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ENGL 493

Professor Grinnell

Narrating Punk

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punk title

The goal of this assignment is not to determine the essence of punk, but instead to understand **how the essence of punk always depends on a set of rhetorical strategies and ways of representing it**. A mainstream view of punk deviancy or a punk perspective on DIY politics (or gender or capital or…) can be different ways of representing the same activities.

Compose an approximately 3000-word essay that examines the rhetorical strategies associated with representing punk.

Rhetorical strategies of punk representation

* aesthetics
* subversion
* irony
* satire
* hyperbole

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. From Pearson alone it is obvious that representations of punk are undeniably fluid while adhering to a core code of ethics. Pearson moreover provides examples of the index of punk’s representative rhetoric.

>>>Pearson

* “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).
* …trashy, drunk, and way over the top. She even made a brief cameo on Holy Molar’s *Dentist the Menace* DVD by introducing the band in a drunken slurred speech I still can’t fully understand” (Pearson 9).
* “It was the eighties and I was living in the place that was known for creating dirthead culture—you know, your run of the mill heavy metal garbage—but that time, there were all sorts of musical crossovers happening” (Pearson 11).
* “Sid Vicious was the poster boy for my dad’s idea of punk. He was certain that I’d become a junkie if I listened to that kind of music. But with an alcoholic wife-beater father who didn’t give a shit about his son, I was bound to avoid the cliched, nihilist aspects of punk culture” (Pearson 12).
* “All of the times when my family life was a complete mess, it was actually helping to make me the person I’d eventually become” (Pearson 13).
* “…we screwed up the school’s event as well as we could…” (Pearson 15).
* “Somehow their antics tapered down to the logical conclusion for morons: I was a ‘fag’… When I got home rather than fuck my friends like I’d been told, I went straight to my room… by myself” (Pearson 18-19).
* “The place reeked of typical late-seventies aesthetic, and left me with the worst taste in my mouth” (Pearson 20).
* “My mom was always criticizing my attire and saying that I needed to cut my hair” (Pearson 23).
* “I became known as ‘Crazy Spike’ because of my spiked hair” (Pearson 26).
* “…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] shot the shit with me as if I was more than just a little kid. I was a punk, and even though Poison Ivy and Candy Del Mar thought I was ‘adorable’, I stood there is the green room with legends and was on their level. We talked about music, San Diego bands, and B-movie horror films, and meeting them actually helped inspire my ‘musical career’. That night would stick with me for the rest of my life, and comes back to me so many times when I’m on tour and meeting younger people who are into what I do or have done” (Pearson 31).
* “…sitting far back in the rafters and making fun of some people in the audience, the bands, and how the music really sucked” (Pearson 31).
* “We ran into a quintessential punk: mohawk, leather jacket, and a bad attitude… He managed to hook me up with an under-the-table job selling cassettes and bootleg rock t-shirts… Around the same time [we] started a band… I was not talented and had no idea how to play or write, but I was knowledgeable about all kinds of music, and I had an ear for it” (Pearson 32-33).
* “[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” (Pearson 39).
* “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 40).
* “I realized that politics were important to me and I was finally able to be opinionated and heard through my own music…Everyone in this community I had stumbled upon had music as a common bond” (Pearson 41).
* “Our set was a mess, and our odd sound and even odder mix of instruments often caught people off-guard” (Pearson 43).
* “The Che was a staple for San Diego music. It was run as a collective, politically and ethically right up my alley… The co-op housing rules were politically based on the ideals of anarchism and direct democracy. Uber-feminists, hippies, punks, nerds, and all sorts of social outcasts were involved. The tenants living there all had vegetarian and vegan diets, so we had communal meals every night” (Pearson 46).
* “I took it upon myself to supplement [my] meager education… I was reading about social revolution, political organizations, artists, and just about anything else that seemed progressive to me…I had arguments in history class over race and gender politics” (Pearson 47).
* “…a lot of the people in high school who gave me trouble ended up at shows that my bands played, which was my first insight into the bastardization of punk culture: some ex-jocks who got hip to whatever was cool via commercially marketed mainstream social fads, or what have you. Same dickheads, different uniform” (Pearson 48).
* “I would just write a few lines of some random emotional garbage and repeat it over and over, whole trying to exert as much energy as I could with my voice” (Pearson 53).
* “I was pretty fed up with other people ruining our ideas” (Pearson 58).
* “In France, we were chased and pelted with rocks through housing projects by children who demanded cigarettes even though we didn’t smoke. To those kids, we looked like smokers and, well, they wanted cigarettes” (Pearson 59).
* “I just hate seeing bands now that are like how Swing Kids were then: unoriginal, musically dated, and uncertain about themselves. But the uncertainty played a very important part in my life” (Pearson 60).
* “After one asshole sucker punched three of the four members of Locust, I pulled out some dynamite and pretended to light a stick. As a safety precaution, the lighter I had was strategically out of fluid was strategically out of fluid. It didn’t faze the dude giving out sucker punches, but I think I scared the crap out of all these douchebags from Phoenix who were also starting shit with us. That story traveled a bit, making our crew seem a bit more off than we actually were” (Pearson 65).
* “…we were about to embark on something that none of us had done, drawing from different points of the musical spectrum, and trying to take absurdity to a new level… We were doing something different for the time and by unintentionally creating controversy and getting a slew of negative press—and because of Sonny’s connections in the music world—we went from being one in a sea of bands doing this as a hobby, to becoming legitimate in the world of strange underground music” (Pearson 66-67).
