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The History, And Influence, Of The Punk and Post-punk Movements

The political anxieties of the 80s contributed to the lyricism and subject matter of the Punk and Post-punk movements. Punk and post-punk represented a significant departure from the symbolic and metaphorical poetry presented in the lyrics of the popular music which preceded the respective movements, “Just a minor operation. To force a final ultimatum. Thousand words are spoken loud. Reach the dumb to fool the crowd.” The lyrics of Ian Curtis, frontman of Joy Division, directly reflect the rightward political upheaval from which many young people derived a sense of dread and uncertainty. The rightward political shift present in the eighties, in many ways, reflects the political anxieties of the modern day; politics are increasingly populist, anti-intellectual, and discriminatory in their presentation. The cyclical nature of history has brought us to a moment in which we might examine the history and influence of Punk and Post-punk music while also recognizing the renewed relevance of the genre for our present age.

Punk and Post-Punk stand as important moments in music history, their influence on modern music is typically unspoken, yet clearly visible. The late 70s and 80s, the decades in which these genres emerged, were a time period marked by political strife—not unlike today—in both the United Kingdom and the United States. It is no accident that the emergence of the post-punk movement coincided with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan’s rise to power; the socially conservative ideologies of their administrations providing a great deal for young and progressive voices to react against. Broader anxieties and anger resulting from the political realities of the time fueled much of the music of bands such as Joy Division and Black Flag. Joy Division, for example, incorporated, “...the bleak Ballardian atmosphere of 1970s Manchester into their sound, [making] music poised on the membrane between the local and universal, between the specifics of a period and place and timeless human fears.” (Simon 104) Manchester had suffered the effects of historically significant disinvestment, “By the 1970s, the world’s first industrial city had become one of the first to enter the postindustrial era. The wealth had evaporated, but the desolate, denatured environment persisted.” (Simon 105) Economic disinvestment provided adequate conditions for the eventual conservative reactionary wave which led to the rise of

Margaret Thatcher in 1979. In the case of Black Flag, their frustrations with the political realities of the 70s and 80s translated into outright anger, often aimed specifically at the police. “Black Flag became synonymous with Punk Rock violence. There were many incidents where Flag would try to play and the police would be there to break up the show... Police beat up kids for no other reason than they were at that show.” (Blush 63)

Punk and post-punk—as artistic movements—encapsulated rebellion against the financial, political, and social hegemonies which dominated discourse and popular opinion. Punk and post-punk gave a voice to those who were typically unheard or ignored.

While most scholarship on the history of punk and post-punk music has primarily focused on the social, political, and economic conditions which led to the evolution of the movement, in addition to this analysis I will examine the artistic progression of the punk, and post-punk, movements and their influence on popular music of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I will draw attention to punk’s incorporation of minimalism, as well as its experimentation with new technologies and instrumentation. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that punk, and thereafter post-punk, represent a significant departure from the zeitgeist of traditional rock and roll, demonstrating the movement’s significance as a transitional period between what we consider “classic rock and roll” and modern music generally.

Punk Music and Minimalism

The punk wave represented the beginnings of the incorporation of minimalism into popular music, “With punk, less is more. The Ramones and other punk bands stripped music down to its essence... Rather than abundance, punk celebrated reduction.” (Weidman 2) Before further establishing the parallels between punk and minimalism, a working definition for minimalism is necessary. Keith Potter, in the Grove Music Online dictionary, defines minimalism as, “A term borrowed from the visual arts to describe a style of composition characterized by an

intentionally simplified rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic vocabulary.” Punk was—at its core—a reactionary artistic movement, which rejected the “bloated and self-indulgent” (Weidman 3) popular rock ‘n’ roll music of the seventies, opting instead to strip down and focus on the essential components of the genre. The aesthetic values of minimalism ran parallel to the central tenets of punk music, which also aimed to erode cultural and musical barriers, “enabling composers to explore a pluralism freed from the shackles of earlier certainties.” (Potter)

However, minimalism alone was not the sole focus of the punk movement. Punk rock’s counter-cultural attitudes transferred over to the artistic movements’ view of consumerism, which ran rampant and unregulated under Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980’s. “Especially in its earliest incarnations, punk rock ideology featured a strong stance against the continual buying and consuming of material possessions.” (Weidman 2) Punk bands like Black Flag were defined by their anti-capitalist attitudes as much as their stripped down, minimalist, raw, version of rock ‘n’ roll music. A progressive political approach, that reacted against the prevalent conservative ideologies of the late seventies and eighties, was essential to the legitimacy of punk as an artistic movement.

