

4.6. From CBGB to Forever 21: the Ramones T-shirt and its representations on the mainstream

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Abstract

This paper analyses the rock band t-shirts as an element that claims a certain identity in contemporary culture and analyses the symbolic transitional phenomenon about this issue. Focusing on the study of t-shirts that display the name, related elements and the logo of punk band The Ramones, due to its strong presence in the popular culture and also because of the symbolic transition phenomenon. The Ramones T-shirt migrates from its original cultural place: beginning in the subcultural scene and then becoming a generic item diluted by the mainstream. To guide this reasoning, it will be used theories about the styles, subcultures and youth culture by Hebdige (1979); about material culture from an anthropological perspective by Miller (2013) and Appadurai (2008) and the notions of social representations from Moscovici (2011) will be presented to help understanding the ways of using the Ramone's T-shirt as a representative element of a fashionable style.

Keywords: subcultures, punk, social representations, deviance, material culture.

1. Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, Tommy

The stage names of the four young boys of the Ramones's original formation are stamping logo of the punk rock band The Ramones. Created by Arturo Vega, a designer who were friends with the band and also their roadie, the logo emphasizes their pride of being North-American by reuniting traditional elements. According to the design creator, the figure is an anti-thesis of the typical chaotic, spontaneous and explosive character of the punk, the logo is, as he says, "authoritarian, militarist, ordered and projects potency"³. Arturo Vega made a redesign by appropriating the United States president's official seal, usually used in presidential correspondence and official documents and transforming it. From the American bald-eagle Vega has ironically designed and distorted the logo so it could express not only the nationalist pride of the band but also criticizes the North-American militarism. In one of the eagle's claws, the bird holds a baseball bat and in the other one it holds an apple tree branch — communicating that the Ramones were as much Americans as a genuine apple pie. The arrows of the original shield are now at the top of the eagle's head. Around the bird, instead of the official inscription, lays the names of the four band members, intercalated and underlined by stars as the Figure 1 shows.

Born in 1974, in New York, formed by four boys from the Queens, in their twenty's years old, the Ramones were a band which main goal was to have the most fun they could have and to play some music somehow different of what they knew at that time⁴. The songs were authorial, composed by fast chords and last less than two minutes long. The live concerts were considered to be impressive in terms of excellence of its fast execution⁵. The clothing the boys wore at the live

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³ Retrieved from <http://smoda.elpais.com/articulos/la-camiseta-de-los-ramones-mas-famosa-que-su-musica/912> — accessed on: 07/23/2016.

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/endofthecentury/legacy.html>.

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.goldminemag.com/article/bookshelf-go-on-the-road-with-the-ramones-tour-manager-monte-melnick>.

presentations became the band's uniform: black leather jackets, old skinny jeans, tiny t-shirts, Keds shoes and sunglasses. Their first concert happened at the Performance Studios⁶ only for a few friends, but soon their presentations started to happen at the iconic CBGB's stage with a growing frequency. The gigs at CBGB's were successful not only because of the Ramones and its first fans, but the fame of the underground music bar came from many others punk rock bands that became famous years later such as The Talking Heads and Blondie. The audience that crowded the small place for concerts were composed also by music critics, producers and other relevant music market personalities that made the ideal scenario so the Ramones could reach their spotlight.



Figure 5: Comparison of the US Government's official seal (left) and the band logo (right).

