Will Barlow

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Narrating Punk

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This is a Title: The Cycle of Punk Cultures Rhetorical Strategies and Representation

Justin Pearson’s punk memoir *The Graveyard of the Arousal Industry* paints a significant picture of a punk’s representation of punk. Because of his relative influence in the “hardcore underground music scene”, Pearson’s memoir certainly asserts itself into the domain of punk representations. The memoir is a manifestation of Pearson’s punk philosophy. Naturally, it is an essential primary work for understanding some rhetorical strategies that are employed by punk sub-culture in its representation. From attention to punk aesthetics, and its “scene” to punk ideals and philosophies, Pearson’s memoir adheres a plethora of rhetorical strategies to his representation of punk. Some are obvious and some are subtle, but all of which are equivocally rhetoric designed to manifest punk representations. Whether Pearson or punks in general lean on these rhetorical strategies consciously or not is besides the point. What matters is focusing on the strategies that are present and how they affect punk representation in the real world.

The leader of The Locust or simply Locust’s memoir provides an evolutionary story of his own journey in the realm of punk culture. What surfaces is a philosophy that denotes punk’s signature rhetorical style. Some his last remarks in the memoir, “I realize that things will go on. And I will be just fine”, evoke a staple in punk rhetoric: the notion of being “just fine” (Pearson 186). This is echoed in earlier remarks of the memoir, where Pearson is reflecting on his childhood trauma in contrast to that of his friends, “That was one of the first times I realized that everyone has shitty things in their lives, and you just have to accept things for how they are and make the best of what you have” (Pearson 8). Connecting the two statements demonstrates that being “just fine” is a method of “making the best of what you have”. This is the core of punk rhetoric; it allures to those who are seeking to cope with trauma, to be “just fine”.

Punk achieves its representation as a coping mechanism through its inherent rhetorical strategies. These strategies are manifest via punk culture’s arguable obsessions with aesthetics, subversion, irony, satire, and hyperbole. Pearson’s memoir naturally hits on all of these rhetorical strategies. Aesthetic control or lack thereof is emphasised by punk culture’s subversive style. In essence, it doesn’t matter what you do, but it better *look* or *feel* subversive. In many ways punk culture’s representation both looks *and* feels subversive.

Pearson’s memoir is ripe with examples of punk culture’s rhetorical strategies of aestheticism and subversion that are realised via both visual and emotional means. For instance, when describing his earlier childhood and pre teen era, Pearson emphasises subversive activities: “…we screwed up the school’s event as well as we could…”, and “…sitting far back in the rafters and making fun of some people in the audience, the bands, and how the music really sucked” for instance (Pearson 15, 31).

The visual nature of these rhetorical strategies in punk’s representation is highlighted by the visual cues Pearson pays attention to: “The place reeked of typical late-seventies aesthetic, and left me with the worst taste in my mouth”, “My mom was always criticizing my attire and saying that I needed to cut my hair”, and “I became known as ‘Crazy Spike’ because of my spiked hair” as some examples (Pearson 20, 23, 26). Clearly, subversion and aestheticism are closely related with punk culture’s representation. When Pearson reflects on seeing the Cramps, the synthesis of these rhetorical strategies in punk representation is exposed:

I went to see the Cramps at the California Theatre… this was the band I had cut my teeth on. The show happened just before they started to get crappy and lose their edge… The band was awesome. They were nasty and vulgar, and I was drawn to their antics… [they] were subversive, and drew from cultural aspects that any kid left of the dial would dig (Pearson 30)

The Cramps’ “antics” and “left of the dial” inspiration are the manifestations of punk aestheticism and subversion. This example furthers the notion that in many ways punk representation leans on both looking and feeling a certain way, that is its subversive aesthetic.