In addition to punk’s espoused counter-cultural attitudes, a DIY approach to music-making, marketing, and social networking was emphasized and encouraged:

One of the essential components that fueled the punk subculture outside of its pure rebellious stance is the concept of a powerful and all-encompassing do-it-yourself, or DIY, ethic. This took shape in the form of independent record labels, fanzines, venues, promotions, and strong social networking that allowed punk to thrive and spread rapidly beyond its initial origins in New York City and London. (Weidman 1)

Synergizing with the movement’s anti-consumerist attitudes, punk acted as a legitimate meritocracy free from the social and economic hegemony of the time period, which—in the late

seventies and early eighties—dictated the media landscape. Amateurism, or a lack of technical ability, was not shunned within the context of punk rock. Rather than celebrating perfect time, complicated guitar solos, or other displays of technical skill within music-making, punk celebrated emotional authenticity, as the following anecdote illustrates:

In fact, all you really needed to form a punk band was a desire to express your individualism... Jon Resh of Gainesville punk band Spoke remarked, ‘We weren’t good at all... Our sole aim was to express ourselves as clearly and intensely as possible, to bring the simple melodies playing in our heads to life. (Weidman 3)

In essence, simplicity came to define the artistic innovations of the initial punk wave. Punk’s relevance extended far beyond its important innovations as an artform in-and-of itself, encompassing a philosophy, or approach to music-making, which provided space for innovations in the sphere of popular music. The punk movement successfully leveled the proverbial playing field in music, providing essentially anyone with nominal musical skills a platform for free expression. By all accounts, however, the original punk wave was short-lived.

Punk’s simple stance of negation, of being *against*, briefly created unity. But as soon as the question shifted to ‘What are we actually *for*?’ the movement disintegrated and dispersed. Each strand nurtured its own creation myth of what punk meant and pursued its own vision of the way forward. (Reynolds 11)

Punk, as a genre, is sort of amorphous. In actuality, there is no strict definition for “punk” music. Punk’s underlying philosophies, which were characterized by rebellion against the zeitgeist of popular rock music in the 70s, were essential to the movement’s growth and influence. However, such an underlying philosophy is unsustainable. Much of the music from the original punk wave is derivative of itself, ad nauseam. For instance, Black Flag, throughout the entirety of the band’s runtime, did not evolve sonically or thematically. The angry, literal, anti-establishment attitudes and aesthetics expressed in the sonic landscapes of Black Flag’s earliest records are quite the same as the subject matter and aesthetics of their final recorded performances. Punk’s principle

of negation was inevitably applied to itself, an ouroboros of musical, social, cultural, and political philosophy. The inevitable failure of punk—the movement consuming itself—was essential to the development of post-punk aesthetics.

Post-punk Evolution

Post-punk incorporates the central philosophical tenets of punk music, and is best described in sequence as a reaction to the reactionary elements of punk rock music. According to Simon Reynolds, in his analysis of the post-punk movement *Rip It up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978-84*, “By the summer of 1977, punk had become a parody of itself. Many of the movement’s original participants felt that something open-ended and full of possibilities had degenerated into a commercial formula.” (Reynolds 1) Punk rock, in its essence, was doomed to eventually fall into the same trappings of the luxurious, bloated, glam rock of the seventies without iteration. The post-punk movement served as the antidote for the stagnant punk wave, “The postpunk vanguard—bands such as PiL, Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle, Contortions, and Scritti Politti—defined punk as an imperative to constant change.” (Reynolds 1) While the underlying philosophies behind the original punk movement survived, most—if not all—of the original punk wave’s aesthetic choices were refined, or rejected entirely in favor of a new sonic language. Punk music, despite its innovative approach, was beholden to an allegiance with traditionalist rock ‘n’ roll music.

