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Shot by both sides: Punk Attitude and Existentialism

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Abstract

The ‘punk attitude’ that is basic to punk music and culture is hard to define. I argue that it can be more fully appreciated through a comparison with features of, and motivations behind, existentialist philosophy and literature: anti-institutionalism, nihilism, creative outputs and processes that are constantly challenging, and authentic belonging.

Key words: punk, post-punk, authenticity, nihilism, creation, challenging, authentic belonging

1. Introduction

Punk as a genre, style, movement or attitude has retained significant salience in western culture since its beginnings in the mid-1970s. There is a parallel with existentialism, a niche philosophy that consistently finds an audience more than seventy years after Sartre’s *Existentialism and Humanism* introduced it to a wider public. Both movements can have an immediate appeal, and I want to claim that part of this appeal is grounded in motivations and attitudes that they share. More precisely, both punk and existentialism involve responses to distinctive features of the human condition, and both connect with (often) inchoate insights and questions that are quite commonly experienced. These are perhaps typical of adolescence, but by no means exclusively so. They are felt intuitively, sometimes intensely, making them ideal for artistic expression. The meaning of ‘punk attitude’ is hard to pin down (see Savage, 1991; Letts, 2005), but through a comparison with the concerns that drive existential philosophy and literature my claim is that a deeper and broader understanding of it can be revealed.

Most of the academic work on punk is political or sociological (e.g. Dale, 2012; Wilkinson, 2016) and to date virtually nothing academic has been written on punk’s links with existentialism.¹ Conversely, the question of their relationship is frequently asked online, indicating that those interested in one or both sense a connection. This article will set-out punk music and culture’s core characteristics, present an initial outline of punk attitude, and then explore punk and existentialism’s commonalities under the headings of anti-institutionalism; freedom (rejection and creation), and authentic belonging.

¹ A decade ago I wrote a short, impressionist essay comparing the two which was published by *Café Philosophy* in Auckland (NZ) in 2010, and then a slightly modified version in their June 2014 edition. Another variation was published by *Philosophy Now* (UK) in 2016. Philosopher John Marmysz’s short novel *The Nihilist* (2015) makes some connections between the two.

2. What is punk?

2.1. History

There is disagreement over whether punk was initiated in the US or the UK, but my overall sense is that US was first. Malcolm McLaren takes credit for the Sex Pistols and punk fashion (along with Vivian Westwood), but he was inspired by the New York Dolls and imported aspects of their style and attitude to the UK in 1976. Regularly cited influences on both US and UK bands are the Velvet Underground and MC5 from the late 1960s, and Iggy Pop & the Stooges and New York Dolls in the early 1970s. It is noteworthy that these are all American acts, but aspects of punk also emerge in UK from the pub rock scene (such as Ian Dury's Kilburn and the High Roads, Joe Strummer's 101ers and Bazooka Joe). If we go further back the rawness of 1950s rock 'n' roll (Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis) is said to be influential, but also, from 1960s, the experimentation of Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa. In this very brief history we can identify a split in both the US and UK scenes between reductive and thrilling three-chord rock, and music that is unexpected and challenging in its style and not just in its delivery and surrounding attitude. More will be said about this dichotomy later in the article.

For some punk lasted only a brief period between 1976 and 1977. A punk festival at London's 100 Club in September 1976 involved bands such as the Sex Pistols, The Damned, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, and inspired the formation of The Clash out of a fluid underground scene. A few months beforehand Howard Devoto of Buzzcocks saw a headline in NME about the Sex Pistols, travelled to High Wycombe to see them and invite them to play in Manchester (Simpson, 2008). The consequent Free Trade Hall show apparently inspired audience members to form bands such as The Fall, Joy Division and The Smiths. The mainstreaming of seminal bands in 1977 (such as the Pistols and The Clash signing for major labels) is said to mark the end of punk in its essential form. For reasons soon to be discussed, however, punk is much more than this period, but this foundation (and expiry) story says something important about the genre. It signifies the formation of several key bands with shared influences and attitudes, as well as personnel. It was an intense, revolutionary, cultural eruption; very novel, quite chaotic, but with drive and vision. From this volcano pours various things, and some of them are bands, songs, ideas and, crucially, a way of being, that inspired many people. It had a huge influence on underground and mainstream music into at least the mid-1980s, and endures as a feature of our culture and people's identity to the present. Important for punk attitude though is intensity and novelty, and for this reason the 1976-77 origin story is apt. Of great interest in this paper is how these qualities can translate into an understanding of ourselves and the human condition.