The Ramones band played for more than twenty years with an enormous amount of internal fights, personal problems, psychological and drug issues, political disagreements and a few band members replacements. Officially extinct in 1996, the Ramones changed the history of world's pop music, influencing even the most recent generations and types of rock bands. They showed to the world that the punk is branded with rebellion — revolting against the conventions, causes and ideologies — but to express this feeling you didn't need to smash guitars nor hotel rooms, make trouble with your fans or the media. The only thing you needed to have that punk position was the freedom feeling and the will for rebellion, both elements that boosted their songs, according to their former drummer and former producer Tommy Ramone⁷. During their twenty-two years on the road, the Ramones made more than two thousand and two hundred all presentations (frequently sold out) all over the world⁸. At the movie documentary "End of the Century"⁹, directed by Jim Fields, Monte Melnick, their ex-manager and responsible for the tours, points that the band were like "the Beatles of Latin America", that's because of the collective hysteria that used to happen whenever they came to the South America. The band have played in Brazil, crowding all the Maracanã Stadium in 1991. In Argentina, their fans sold out the forty-five thousand tickets available for the concert and more: they have followed the band and worshiped as the Ramones have never seen before. At their homeland, where half of the concerts took place, the behavioral and musical impact were also big. The band stands out on rocks history not only for its innovative

⁶ Retrieved from <http://archives.jrn.columbia.edu/2010-2011/panicnarrative.com/2010/10/ramones-play-live-for-the-first-time-in-1974/index.html>.

⁷ Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/tommy-ramone-the-ramones-original-drummer-and-driving-influence-dies-at-62/2014/07/12/1c430c8c-0a04-11e4-8a6a-19355c7e870a_story.html.

⁸ Retrieved from <http://whiplash.net/materias/curiosidades/153806-ramones.html>.

⁹ "End Of The Century — The Story Of The Ramones". Directed by Jim Fields, USA, 2003. Digital version.

factor and its longevity, but also for its good relationships with other bands colleagues — the Ramones were known for being an easy-going band. Their musical simplicity, being strongly compromised to never disappoint their fans, the humble songs and the will of having fun above all the matters made the Ramones an icon of the punk rock and world music history.

2. The rock band T-shirt

Just as every social group, the rock fans have a series of symbolic elements for identification and construction of identity: various behavior styles, haircuts, color palettes, accessories, clothing, etc. Among those indexes of belonging that are part of the material culture, the T-shirt printed with a band or an idol is an important item, almost mandatory. The designs vary: photos of the musicians, album covers, cool designs, logos, and even stylized versions, created by professional designers, that bring elements such as lyrics or cartoons that matches with the band theme. These prints may communicate different things: a musical style they enjoy, fondness for a time or “phase” of a particular band, attest their presence in a remarkable show, etc. There is also its own encoding which is recognized within the subculture, by its own members, working as elements that prove some authenticity (independent manufacturing, legitimate brands scene and clothing traditionally associated with rock styles) or, on the other hand, may denounce its origins such as being manufactured by some luxurious or expansive designer label.

Concentrating good efforts on studying the objects that compose a material culture will help with the understanding the operation of a particular group through a perspective that not only prioritizes matters of kinship, religion, social divisions, etc., but also looks directly at the things. For Miller (2010), the stuff acts passively in exchanges, rituals, homes, and bodies, additionally it performs a powerful agency above the individuals, acting in different levels of influence and straightly on the daily activities; and there’s also the possibility that stuff interacts in a pervasive way with the society members in which both are. Arjun Appadurai (2008) studies the meaning of merchandise that things have along their social life; or how some specific thing, at some point in its social life, acquires the status of goods. The status is not an eternal and enduring state because depends entirely on the cultural and social context in which it is. The commodification of this commodity-thing operates from a certain temporal, cultural and social factors, and thus, according to the market context, the symbolic values of a merchandise that are perceived and attributed by people. As it circulates around certain groups, societies, a certain era and around the world areas, the stuff goes in and out of the merchandise status, shifting the symbolic value attributed to it. For example: the today’s “super in”, “fashionable” stuff might be considered “valuable”, “out”, “rare” or “vintage” in a few years from now. On the same way, a thing, such as a piece of paper with some lyrics and a set list written on it that belongs to some small and new band that plays in NY underground rock bar might suddenly become a highly valuable merchandise.