For the postpunk vanguard, punk had failed because it attempted to overthrow rock’s status quo using conventional music (fifties rock ‘n’ roll, garage punk, mod) that actually *predated* dinosaur megabands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. The postpunks set forth with the belief that ‘radical content demands radical form.’” (Reynolds 3)

Post-punk took steps towards innovating the genre through a focus on angularity, borrowing from punk’s emphasis on minimalism while implementing new forms of instrumentation. The guitar, a staple of rock ‘n’ roll music—in much of post-punk—is not front and center. In contrast

to traditionalist punk, and rock ‘n’ roll music, the bass dominated the sonic landscape, “This more compact, scrawny style of guitar playing didn’t fill up every corner of the soundscape, and this allowed the bass to step forward from its usually inconspicuous, supportive role to become the lead instrumental voice, fulfilling a melodic function even as it pushed the groove.”

(Reynolds 3) Post-punk differentiated itself from punk through changes in musical form. The bass, for decades—in much of rock ‘n’ roll and punk music—remained trapped in a supportive role. The underlying ideologies behind post-punk, which in and of themselves were derived from punk, enabled artistic innovation. Through challenging the artistic hegemony of rock ‘n’ roll music, the potential of the bass as a melodic instrument was unleashed into popular culture.

Post-punk lyrics—similarly to the developments in musical form—were experimental and diverged from tradition, “Postpunk was a period of astonishing experimentation with lyrics and singing [...] Other singer-lyricists—Joy Division’s Ian Curtis, Paul Haig of Josef K—were steeped in the shadowy unease and crippling anxiety of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Conrad, and Beckett.” (Reynolds 7) The post-punk vanguard took an approach to storytelling that emphasized the underlying anxieties of the time period. Only forty years after the atrocities of World War II, the West’s shift towards the right created a sense of unease amongst young people. The idealistic politics of the sixties and early seventies stood in stark contrast to the political realities of the late seventies and eighties, “Ushering in a long period of conservative politics that lasted twelve years in the United States and sixteen years in Britain, Thatcher and Reagan represented a massive backlash against both the countercultural sixties and the permissive seventies.”

(Reynolds 8) As a result, the lyrics of much of post-punk are, in essence, incredibly dark, recontextualizing the musical form itself. The bleak lyrical content of lead singer Ian Curtis of Joy Division synergized with the sonic landscapes painted through the application of new

musical technologies, emphasizing a subtle “coldness” to the sound which may go overlooked. Separately, the post-punk vanguard made efforts to distance themselves from the political literalism of the original punk movement, “They saw the plainspoken demagoguery of overtly politicized musicians of the era (such as Crass and Tom Brobinson) as far too literal and unaesthetic... a pointless exercise in ‘preaching to the converted.’” (Reynolds 6) Post-punk, in essence, was an abstraction upon the ideas innovated in punk. Punk’s straightforward, in-your-face, lyrical content and sonic qualities—specifically, simple, heavily stripped down rock ‘n’ roll music—was done away with within the scope of post-punk. Rather, post-punk emphasized non-literalism in both sonic quality and lyrical content; the mixing and mastering on Joy Division’s record *Unknown Pleasures*, for instance, is dreamlike and spacious. These stylistic choices stand in contrast to Black Flag’s *Damaged*, which stands out—even within the realm of punk music—as incredibly in your face, distorted, and really lacking any form of subtlety.

Furthermore, the post-punk movement made efforts to separate itself from stagnant “Americanism”, opting instead to look towards Europe for inspiration.

[P]ostpunk music was far more deeply affected by four Bowie-related albums... his own *Low* and *Heroes*, and Iggy Pop’s *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life*... The Bowie and Iggy albums signaled a shift away from America and rock ‘n’ roll toward Europe... a sound in which synthesizers played as much of a role as guitars.” (Reynolds 5)

Synthesizers opened the floodgates for artistic innovation, providing artists a unique timbral quality for their sonic paintings. In contrast to the original punk wave, post-punk’s “out with the old, in with the new,” approach to music-making led to fractures within what Reynolds defines as the “postpunk vanguard.” Post-punk’s imperative towards innovation fostered an environment where, “Trend competed with trend, and each new development was swiftly followed by a backlash or a swerve.” (Reynolds 9) In fact, the “postpunk vanguard” was so obsessed with

forward progress within the genre, many refused to discuss their musical influences, “The lack of interest in discussing musical influences also created a sense of postpunk as an absolute break with tradition.” (Reynolds 10) As a result, music from the post-punk era, 1978-1984, is defined by an essentially uncategorizable amalgamation of various widely diverse musical ideas. Joy Division’s records sound entirely distinct from the works of Siouxsie and the Banshees. Yet—in comparing the records of the two artists—there are clear underlying, “angular”, common aesthetic choices signature to the post-punk movement. In essence, post-punk emphasized creating space—subtlety in detail—rather than the in-your-face distortion and unfiltered rage expressed in traditional punk music. These artistic principles are clear listening to either Joy Division, Siouxsie and the Banshees, or even some of the Cure’s earlier records. All of these artists borrowed artistic principles from Punk, expressing unpopular or taboo ideas within their music unabashedly without the restrictions of the cultural and social hegemony; simultaneously without ascribing to specific aesthetic choices which were commonplace and encouraged in traditional Punk.