The subversive aesthetic of punk culture is heavily rooted in irony, which is ever present in its many different representations. Some examples from Pearson are realized in the absurdism achieved by his band Struggle:

[Struggle] started hanging out with people form the Revolutionary Communist Party… we had a newfound interest in politics…we still managed to associate with serious communist activists and to network with some of the most absurd people I have ever encountered… Struggle was always at protests, putting up graffiti, pulling pranks inspired by Dada art, and at the same time trying to play music and do something progressive (Pearson 39-40).

The ironic nature of these examples is not subtle, especially when Pearson’s activities are compared to mainstream culture. In fact, these activities are near antitheses of mainstream culture. Punk irony is arguably one of the staples in Pearson’s representation of punk culture, especially in one of his more evolved bands, The Crimson Curse: “There was a mix of metal and punk and a shitload of irony in what our band was doing” (Pearson 93). What kind of irony? This kind:

Here, alongside the followers of Unbroken with their pseudo-greaser look and typical hardcore camouflage cargo-shorts and black t-shirts, you had The Crimson Curse in cowboy hats, glitter half-shirts, goggles, tight pants, high-heel boots, and makeup…The sleaze and the fact that we just didn’t give a shit about what was acceptable was perfect…As I stage-dived time and time again with next to no clothing on, I bummed out many of the hetero jock-type hardcore dudes (Pearson 104-105)

Ironic friction certainly asserts itself as a theme in Pearson’s punk memoir. Interestingly, punk irony is also realized in aesthetic subversion. This synthesis finds its place in musical representation: “…we would hit them hard, song after song, in thirty-second bursts of noise, displaying an aesthetic that was just odd enough to have them scratching their heads as they left shows” (Pearson 67-68).

Pearson’s goal of getting the audience to scratch their heads while they leave asserts another aspect of punk rhetoric, satire. The above snippet from Pearson reflects how punk’s subversive aesthetic—impregnated by irony—bears a satirical child. By seeking to confuse his audience, Pearson divulges that there is meaning in that confusion. He *wants* the audience to be confused, the “just odd enough” aesthetic display is a satirical message. Pearson’s body of work is dripping with satire (Holy Molar’s *Dentist the Menace* anyone?). Even his more serious phase with Struggle and their political agenda is ripe with satirical notes: “Our set was a mess, and our odd sound and even odder mix of instruments often caught people off-guard” (Pearson 43). Again, the goal of Pearson’s satire is to be absurd and confuse his audience.

These are the core aspects of punk rhetoric as represented by Pearson’s memoir. The allure of coping that punk rhetoric broadcasts is realized with its satirical core. It presents a refuge to embrace an ironic, subversive aesthetic that appeals to anyone who does not identify with mainstream culture. From Pearson alone it is obvious that representations of punk are undeniably fluid while adhering to a core index of rhetorical strategies.

Sam MacPheeters’ *Mutations* maintains the examples of punk rhetoric found in Pearson’s memoir. Drawing on these two punk resources forms a collaborative image of how punk represents itself in the world. Though the two works discuss punk culture at two opposite ends of the country (west coast versus east coast), they divulge remarkably similar rhetorical strategies for representing punk.

So, what is punk? I will not answer this question, but MacPheeters’ approach to it presents some insight into the rhetorical strategies that are conveyed in punk representations:

Punk is… “Depending on who and where you are, “punk” can be a lifestyle; cosplay; design element; powerful ideal; lazy cliché; magical realism; badge of authenticity; pantomime social movement; withering mockery; ironclad conviction; lucrative career; vow of slovenly poverty; incubator of brilliance and/or mediocrity; rite of passage; riot of violence; ferocious hokeyness; suicide hotline; sales category; community glue; license to wallow; mass catharsis; a refuge for smart people and/or playground for dumb people; boisterous escapism; marketable nostalgia; belligerent incompetence; self-satire (intentional or otherwise); assault on falseness; or adult-sized, psychic diapers that can be worn until death” (13).