In this sense, Igor Kopytoff (2008) indicates that the production of goods should not be just an economic activity to produce things, but should also be a cultural and cognitive process — because, beyond the materiality production, things need to be culturally produced and treated according to their historical, cultural, social and political contexts. A commodity, taken from its original context, is likely to suffer decommodification, losing its status of merchandise. But it is also possible that this thing can be recommodified, if reinserted in another context that gives it some sense. From this perspective, we can go for a more detailed analysis of the cultural biography (Kopytoff, 2008) of the thing which this article aims to analyze: band T-shirts, specifically, Ramones’s.

Johan Kugelberg (2006) has published a study about vintage rock band T-shirts, in which he analyses the value contained in the accumulated historical time by the shirt considered to be “authentic” — one used, frayed, torn, with sweat marks and stains from unknown origins. For the author, these marks tell us stories, comparable to war scars. In other cases, the piece is distinguished by having been purchased in a past concert — the T-shirts sold during specific band tours or concerts. According to Kugelberg, the vintage value is in the historicity, that which is not

manufacturable and which adds itself with the use or with the passage of time. These objects end up becoming rare items, not replicable and that arouse the interest of collectors. Some shirts are sold for thousands of dollars because they were bought at a past concert, considered historical, having the date and the name of the tour printed on it.

In order to reconstruct the path that led to this symbolic configuration, Kugelberg tells a brief history of the use of the T-shirt in Western customs. The author draws attention to the fact that until the mid-twentieth century the shirt was considered a "underwear", so it should only be used under the shirts with collar and buttons. After World War II, however, the Great Britain has experienced a decade of rationing of various goods, including items of clothing, in particular button shirts. Around this time, there was in stocks of English shops in large quantities, plenty of T-shirts worn by soldiers under their uniforms. Until then considered indecent for use in public, t-shirts, as they are called not only in English but also in Portuguese, because of its shape like the letter "T", began to be sold as part of main clothing and casual. At the same time, also became popular military pants with side pockets, made of thick fabric, and boots, both marketed not as pieces of military uniform, but as clothing for use in the daily casual life. Still according Kugelberg, these items were appropriated and reinterpreted, again, for the first youth movements that began to popularize between the United States and England: among bohemians Jazz Young Englishmen, or between the American beat generation.

The resignification process of a commodity is only possible because the goods have symbolic and social meanings, i.e. the construction and creation of a (new) meaning depends entirely on the cultural context in which it is inserted, and may vary from one group to another, from one culture to another, from one season to another. This symbolic traffic is facilitated, and sometimes driven by the advertising discourse, the fashion system (Barthes, 2009) and by the media that owns the means of transmission of messages and meanings, allowing the arrival in several layers of consumer society (McCracken, 2003). Analyzing the appropriations process, reappropriations and assigning new meanings, Brown (2007) uses the term "culture circuit" (p. 67) to explain this cycle. That is, the commercialization made by manufacturers leads to commercialization made by consumers and thus resets and forms the sub-cultural goods, so that it is reaffirmed as such. The reappropriation and recommodification of something produced for and by the mainstream is able to strengthen the significance of its subcultural sense.

3. Subcultures and re-signifying processes

In an iconic study about subcultures, Dick Hebdige (1979) does a symbolic analysis of its styles, codes, rituals, etc. For the author, it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through the composition of a style that the subculture reveals its own identity and communicates to society their meanings so far restricted. The band T-shirt is just one of the possible components of a particular subcultural style. According Hebdige, however, this is not a simple mechanical acquisition of symbolic goods: one of the cultural traits of these groups is the symbolic appropriation and reinterpretation of goods — illustrated phenomenon by certain features of the punk movement. An example of this happened when Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols band's singer, cut out a black plastic garbage bag and put it as a shiny leather vest. Another example was the way punks started to use diaper pins not to hold tissues, but as earrings in their ears. An even stronger case for re-signifying act was when they started to wear clothes with Nazi swastika, emblem of the greatest trauma of the twentieth century. The purpose was not to declare membership or sympathy to National Socialist ideology, but to make an impact, blasting a culturally established meaning, trample a taboo and show complete indifference to a symbolic and social convention of the mainstream.