* “…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).
* “…even if we sucked, I guess it didn’t matter. There was nothing to compare it to, really” (Pearson 68).
* “The Curse did very little as a band and was more of a joke than anything else—at least to me” (Pearson 69).
* “I’d be bummed if I wrote background music for marketing an enormous SUV” (Pearson 70).
* “The venue was actually a library and the sound sucked pretty bad, but it was always a good time” (Pearson 70).
* “My first response to the lawyers was to tell them to fuck off” (Pearson 71).
* “We had shows at the house that attracted assholes, and some of us would attract assholes all by ourselves” (Pearson 72).
* “At the house we’d had years of blowing holes in the street by lighting off half-sticks of dynamite, finding dirty needles in the carpet after parties, kung fu fights on the lawn between drunks and actual black belts, hair-product photoshoots thanks to Joico, who paid our rent for a month, guacamole-themed parties where you had to bring avocados to get in, and we even tried to cut open a stolen parking meter Eric knocked out of the ground with the borrowed Revelation Records van while on tour with Swing Kids. We gave Golden Hill something to live up to and put that shit on the map” (Pearson 74).
* “They were a group of young punks with the typical creeper cheetah-print, spiky-hair, bondage-pants-wearing shtick…I looked like a bum those days and they seemed to be pretty into their own fashion…I suppose that fashion is all a matter of opinion… I thought their crew was silly looking and had bad taste in music, and they all thought equally critical things about me” (Pearson 80-81).
* “Amy didn’t have that typical punk image; she was this androgynous girl who managed to hang out with just about everyone” (Pearson 81).
* “None of the bands looked at what they were doing as a method of creating income or, more seriously, as a career. You just did what you did, lost your ass financially, and benefited in ways that had nothing to do with monetary success” (Pearson 82).
* “I had played in bands with both of these guys, which is sort of like dating them (without the sex)” (Pearson 87).
* “I almost got arrested, but [Eric] convinced security that some kids who were part of a church group were obviously the culprits. More importantly, Eric taught me about the unspoken connection that people can have when playing music…we found emotion in what we created together” (Pearson 91).
* “There was a mix of metal and punk and a shitload of irony in what our band was doing” (Pearson 93).
* “I have friends who believe that The Locust makes it hard for fat kids to succeed in hardcore” (Pearson 94).
* “The Locust got sick of the heckling and violence from the audience that seemed to follow the band” (Pearson 98).
* “They had that burnout, retro-rock shtick down to a tee” (Pearson 98).
* “The tour had become absurd right away…” (Pearson 101).
* “The four of us were on the same page musically and aesthetically” (Pearson 102).
* “The Curse’s ethics were exactly what Eric subscribed to: being a punk, taking the piss out of people, and pushing buttons” (Pearson 104).
* “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).
* “The producers had asked us to look ‘punk’ and ‘crazy’…I threw together the typical punk attire. I wore a Locust shirt to plug my band…I was going to get that image out to millions of people and mock a popular aspect of American culture… it was absurd. I was on national TV, acting like a complete asshole, making out with a dude, and nobody seemed to think negatively of me. My grandmother and homophobic uncle watched it and didn’t question my sexuality or morals at all. They loved the fact that I was on television, and that was that” (Pearson 107, 114).
* “We added goggles to the vests and the look fit in well on Japanese soil. 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).
* “There was a police helicopter in the air and police dogs on the ground. People were demanding money back for our merchandise they’d bought. Some even threw the stuff back at us. Everyone was yelling at us, but we weren’t taking their shit” (Pearson 120).
* “If you really wanted to be a badass, you should slash all of the tires. But I suppose a badass would have just kicked out asses in person” (Pearson 121).
* “…we tried to reinvent ourselves over and over’ (Pearson 124).
* “…it seemed as if my musical endeavors were getting more and more absurd” (Pearson 130).
* “This girl had no problem with me kicking her head to the rhythm of our last song, and she was not about to stop the ‘supportive’ hostility toward a band that she actually liked” (Pearson 134).
* “I was a huge Chain fan…I was not concerned with the band’s culture or genre; I was drawn to them by the songs they wrote and the sheer intensity they possessed live” (Pearson 137).
* “I wanted to move forward from what had already been done musically…I was not a fan of your typical run-of-the-mill hardcore anymore…” (Pearson 138).
* “Owning a business that doesn’t make much money, playing obscure music outside of mainstream music culture, and working my ass off made me realize I could use a lesson in patience…playing music outside of mainstream culture sure burns through a lot of patience over time” (Pearson 141).
* “…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).
* “…a guy who can get so wasted, take a shit on a Texas road in front of a crummy venue, then throw his cell phone down the street, and never go look for it is pretty solid in my book” (Pearson 148).
* “I’m a product of the world that I live in” (Pearson 185).

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.

>>>MacPheeters

>>>Salad Days

* evolutionary representation of punk
* absurdism & bold designs
* DIY ethic
* meaningful contributions to creative body of work
* unapologetically exclusive
* wealthy escapism
* punk genres
* revolutionary summer and punk movement in early 1990s -> punk in the mainstream (Nirvana)

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.

>>>Pearson & MacPheeters Synthesis

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 sub-cultures in general. Further, examining the basic rhetoric that supports general sub-cultures provides a starting point with which punk rhetoric and its representations can be honed for discussion.

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.

>>>Synthesis + Hebdige

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).

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).

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).

Works Cited

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