Joy Division represented a departure from the musical conventions of the 60s, “Gaping yet claustrophobic, the space in Joy Division’s music is the opposite of the utopian kind you find in sixties rock... the outward-bound cosmic surge of Pink Floyd and Hendrix.” (Reynolds 112) Joy Division, rather than submerging the listener in a dreamworld disconnected from the realities of the time period, instead focused on the anxieties and “claustrophobic” political realities of the 80s. Ian Curtis—frontman and lead singer of Joy Division—carried the weight of humankind’s capacity for hubris, and seemed to enjoy “contemplating humanity’s bottomless capacity for inhumanity.” (Reynolds 112) The cultural and political shift to the Right during the eighties impacted young people and contributed to the development of reactionary attitudes in post-punk.

In tandem, Joy Division departed from the musical philosophies of their predecessors in their approach to music-making, “Hannett (producer for Joy Division’s first record *Digital*) used the AMS and other digital effects coming onto the market in the late seventies to achieve ‘ambience control’... Hannett talked of creating ‘sonic holograms’ through layering ‘sounds and reverbs.’” (Reynolds 113) Revolutionary in their approach, Joy Division were able to achieve a cold, atmospheric, alien-like sound unprecedented in punk music. Joy Division’s departure from the conventions of punk rock helped to differentiate post-punk as an independent artistic movement, “(Hannett) demanded totally clean and clear ‘sound separation,’ not just for individual instruments but for each separate element of the drum kit... Not only was this tediously protracted, it created a mechanistic, disjointed effect... But this had beneficial results aesthetically, because the disjointedness actually added to the music’s stark, alienated feel.” (Reynolds 113) Hannett’s methods were unconventional for the 80s, yet helped to distinguish Joy Division’s sound. The starkness and alienlike qualities of Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures* and *Closer*, were partially attributable to the inhuman process of recording which Hannett emphasized. Joy Division’s divergence from their predecessors, only further emphasized by the enigmatic—mysterious—nature of the music itself, contributed to the development of their cult-like fanbase, “Joy Division understood the power and attraction of mystique from the start... The band’s refusal to do interviews... only helped to enhance their aura.” (Reynolds 115) Joy Division’s refusal to participate in interviews represented a divergence from practices of bands in the initial Punk wave, which supported and fostered a DIY community separate from corporate media. The essence of Joy Division, however, was channeled through Ian Curtis, lead singer and frontman, “‘Possessed,’ is how the normally dry and sardonic Hannett described Curtis in an interview with Jon Savage... you don’t need to wax mystical to see Curtis as a seerlike figure,

someone whose private pain somehow worked as a prism for the wider culture, refracting the malaise and anguish of Britain in the late seventies.” (Reynolds 115) Curtis, as an individual, inspired the essence of Joy Division and was essential to the development of the band’s aesthetics. Curtis’s expression of his energy, his artistic essence and worldview, ran parallel with the sonic landscapes painted synergistically with the other band members in Joy Division. Curtis channeled his inner turmoil in his live performance style as well, “Strangely, he’d been dancing onstage in a twitchy, convulsive style that resembled an epileptic fit for some time before he suffered his first attack in December 1978.” (Reynolds 115)

New Wave’s Introduction

In modern music, the influence of the post-punk, and punk, movements is apparent. Following punk and post-punk, New Wave, a more accessible version of the genre was introduced to the public consciousness.