This fact already shows how committed was the movement with an ideal of transgression, as they intended to affirm the non-conformity and refuse everything belonging to the dominant

culture or “mother culture”¹⁰ (Hodkinson, 2007). This dynamic given between subculture and the mainstream is a two-way route for the appropriation and reinterpretation processes can happen in two ways. A subculture can cut a good or a symbol of their original context, but the mother culture can also get hold of typical subcultural elements and present it to its mainstream audience as a massive consumer good. In this second case, there is almost always a neutralization or “domestication” of hostile meanings to the prevailing order.

Besides punk, other subculture that has a strong presence as a global movement is heavy metal. In the “Global Metal”¹¹ film documentary (2008), the researcher and Canadian anthropologist Sam Dunn examines its impact on youth culture development in areas that are outside of the US and European circuit: China, India, Israel, Iran, Brazil, among others. The movie shows that a subculture can form globally, with characteristics and behaviors that vary and adapt to the local system of interdictions and prescriptions without losing some original features. The movie shows that the Metalheads remain united as subcultural movement by a shared interest, and one of the main means of communicating this common belonging is a metal band T-shirt.

In the movie, the anthropologist goes to Rock Desert Festival, the Middle East’s largest rock festival in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, which is the meeting of the main bands of the genre and the reunion thousands of metalheads coming from various territories, which form a subcultural kind of global chain. Even in the most remote areas and living under very strict policies that forbids the use of non-religious or non-traditional robes, metalheads cultivate and maintain their interests through the internet, social networks and through the illegal download of music. For participants of a subculture like this, the band shirt works in any territory as a possibility to communicate and also to identify another participant who shares the same taste in music, the common ideologies and/or same values. According to Brown (2007), the band T-shirt is of great importance in subcultures, it is a well manufactured, distributed commercially, but high symbolic value, because as commercially mediated item, allows for distinction and identification of participants anywhere. The author, in his case study of the metal T-shirt and new approaches to subcultural merchandise, highlights the significant weight that the band T-shirt gained over the 1990’s. When the physical media — LPs, CDs, cassette tapes — became scarce, the shirt becomes the sign which materializes the musical tastes of the individual bearing it. These characteristics of the symbolic object are not fixed, and changes according to the social context (Douglas & Isherwood, 2009). A T-shirt of a band may, in the case of ultra-Orthodox regimes under some of the respondents live, represent a direct affront to the values and current policy.

Placed the possibility of global communication range of a subculture through style, it’s possible to go back and think about the band tees massively produced to reach the largest possible number of fans and ordinary people. Once manufactured on a large scale, the rock’n’roll band T-shirt, once produced only in small quantities for the tiny local merchandising, has neither the rarity or historicity or even the “scars” provided by the real vintage object and its history. This value of the “scars” of the original object, acquired throughout his life and recognized among connoisseurs, is what McCracken (2003) entitled of “patina”. This is a physical property of the material culture that “consists of small signs of age that accumulate on the surface of objects” and “experience a gradual shift away from its original intact condition” (McCracken, 2003, p.54). According to the author, it’s like the marks of time forge a new and unique surface greatly appreciated, a symbol and visual proof status.

¹⁰ Punk, like any subculture, has symbols and objects that belonged originally to the culture in which they were its participants: the “mother culture”. It is necessary to qualify the term “sub” in this context. Subculture here must be understood as a group that has a common set of cultural practices that differs from what the most conventional or mainstream do. The subculture should not be understood as something inferior, but as a social group with practical and specific symbols of their particular niche. Concept used by Hodkinson (2007).

¹¹ “Global Metal”. Directed by: Sam Dunn, Scot McFayden. CAN, 2008. Digital version.