The distinction between the punk mainstream and underground is often regarded as important. Pete Dale (2012, pp. 25-31) characterises the punk underground in terms of independent record labels and networks, and as non-hierarchical rather than competitive. For example, top billing (most obviously,

who goes on last) is shared evenly among acts. If the level of musicianship is amateur this is not a concern and can be applauded because it contravenes mainstream professionalism. The music deliberately challenges expectations and is ‘difficult’, the very opposite of what typically sells in the mainstream market.

Many people’s experience of, and liking for, punk refers to big-label bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash. In varying ways punk attitude is found in the mainstream and the underground, and so people’s reasons for liking it are not always confined to one world or the other. Where relevant in this article I will make this distinction apparent, but otherwise the points I make apply to both variants.

2.2. Style and delivery

The archetype punk style is high-tempo, short, simple songs – ‘incredibly reductive’ – as film director Jim Jarmusch puts it (in Letts, 2005). The Ramones, the early Clash, The Damned and the Sex Pistols made 3-chord music, often with the ‘thick’ guitar sound of rock and heavy metal, but closer to rock ‘n’ roll in other respects: short songs, few solos, simplicity, abandon. Explaining why Little Richard should be seen as the first rock ‘n’ roller David Hepworth says,

The opening shout of ‘Awopbopaloobop alopbamboom!’ seemed like the answer to a question that nobody had yet thought of posing ... Richard was young enough, unsettling enough and clearly invested enough in the revolution announced by ‘Tutti Frutti’ to be that figure. [i.e. the embodiment of the spirit of rock ‘n’ roll] It helped that he looked the way he did and acted the way he did, and had a name and persona which placed him in the appropriate category of otherness ... With Little Richard you finally had a personality who lived up to the sound. It was this new combination of mayhem and personal magnetism, this marriage of walking and talking, the intimation that even though the record may have reached its end the consciousness from which it sprang was alive out there in the world, carrying itself in a certain way and behaving in a way that the fans would dearly like to have had the permission to behave, that made Richard the first rock star.’ (2018, pp.8-9)

Johnny Rotten arguably did a very similar thing in 1976 including, as Hepworth suggests with respect to Little Richard, embodying an attitude that extends beyond the music: ‘punk attitude’. With this goes an intense, sometimes aggressive delivery, but most usually also one of solidarity with the audience, sharing their anger and frustration.

From the start, though, the punk sound was broader than this. It is said that the then new music of reggae² was what everyone in the London punk scene was listening to, influenced by DJ Don Letts.

² Paul Simonon (of The Clash) refers to reggae as the ‘Black punk’ (in Letts, 2005).

This is evident in the Slits and The Clash, but perhaps most typical of the punk sound and attitude beyond three-chord rock is an experimental ethos. If energetic and violent music is suitable for a spirit of rejection, the longer-term *process* of rejection and the filling of the void require something else. One outcome – a strand of what is often referred to as post-punk³ – is the rejection of rock ‘n’ roll itself and a drive to replace it with something entirely different.

Simon Reynolds (2005) sees the ‘post-punk’ of the later 1970s as typified by art-school sensibilities, a ‘thin’, scratchy guitar sound, unconventional song structures; for some the rejection of guitars for synthesisers, and a highly experimental range of sounds. John Lydon’s Public Image Limited (PiL) is a prominent example, as is New York’s ‘no wave’ scene (bands such as Suicide, DNA, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, James Chance & the Contortions, Mars). Indeed, the no wave movement was more than just music, encompassing spoken word and performance art, and in the UK punk poets such as John Cooper Clarke were also part of the scene.

A distinction, drawn by Reynolds (2005, p.xvii) and others, is between those who maintained the simple, aggressive energy of punk’s initial explosion such as the ‘Oi!’ movement in the UK (e.g. Sham ’69, Cockney Rejects) and ‘hard core’ in the US (e.g. Agnostic Front, Minor Threat, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag), and those who followed more experimental directions. The Sex Pistols’ ‘Pretty Vacant’ and the Ramones’ ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll High School’ are clearly punk, but so are the sparse, sonically unconventional, almost tuneless ‘Careering’ by PiL and the 10 minute plus ‘Frankie Teardrop’ by Suicide. Beyond this core various sub-genres have been named, including funk (e.g. The Pop Group, Clinic, Warmduscher) and folk-punk (e.g. The Pogues, Violent Femmes, Gogol Bordello, Lupen Crook, Ferocious Dog).