Out of the self-destructive punk rock scene of the mid- to late 1970’s, a more pop and refined genre of rock known as New Wave emerged. It became prominent during the early 1980’s, becoming associated both with mainstream groups and with a continuing fringe sensibility. (Jensen)

The influence of the punk and post-punk movements stretched beyond their initial innovations within the scope of their time periods. New Wave borrowed many of the principles of the punk, and post-punk movements, “Both punk and new wave wanted to get back to the focus and drive of early rock, largely in reaction to the excesses of the mid-’70s” (Himes) New Wave packaged the concepts, the broader sense of experimentation signature to the punk and post-punk movements, presented with pop-music sensibilities. New Wave was, in its own right, a rejection of the popular music of the seventies—glam rock—yet was decidedly less counter-cultural.

What distinguished punk from new wave was its attitude toward the Beatles... Punks liked to pretend that they had scorched the earth so they could rebuild rock

‘n’ roll from scratch. New wavers such as... the Police... tried to keep the catchy choruses and twitchy rhythms.” (Himes)

Through the process of commodifying the innovations of the punk and post-punk movements, New Wave was able to further propagate the newer musical ideas initially presented by their predecessors. The influence of New Wave, and thereby punk and post-punk, stretched into the 21st century, “Radiohead’s Thom Yorke cited Costello’s *Blood & Chocolate* as ‘the album that made me change the way I thought about recording and writing music, lyrics too.’” (Himes)

Important to note, New Order—one of the pre-eminent New Wave bands—was born out of the ashes of Joy Division following the unfortunate passing of frontman and lead singer Ian Curtis “New Order were born from abrupt change, forming in the aftermath of Ian Curtis’ 1980 death and the end of Joy Division.” (Patel) In its totality, New Wave was an important development in the history of popular music, ensuring the innovations introduced initially in the punk and post-punk movements did not disappear in the tides of history, demonstrating the importance of punk and post-punk in the history of popular music.

Despite the efforts of musicians to rebel against the cultural undercurrents of the 80s, conservatism played a role in the hindrance of the progressive, experimental, and innovative cultural diaspora which new wave, following punk and post-punk, propagated.

The delicious ‘art fag’ decadence of new wave—or ‘that queer English shit’ as it was sometimes known—was clearly doomed in the militaristic, materialistic, AIDS-terror climate of the mid 1980s. Male vulnerability and sexual ambiguity were now fatal weaknesses. (Simpson)

By going against the grain, new wave attempted to resist the unstoppable force of mid 80s conservatism. Backlash against countercultural ideas surrounding gender and sexuality was inevitable, “[...] it was the eruption of the ‘gay plague’ into the news headlines in the mid-’80s that was to decisively turn the tide on both sides of the Atlantic against the androgynous,

gender-bending culture of New Wave.” (Simpson) Interesting to note, the artists propagating this “gender-bending” and “sexually androgynous” culture through the popular music of the new wave were mostly, themselves, not homosexual. David Bowie certainly was not gay, neither was Robert Smith of The Cure. The artists of new wave, understanding the philosophies of their predecessors in punk and post-punk, were attempting to appropriate the controversial counter-cultural attitudes which brought those movements to prominence. In attempting to integrate themselves into popular culture, while simultaneously expressing counter-cultural political ideology, new wave doomed itself to obsolescence and defunding, “as the panic began to spread, social attitudes towards homosexuality and anything that looked like it began to nose-dive. Being or seeming gay was ‘unclean’ and ‘high risk’.” (Simpson) Political forces in the West, unfortunately, were able to hinder the continued influence of new wave, and thereby the philosophies which birthed the punk and post-punk movements.

Bruce Springsteen’s album about the American dream. Born in the U.S.A., came to the [...] uncontaminated rescue [...] single based New Wave was largely a thing of the past. Good old authentic, straight, reproductive, patriotic, album-based guitar rock was back. (Simpson)

The year 1985 marked the release of Bruce Springsteen’s album *Born in the U.S.A.*, highlighting the power of mainstream political undercurrents in affecting, or in this case afflicting, the direction of popular music. Punk and post-punk were immune to this influence, through their attempts to subvert systems of popular culture and politics. By giving in, attempting to integrate into popular culture, new wave was susceptible to the tides of mainstream political shifts.