All this trajectory of symbolic goods is observed in the object of analysis of this article. Originally subcultural, the T-shirt of the band Ramones currently among the most sold and famous in the world¹². They left the small shops of punk and underground scene and are now displayed by celebrities of various styles, breaking completely with the social barrier that separated previously punks and fans of the band of those who were not part of authentic punk movement or of the underground scene. The shirt with shield and band name was popularized as a diffuse symbol, currently associated in the fashion world to a “rocker style”¹³ as said by the very language of the fashion industry bloggers. It no longer means the punk itself, but acts as a social representation of a style of clothing inspired by what is meant by “rockers”. The concept of “social representation” is, according to the theoretical Serge Moscovici (2011), a meaning built and understood collectively and shared massively given to a particular idea or object. The Ramones T-shirt can be interpreted as the social representation of what the mass culture or conventional mainstream society and understand as rock or rock culture. In the following section, we will see how the celebrities, who are behavior references in the consumer society, played an important role in the process of popularization of shirts band, and specifically the Ramones T-shirt.

4. From punk to pop

In 2013, the clothing store Renner, one of the biggest player in the Brazilian fast fashion market, launched a collection of clothes that followed the so-called “rocker style”: the pieces had tacks, prints chess, pins, spikes, dark shades, varnished fabrics imitating leather, tears, cuts, etc. The T-shirts, even pajamas¹⁴, had stamps and drawings of skulls, guitars, names and logos of bands such as AC/DC, Rolling Stones, Guns’n’Roses and of course the classic one from the Ramones. The latter was the only band whose picture was in non-stylized print, with the logo of the band printed without notable changes. Later that year, weeks before the Rock in Rio (one of the biggest music festivals in the world, which took place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) was given the highest peak search for the term “Ramones shirt” (it was searched by the Portuguese term *camiseta Ramones*) on Google. When searched on Google Trends¹⁵ platform, a search tool that shows the most searched trends keywords, searches for the Ramones T-shirt surpassed other popular bands T-shirts such as Slayer, AC/DC and Iron Maiden also quite popular among Brazilian rock fans.

Progressively, the T-shirts themed by the New York punk quartet began to appear in fashion blogs or in posts that featured the “rocker style” or tutorials that teach how to use the band’s tee keeping the some fashionable sense. References used to exemplify the look are the celebrities that combine the shirts with other compositional elements of a style well fitted. In addition to Renner, other large networks of fast-fashion around the world have launched their versions of the shirt, such as Forever 21¹⁶, H&M¹⁷, C&A¹⁸ and Primark, which came to create a fact sheet¹⁹, a kind of

¹² The El País Newspaper’s article: *¿Es la camiseta de los Ramones más famosa que su música?* Retrieved from <http://smoda.elpais.com/moda/es-la-camiseta-de-los-ramones-mas-famosa-que-su-musica/>

¹³ According to the blog *Oficina Chic* (Chic Workshop): Retrieved from <http://oficinachic.blogspot.com.br/2013/03/ramones-tee.html>

¹⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.estilorenner.com.br/2013/09/rockn-roll-na-hora-de-dormir/>.

¹⁵ The research covers the period in which the amount of search terms reached the sufficient volume for the measurement. It starts from January 2007 to date. Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/EtUizZ>.

¹⁶ Retrieved from http://www.forever21.com/product/product_oos.aspx?br=f21&category=top&productid=2000136163.

¹⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.hm.com/us/product/34001?article=34001-D>.

¹⁸ Retrieved from <http://www.cea.com.br/pijama-estampado-branco-8097296-branco/p>.

¹⁹ Primark’s official website withdrew the information on their blog about the fact sheet, due to the very high number of criticisms made by the music community and fans to the store. However, the London news portal on the rock world “Louder Than War” released the full text at: <http://louderthanwar.com/primark-issue-a-fact-its-to-accompany-their-range-of-rock-nroll-shirts>.

information for didactic purposes, gathering basic data on band illustrating the shirt so that outsiders to the subculture avoid constraints if asked about wearing it.

According to an interview for the Spanish newspaper *El País*, Arturo Vega, the designer himself and creator of logo, estimated that the sale of the Ramones T-shirts is vastly superior to the albums', since, according to Vega, the shield became a fashionable brand that is even used by people, celebrities or not, that are completely unaware of the existence of the band. So the logo appears to communicate some element of authenticity, irreverence or rebellion often associated with the "rocker style".