My earlier estimations of punk’s rhetorical strategies appear to hold up to MacPheeters’ long winded, but appropriately concise “definition” of punk. Aestheticism, subversion, irony, and satire, all tools of the would-be punk in anyone of these aspects of MacPheeters’ conceptualization of punk though he does bring some new tools to the table.

Given the rhetorical strategies exemplified by Pearson and MacPheeters’ works, it is worth discussing the differences and continuities between the two. Bearing in mind that while these two men do not speak for the entirety of the punk community, their work provides a curated window into the sub-culture. Claims to authenticity are, for all intents and purposes, a rhetorical fallacy. Punk rhetoric deals with claims to authenticity in a peculiar manner. Representations of punk culture claim authenticity, but authenticity that is riddled with aestheticism, subversion, irony, and satire. Is it even “authentic”? One of the major representations of punk culture is exhibited via musical medium. MacPheeters hits on the musical goal of punk culture, saying:

Punk tried to crack the code of the music industry; hardcore never had that option. It would have been absurd for any major label to sign—or any radio station to play—loud, violent bands made up of loud, mentally ill people who gleefully “sang” about every possible taboo (15)

Bearing in mind that hardcore and punk as genres are distinct, the rhetorical strategies of hardcore and punk artists are the same. They are simply different representations. Authenticity is all about representation. How one represents something matters, because different representations resonate with different people.

Pearson’s memoir follows his evolution as a punk artist. As such, in the progress of evolving, Pearson experienced and choreographed many different representations of punk culture. While the representations certainly changed and will likely continue to change, the rhetoric inherent in the many different representations remains the same. Pearson even maintains an air of “authenticity” that is naturally subject to satirical representation. This is best realized in The Crimson Curse’s aforementioned contrastive appearance at an Unbroken hardcore show and Locust’s antics at the Yeah Yeah Yeahs concert in the UK:

…we shocked the audience as soon as we took the stage by our appearance alone…People can think what they want, but I’d like to see them try to replicate what we do…These were sold out shows in venues that held two- or three-thousand people and no one liked us, which was brilliant…The event was genius. It reeked of punk ethics and puke that probably had not been seen in the UK since the Sex Pistols (Pearson 142-144)

Again, here Pearson is going for confusing satire. But this appears to be the source of punk authenticity as he later declares that the event “reeked of punk ethics that probably had not been seen in the UK since the Sex Pistols” who are arguably the original punks. What can be more authentic than that? Of course, this is not an outright claim to authenticity so perhaps it is not a fallacy. MacPheeters further emphasises that punk authenticity is manifest in its rhetoric, not its claims. The following snippet from *Mutations* portrays emotional hollowness upon viewing a hardcore show on TV:

The headlining band played loud, aggressive music. At some point during their set, I shifted my gaze from stage to crowd. No one moved. No one did anything. I found myself surrounded by blank faces. Now it was the audience who were bluffing, and bluffing badly. I found myself wondering if music fans had always been so disengaged, if my own emotional investment in bands had blinded me to this mass disinterest. It was spooky… I can remember those earlier emotions, the way live music was like fresh Squeezed juice to the canned concentrate of a recording. But I can no longer feel them (MacPheeters 20)

Part of punk’s rhetorical strategy index is that there is more power in the first idea than the first idea a second time. This is arguably true for most art forms, but it is especially poignant for punk culture’s representations. As MacPheeter’s puts it, “Audiences were (and are) part of punk’s sales pitch” (MacPheeters 20).

That “sales pitch” extends beyond punk’s musical representation. MacPheeters’ words on *Loud 3D*, the eighties photographic documentation of the hardcore punk scene exhibit the rhetorical purpose of punk aesthetics: “It is martial yet joyous, and oddly sensual. It looks like sexy propaganda. This book is full of good-looking young men striking poses for each other’s enjoyment (MacPheeters 22). Interestingly, these words evoke Pearson’s sentiments on the “death of hardcore”:

We added goggles to the vests…Our new uninformed image seemed to gel with the new lineup, so we ran with it, soon moving on to mesh vests with reflective strips and the Locust logo on the back. As our uniform evolved, hot pants helped us draw attention to the closeted homoeroticism of hardcore…Anyhow hardcore as we knew it was dead and we could’ve cared less” (Pearson 118).