Further Developments: Seattle Grunge

Despite the influence of mid eighties conservatism, the influence of the punk and post-punk waves was not erased entirely. The nineties saw the rise of Seattle grunge, which fell under the umbrella of ‘alternative’ music, a term that “originated in the late 1960s to connote the

musical reaction against the formulaic routinization of mainstream popular music” appearing in “a dizzying variety of musical genres including, at first, the punk movement, and later post-punk”. (Bell 36) Fighting back against the mainstream ebb and flow of politics and popular culture was—unsurprisingly—not unique to the late seventies or eighties. Seattle was, however, uniquely positioned in the nineties to bear the responsibility of the curation of counter-cultural music, being a university town and having a “lively and rather recent *mélange* of music clubs and lounges.” (Bell 36) Similarly to the post-punk movement, academia played a role in the propagation of counter-cultural ideology, which infiltrated the Seattle arts scene. The Seattle-based strain of counter-cultural music was described as, ““a form of ‘protopunk’ music—loud, crude, simplistic, and accessible”” (Bell 37) The cyclical nature of history, in essence, guaranteed the return of the innovations of the punk and post-punk movements, further reinforcing their importance as landmarks in popular music history. The Seattle alternative scene brought new life into a musical ideology that had previously been struck down by the panic of the AIDS crisis, and the general conservative unease that defined the political culture of the eighties.

The alternative scene, which was born in Seattle, borrowed the DIY ethic of punk and post-punk.

In the old days [...] local Seattle rock bands did not really expect major record labels to pay heed to their innocent musical creations [...] Instead, it was the outrageous promotional tactics of a well-known independent record label, Sub Pop Records, which focused musical attention on the Seattle groups. (Bell 40)

The punk, and post-punk movements, which preceded the alternative scene in Seattle, were similarly platformed by underground, “independent,” record labels, that were able to successfully subvert the influence of mainstream music labels, which, through their corporate influence, were able to successfully gate-keep and sway the tides of popular music. Without the DIY,

independent, promotion of the Seattle alternative scene, “the rest of the world may never have heard of bands like Nirvana and Soundgarden”. (Bell 40) However, Nirvana, perhaps the pre-eminent band of the alternative grunge scene of nineties Seattle, was skyrocketed—not by the DIY independent labels which birthed the initial scenes—but by mainstream intervention, “...David Geffen domesticated the spirit of rebellion in Nirvana... He did so by ‘giving its possessors their own room in the house of late capitalist consumerism.’” (Bell 42) Unfortunately for Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain, his departure from the tenets of the initial punk, and post-punk, waves was a source of dissonance which created turmoil in his personal life, “...this ultimate irony was not lost on Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain. His untimely suicide was, at least in part, a response to the growing commodification and domestication of his band and what it signified.” (Bell 43)

The internal hypocrisy of the musicians who ascribed to the punk, DIY, rulebook, yet attempted to reach the mainstream, spelled doom for artists who participated. Analyzing the downfall of new wave, the same trend is apparent. Punk, and thereby post-punk, ideologies can only survive in the underground. Completely understandably, many musicians and artists felt the only method by which they could reach the epitomes of success they strived for was through the mainstream. However, reaching these mainstream heights is, and was, not possible without throwing out the rulebook which brought many of these bands their initial successes. How is it possible to rebel against the mainstream, while simultaneously attempting to incorporate into the media sphere encapsulated by the mainstream?

Post-punk and Women

Mainstream remembrances of the 90s grunge scene, based in Seattle, often leave out the historical importance of the influence of women on the artistic movement, “A number of the

female bands associated with grunge, particularly L7, Hole, and Babes in Toyland, became commercially successful... grunge offered a message of gender equality and presented a higher proportion of women participating as creative band members than had been apparent in recent rock history—particularly in comparison with ‘hair metal,’” (Strong 403). Much of preceding punk, post-punk, and even new wave, pushed progressive social values. Yet—especially apparent in punk and post-punk—female representation, when analyzing the respective movements through a historical lens, is surprisingly lacking. The flagship bands of punk, post-punk, and new wave, were essentially all male. Siouxsie and the Banshees, a highly influential female-led post-punk band, stands as a footnote in comparison to the scale of attention bands like The Cure, or Joy Division, received—and still receive—in popular culture as well as academia. Seemingly unique in the history of popular 20th century rock music, female participants in the Seattle grunge scene collectivized under the ‘Riot Grrrl’ moniker, “Riot Grrrl was a women’s collective organized around the music scene, which produced fanzines and recordings, and organized and supported gigs of female musicians, while maintaining sharp social commentary on the position of females in society at large.” (Strong 405) Shockingly, in covering the history of punk, post-punk, and new wave, no comparable subculture exists. Riot Grrrl—in tandem with the rest of the grunge collective—applied the punk, DIY, rulebook to subvert patriarchal social norms, which were unfortunately historically prevalent in the realm of popular music, as well as the rest of society at large. Furthermore, the development of Riot Grrrl was intertwined with the development of the popular grunge movement at large, “There is demonstrably a significant overlap between these genres [...]a shifting of labels of female bands between ‘grunge’ and ‘Riot Grrrl.’” (Strong 405) The distinction between Riot Grrrl, and grunge, as understood within the context of the Seattle music scene in the 90s, is arbitrary in many instances. The distinction