The celebrity culture is a known phenomenon and widely studied in contemporary society. Celebrities are often seen as special or spectacular beings that inhabit a dream world. The stars receive special attention, cultivate unusual attitudes, launch own fashions, create behavior trends and seems to be forgiven for their eccentricities and megalomania. The sections of the news portals that are dedicated to publish news about the famous people are one of the most lucrative entertainment channels of journalism²⁰. The news is read by not only fans, but also for the wider public, as they are seen as a form of light and instant pleasure. No wonder that websites that gather gossip and paparazzi photographs, such as TMZ²¹, Perez Hilton²² and Ego²³, the most popular in Brazil on celebrities and gossips, have a large number of unique accesses²⁴, advertisements of various segments and are highly profitable. Such media personalities are present not only in news, reports and advertisements, but also in social networks, in which they show stuff of their everyday life: outfits that quickly become reference, behavior and habits that are shared and copied almost instantly. According to the theory of anthropology consumption Grant McCracken (2005), when a celebrity appears using a particular item, it gives a new meaning to the object that it becomes more or less valued by the society and by their internal subgroups. This phenomenon of reassignment of value of a particular object from the association with a famous person is what McCracken calls "celebrity endorsement". This endorsement can be given from the moment a celebrity uses (or say) some object that is shown on the *paparazzi* photographs, by publishing it for public viewing on their social networks, for advertising, for news or news reports. With this in view, it is possible to assume that the popularization of Ramones T-shirt followed this same pattern. If in the past the celebrity appearances were less frequent and restricted to certain public events, recently the circulation of information has become noticeably more intense and accessible, with a massive display elements of day-to-day: the daily clothes, the intimate habits, the foods, among others.

This phenomenon came with, as was to be expected, a movement of heavy criticism from members of the original subcultural movements, with frequent accusations of inauthenticity, lack of loyalty to the ideology and ignorance of the punk scene. The critical movement also has a vocabulary and categories of accusation, being common the appearance of terms such as "fashion victims" and "posers". These critics also frequently point out "contradictions", i.e. the simultaneous presence of different subcultures elements or even antagonistic — the combination, for example, a punk rock band shirt with accessories or designer items, hair brushed, high heels or the belonging to a social class or to a very pop musical lifestyle (Figure 2).

²⁰ Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/marketshare/2013/05/24/the-30-most-popular-celebrity-gossip-sites-and-why-big-brands-love-them/>.

²¹ Retrieved from <http://tmz.com>.

²² Retrieved from <http://perezhilton.com/>.

²³ Retrieved from <http://ego.globo.com/>.

²⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.trackalytics.com/website/tmz.com/>, <http://www.trackalytics.com/website/perezhilton.com/> and <http://anuncio.globo.com/redeglobo/sites/entretenimento/ego.html>.



Figure 6: From the left to the right: The heir Paris Hilton; the Brazilian pop-funk singer Anitta; Niall Horan, from the boy band One Direction.

The Ramones T-shirt, ressignified, no longer symbolizes the punk movement, behavioral motivations and original policies, and has little to do with the raging cry of the poor suburbs of London or New York, but it seems to be vague sign of a rebellion contained scheduled and framed establishing a stylistic contrast to the clothing brand and good behavior provided by conventional society. It is an item for some style composition that is available on the market. At the same time is accepted by the mainstream and provides a subcultural association that enjoys some prestige in society. Another perspective is that of a resignifying practice. As mentioned above, just as the punk ressignified, attributing new meanings to normal stuff, conventional goods for their own social standards, the fashion ressignifies what was seen as the object of a subculture and absorbs it in their own mass culture standards. Thus outsiders to punk dress shirts Ramones can be perceived negatively by subcultural members, but at the same time are well received by those who are completely out of subcultural context, and partially or completely unaware. For the general public, the pattern of the Ramones is now appreciated as diffuse allusion, already with its entirely neutralized original significance (Figure 2).

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