“Closeted homoeroticism” seems to be pretty far from authentic. This is where the evolutionary progressive aspect of punk culture comes into play. The adherence of punk culture to the rhetoric of progress allows it to have a retrospective gaze on its past that circumnavigates instances where authenticity is challenged. Where MacPheeters highlights the “closeted homoeroticism” of eighties hardcore as an aesthetic selling point, Pearson progresses “closeted homoeroticism” into authentic homoeroticism with a refined aesthetic. MacPheeters’ notes this evolutionary aspect of punk culture, saying:

The tangible lures of eighties hardcore (photography, fashions) gave way to fuzzier bait, things like “community” and “communication” and “release,” all concepts peripheral to the theatrical art at the heart of the music (23)

Those “fuzzier bait things” are realized in Pearson’s work. Moreover, punk rhetoric comes hand in hand with performance.

The rhetorical strategies of punk representation hereto established (aestheticism, subversion, irony, and satire) are embedded in the ritual of performance. To further understand the idea of representation in punk culture and how rhetorical strategies are affiliated with it, it is important to understand the nature of punk culture in relation to its representations. Drawing on the concepts discussed by MacPheeters and Pearson, Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture* presents further insights into punk rhetorical strategies.

As previously discussed, the crux of punk’s rhetorical strategies is realized in its medium. Hebdige’s work furthers the understanding of this phenomena. He notes that:

The advent of the mass media, changes in the constitution of the family, in the organization of school and work, shifts in the relative work and leisure, all served to fragment and polarize the working-class community, producing a series of marginal discourses within the broad confines of class experience (Hebdige 74).

These are the social factors that catalyze punk culture. It is born out of the advent of mass media in addition to shifts in social order. Its rhetoric echoes this birth, seeking to enhance a marginalized experience in response to an overarching culture represented everywhere with mass media. Hebdige’s later remarks enforce this:

Spectacular subcultures express what is by definition an imaginary set of relations (see pp. 77–8). The raw material out of which they are constructed is both real and ideological… Each subcultural ‘instance’ represents a ‘solution’ to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions (Hebdige 81)

Punk culture the “subcultural instance” employs its rhetorical strategies that become manifest in its “solutions” or representations. Punk culture’s representations are almost always performative because of the combination of aestheticism, subversion, irony, and satire. Thus, medium of performance is an important component for punk culture’s representation and efficacy of its rhetorical strategies. Hebdige’s notes on the performance mediums of media are profound in this paradigm:

It is primarily through the press, television, film, etc. that experience is organized, interpreted, and made to cohere in contradiction as it were. It should hardly surprise us then, to discover that much of what finds itself encoded in sub culture has already been subjected to a certain amount of prior handling by the media (Hebdige 85)

Essentially, no matter how subversive punk rhetoric gets, it will always be tainted by some aspect of mainstream culture. It depends on the performative act, no matter how subversive its rhetoric is, it will always be built on some aspect of mainstream culture. That is what is so important about punk’s rhetorical strategies; they make it possible to have many different representations that denote the same ideals.

Recalling the window analogy from earlier, in addition to the ideas presented by Hebdige, punk rhetoric and its representations are always viewed with a filter of some sort. Whether its Justin Pearson picking fights with audiences that he thinks deserve it, or a scholar reading his memoir. Both are observing punk rhetoric through different panes of glass. Those windows into punk culture will always be different for different people. This is why we have different representations of punk. Though the representations are different in their own ways, they all signify the punk rhetorical strategies of aestheticism, subversion, irony, and satire. These strategies along with punk’s ideal of progress provides that the sub-culture will continually reinvent itself.

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