between Riot Grrrl and grunge became more apparent, however, as the respective movements progressed, “In particular, the genre-defining article ‘Rage Against The Man Machine’... identifies the movement as having been in existence for around two years, but only in the United Kingdom for six months or so... there is suddenly a clear demarcation between grunge and Riot Grrrl.” (Strong 407) Intertwined with grunge, and completely unique in the history of rock music, Riot Grrrl was culturally powerful enough on its own to produce its own separate stylistic demarcation. The movement inspired newer generations of female musicians to become involved in an artistic field which was typically reserved, exclusively, for the expression of the masculine. Despite Riot Grrrl’s distinct revelations within the punk and post-punk ethos, their contributions are often overlooked in the realm of popular media, appearing on lists of “The Best Grunge Albums,” but “only if the list is long enough.” (Strong 412) The underlying cultural forces that contributed to a lack of acknowledgement of the importance of Riot Grrrl in the development of grunge—the two movements were at one point completely intertwined—can be attributed to a tendency to segregate female musicians into separate artistic categories as to not undermine the patriarchal structures which typically hold the masculine above the feminine arbitrarily, “Where bands such as Hole, L7, and Babes in Toyland have not been forgotten, they have been conveniently subsumed into the Riot Grrrl movement, despite not being part of it at the the time.” (Strong 413) In essence, similarly to the pitfalls of new wave, the progressive political messaging present in grunge was doomed to fall to the wayside, as the main proponents of the movement abandoned the principles of the punk DIY rulebook, instead becoming subsumed into the mainstream, “If the accomplishments of... the past are constantly forgotten, it makes it easier for each new generation... to congratulate themselves on the progressive nature of society.” (Strong 413)

As the pendulum of politics swung towards the right in the 2000s, Radiohead took up the mantle of 'punk' political resistance through the production of several landmark albums which took aim at cultural and political issues, "At the start of the Iraq War, as American stars struggled to balance patriotism and protest, Radiohead took dead aim at the Bush White House with 2003's *Hail to the Thief*." (Fricke) Understanding the pitfalls of their predecessors—the downfall of New Wave—Radiohead took a staunchly anti-corporate approach to the distribution of their albums, "Radiohead released 2007's *In Rainbows* as a download, at any price consumers wished to pay." (Fricke) Ed O'Brien, guitarist and member of Radiohead, cites Joy Division as a significant inspiration for the song 'Morning Bell,' off of their album *Kid A* released in the year 2000, "'Morning Bell,' on *Kid A*, was our version of Joy Division, with a great undertone of darkness." (Fricke) Radiohead's prominence as the zeitgeist of rock music, heading into the 2000s, speaks volumes of the influence post-punk, and thereby punk, exercised on aspiring musicians' understanding of the philosophical importance of the expression of political, and cultural, resistance in their music. *Kid A*, specifically, adhered to Europeanism, "...rock stars decide to rip it up and start again, trading their guitars for synthesizers they don't quite know how to play." (Sheffield) Radiohead, in their essence, were scholars of the history of punk, post-punk, and new wave, adhering to the principles which made those initial movements influential. Radiohead, distinctly, tackles issues unique to the awareness of the 21st century in their music, "In the world depicted by Radiohead, citizens are given the impression that they have a political role to play, yet this power is all but empty... individuals make no decisions for themselves, and... they are best defined as consumers rather than citizens". (Clément 4) Radiohead's awareness of the detrimental aspects of rampant consumerism in the West, empowered by an increasingly technologically advanced media apparatus, are central,

thematically, to their most critically acclaimed album, *OK Computer*, released in 1997, “Despite the unsettling images conjured up by such political references, the album was hailed as a masterpiece... indicating sales in excess of 2.5 million in the UK alone... The album’s success indicates that subversive music and commercial success are not necessarily incompatible”

(Clément 5) Radiohead demonstrated, through the release of *OK Computer* the timeless influence of the punk, and post-punk movements and their direct, somewhat abrasive, communication style. Radiohead chose, similarly to their predecessors in punk and post-punk, to directly address societal issues which they felt were preeminent at the time. Following the release of *OK Computer*, recording sessions yielded *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, which were released a few months apart in 2000 and 2001 respectively, “...the historical context of the recording sessions prompted the band to incorporate references to political concepts into their music.”

