Germany and Italy: both countries had to do with the deterioration of student movements, with the economic crisis after the boom of the 1960s, with the Cold War. Geopolitically speaking, the destiny of European countries, at least in the West-bloc, was one and the same. Düsseldorf was not as wealthy as it used to be, but unemployment did not directly affect the Male 17-years-old students. Pordenone was maybe peripheral, but it had just experienced a catastrophic earthquake, and even if the young people of the Great Complotto were directly engaged in the reconstruction, there is no trace of that in their production. The cultural actors who created the Great Complotto had a lot of contextual material to choose from, to create a political interpretation of the punk message. They used instead its irreverence and nonsense potential, exactly because they created contextual connections with creative forces carefully avoiding political involvement, maybe aware of the sterility of the coeval political debate. Probably the failed connection of the Pordenone scene to the political squats induced a refusal of political engagement. Quite the opposite, German punks included in their understating of punk the social and political engagement already from the beginning, following in some aspects the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Still today German punks list as a fundamental listening the hippie band Ton Steine Scherben, and soon after Male came the hamburger band Slime, whose singer's first lyrics was dealing with the topic of political violence and anti-nuclear activism.

<sup>4</sup> Actually the coal crisis in the Ruhr District had begun already in the 1950s, by the end of the 1970s most of the economic rearrangements had already taken place (Eckart 2003).

At the very beginning of the punk era, then, the punk word has been understood in two different ways while entering two slightly different contexts. Both interpretations, the political and the artistic one, were present in the English scene as it was communicated by the media. The local reactions picked up some aspects to connect them with the local context. What is important is which texts have been activated by punk in the two countries, what these two different scenes included in their understanding of punk. External political or economic factors are not included in a semiotic analysis, if not filtered through a discourse, because it is the discourse that determines what is important in the context and what is not. Going back to the first interpretations of punk in Germany and Italy is not intended to deduce some constitutional difference, it was meant only to be an example of the richness of the possible interpretations and to stress the power of the interpreter above that of the message.

The punk message – like any other message – enters a new context only through a process of cultural translation, therefore the definition of a subculture is always local, integrated in pre-existing experiences. To the point that, as punk becomes a way of understanding the world, every single cultural actor will have to include the punk experience in its personal life history, and that is how narratives come into being and how it happens that comforting similar cultural references can be found in punk cultural actors all over the world. This first contact allows a broader exchange that ignores boundaries and national differences. It happened quite quickly in Germany and Italy, mostly through touring bands from both sides, which encouraged the formation of more homogeneous interpretations of punk, through the rearrangement of texts. The Italian hardcore bands of the early 1980s, for example, had intense contacts with the German squatting scenes and German punks, and brought back the idea of singing punk in the mother tongue and of playing in autonomous organized spaces where politics and punk culture could live together: the first cultural centre and punk venue of this kind was then Virus in Milan in 1981. Also punk with lyrics in Italian became quickly established. In a reportage on the Italian punk scene in 1982, the music journalist Gorrani criticized those Italian punk bands still singing in English, on the same note as the German punks had done a couple of years before.

Whatever the beginnings of punk have been, punk is capable of entering the oppositional and chaotic part of every biography; every new generation of punks is a demonstration of the adaptability of this text to different contexts, and of the enduring power of the no future.

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7, 295–310. doi: 10.1177/026327690007002017
- Comenicini, L. (1978) *Punks*. I figli di Odeon. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Jm8uTg0dLw>
- De Mauro, T. (1963). *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*. Bari: Laterza.
- Dickie, J. (1996). Imagined Italies. In Forgacs, D. & Lumley, R. (Eds.), *Italian Cultural Studies. An Introduction* (pp. 19–33). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Drissel, D. (2011) Anarchist Punks resisting gentrification: contertural contestation of space in the new Berlin. *The international Journal of the Humanities*, (8) 10. Champaign: Common Ground.
- Eckart, K. et al. (2003). *Social, economic and cultural aspects in the dynamic changing process of old industrial regions. Ruhr District (Germany), Upper Silesia (Poland), Ostrava Region (Czech Republic)*. Münster: Lit.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic.
- Gorrani, A. (1982) Italia la Punk. *Rockerilla*, 28, 26–27.
- Hilsberg, A. (1978). Krautpunk. Rodenkirchen is burning. *Sounds*, 3, 20–24.
- Kubanke, U. (2014). Punk haste im Herzen. Retrieved from <http://www.laut.de/Die-Krupps/Interviews/Punk-haste-im-Herzen-07-02-2014-1115>
- Laing, D. (1986). The music industry and the 'cultural imperialism' thesis. *Media, Culture and Society*, 8, 331-341. London: Sage.
- Lancioni, T., Marsciani, F. (2007). La pratica come testo. Per una etnosemiotica del mondo quotidiano. In Marrone, G., Dusi, N., Lo Feudo, G. (Eds.), *Narrazione ed esperienza. Intorno a una semiotica della vita quotidiana* (pp. 59–70). Roma: Meltemi.
- Lorusso, A.M. (2008) *Umberto Eco. Temi, problemi e percorsi semiotici*. Roma: Carocci.
- Lotman, J. M. (1985) *La semiosfera: l'asimmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture pensanti*. Padova: Marsilio.
- Mazzocut, M. (2005). *The Great Complotto Pordenone*. Pordenone: Biblioteca Civica.
- Ortoleva, P. (1996). A Geography of the Media since 1945. In Forgacs, D. & Lumley, R. (Eds.), *Italian Cultural Studies. An Introduction* (pp. 185–198). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meinert, P., Seeliger, M. (2013). *Punk in Deutschland: Sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Philopat, M. (2006). *Lumi di punk. La scena italiana raccontata dai protagonisti*. Milano: AgenziaX.
- Rumpf, W. (2008). Lob der Dilettanten. Kanonisierung des Punk in der Zeitschrift Sounds 1977/78. In Helms, D. (ed.) *No Time for Losers* (pp. 113–126). Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Schamoni, R. (2005). *Dorfpunks*. Hamburg: Rororo.