(Clément 5) As noted previously, *Kid A* was directly influenced by post-punk, the stylistic similarities are apparent in subject matter, as well as the tools Radiohead chose to paint their sonic landscapes. Radiohead, following the principles of Punk, incorporated synthetic elements, and pushed them to an extreme. The song “Kid A” possesses the same title as the album, and is distinctly almost completely computerized. Thom Yorke’s voice is digitally processed to such a degree, there is almost nothing human remaining. The entire song is composed with synthesizers, with the exception of the bassline. The listener is left with a despondent, cold, digitized atmosphere, not dissimilar to the stylistic choices of Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures*.

Radiohead’s artistic direction on *Kid A* is, in its essence, a critique of an increasingly accelerationist and technocratic form of consumerism unique to the 21st century. The technologies curating the perceived societal decline Radiohead expresses were not present to the same extent in the late seventies, *Unknown Pleasures* was released in 1979. Following *Kid A*,

with the release of *Hail To The Thief* in 2003, Radiohead continued to participate in cultural and political critique, “The title is, in itself, a reference to a popular slogan used by protestors who contested George W. Bush’s election as President of the United States in 2000... This slogan (a play on words parodying the official Presidential anthem entitled ‘Hail To The Chief’) is also featured in the album’s opening track entitled ‘2+2=5’”. (Clément 7) The entirety of *Hail To The Thief* is characterized by references to human hubris and political corruption. Thom Yorke, the lead singer of Radiohead, stood in staunch opposition to the west’s second invasion of Iraq, featuring a song “Harrowdown Hill” on his solo work *The Eraser*, released in 2006, “Harrowdown Hill is the name of a place in Oxfordshire where the body of David Kelly, a scientist and United Nations inspector in Iraq, was found in 2003. A few days before his death, Kelly had been identified as the source of a leak to the press which had confirmed that United Nations’ inspectors in Iraq had failed to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction.” (Clément 7) Radiohead, through staunch adherence to the principles of Punk, demonstrates the power of political advocacy through the curation of music which attempts to address controversial subject matter directly. Although many may be aware of the extent of corruption which influenced the United States’ second invasion of Iraq, less may be aware of the details, or of the significance of David Kelly’s death. Music provides a unique medium, where artists are empowered to convey controversial philosophies and interpretation of historical events, which may be shunned in day-to-day conversation.

Conclusion

Punk, and post-punk, represent important landmarks in the history of the progression of music in the 20th century through their important philosophical revelations which enabled musicians to express uncomfortable feelings and realities. The revolutionary ideas which the

vanguard of punk and post-punk promoted were so influential, their reverberations are felt into the 21st century, infiltrating the mainstream through New Wave, Grunge, and eventually Radiohead. Through analysis of 20th, and early 21st century music, we are able to discern cyclical patterns in the course of politics. Often, political shifts to the right are followed by a shift to the left. Rightward political shifts contributed to disillusionment which, coincidentally, inspired the initial punk movement, post-punk, and aspects of new wave. Lingering effects of cultural and social conservatism transitioning into the nineties, gender inequalities for example, were the basis of the anger which fueled the Seattle grunge scene. The early 2000s fell victim to another shift to the right with the controversial election of George W. Bush, inspiring several of the works of Radiohead, as well as Thom Yorke through his solo work.

Historical analogues provide me comfort; the eighties—much like today—were a time period marked by political upheaval. I naturally gravitated towards punk, and post-punk music, as a method of catharsis, derived from the political anxieties of the present. By better understanding the music of post-punk bands like Joy Division as “period pieces”, not only are we able to discern their importance as landmarks in the progression of modern music, we are able to generate an understanding of the experiences of young people dealing with social and political circumstances dishearteningly similar to today. In grasping the cyclical nature of history, I am able to preserve hope, in the observation of the perseverance of generations preceding my own.

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