At this point I will employ two forms of summary before discussing punk attitude. First is a by no means exhaustive, but hopefully representative, list of acts who have been referred to as punk either because a) they are popularly known as classic examples of the genre, or b) because of their obvious embodiment of punk attitude: The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned, Subway Sect, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Adverts, X-Ray Spex, Buzzcocks, Magazine, Joy Division, The Ruts, Crass, Sham 69, The Cockney Rejects, The Slits, The Exploited, The Raincoats, Cabaret Voltaire, Throbbing Gristle, PiL, Wire, Mekons, Violent Femmes, The Pogues, Ramones, Suicide, DNA, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, James Chance & the Contortions, Mars, Devo, Pere Ubu, The Fall, The Pop Group, Bad Brains, Sonic Youth, Swans, Agnostic Front, Minor Threat, Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, Sleater Kinney, Bikini Kill, Pussy Riot, Lupen Crook, Clinic, Warmduscher, Tropical Fuck Storm.

³ The meaning of post-punk is analogous to the pre-Socratics in so far as the names are historically misleading. Just as some pre-Socratics were contemporaneous with or even post-date Socrates, so some bands labelled ‘post-punk’ were contemporaneous with or pre-date the Sex Pistols. Often what is meant by post-punk is, then, a more experimental, less archetypically reductive punk sound.

Second is an attempt to identify core characteristics of punk as a genre that helps makes sense of such a list.

- **Musical style:** fast, basic, aggressive; or experimental (in the right sorts of ways, see below).
- **Amateur:** musical proficiency is not required, and music or performance is practiced and valued for its own sake rather than for the sake of profit. The same applies to the organisational side of things. As Geoff Travis of the independent label Rough Trade put it recently, ‘We had no skill but we were encouraging, enthusiastic and knew what we liked.’ (Wilson, 2019, p.64)
- **Radical:** the politics or ethos is egalitarian, anarchist, inclusive.
- **Shocking:** elements of the style, delivery, or context of the music is extreme, violent, or in some other sense unfamiliar – a ‘wake-up call’.
- **Independent:** typically meaning anti-institutional (government, moral and conventional norms, corporations such as record labels), or perhaps a rejection of a cultural past such as pop and rock sub-genres.

Many punk acts will exhibit at least four of these characteristics, but it could be as few as two. As with Wittgenstein’s family resemblance, it is then possible to point to instances with no cross over of attributes, but when members are considered as a totality the sharing of features provides a basis for categorical belonging.

2.3. Punk Attitude

A different and deeper approach to explaining why some acts are punk – and indeed why a range of performers and other people are punk – is to say they have ‘punk attitude’. When John Savage says that ‘punk was at its most powerful when impossible to define’ (1991, p. xvii) he is gesturing at punk attitude, and indeed we need to take care not to be too reductive.

I will attempt to throw light on what I take to be punk attitude under the headings of ‘DIY’ (do it yourself) and ‘Challenging’, but always aware that an attitude of this kind is something you need to feel or experience in order to truly understand it. After this my thesis is that approaching it in terms of certain motivations behind existentialist philosophy and literature will add a further level of understanding.

2.3.1. DIY

The outstanding aspect of punk attitude is the do-it-yourself (DIY) or ‘anyone can do it’ ethos. This is apparent in the musical style, performances, the homemade record sleeves, fanzines and posters, and

sometimes fashion.⁴ In contrast to the increasingly complex rock music of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, and the increasing competence of musicians, whether they were prog rockers or not, punk is easy to play. It was a reminder that you can write and play a tune with minimal musical competence,⁵ and indeed minimal finance. This allowed a wide range of people to engage with the production of music (and not just its consumption) who wouldn’t previously have been. In this sense it was liberating.

Vitally, the DIY ethos lends itself to a more fluid relationship between bands and audiences. In one sense this is a matter of inspiration, and it is for just this reason that the Pistols’ Manchester Free Trade Hall gig is re-told. Audience members can realistically imagine themselves on stage doing something similar. ‘I remember being in the front row of the Slits’ first show and my jaw dropped’ recalls Gina Birch of The Raincoats. ‘Suddenly there was me represented in performance, lyrics, looks, sounds, joy, fury, rage, everything.’ (Wilson, 2019, p.64)

As this suggests, the performer-audience identification runs deep: the performer’s life and values are the audience’s lives and values. One example is the punk underground’s commitment to sharing profits among the relevant collective (bands, venues), and to a rejection of ‘stardom’. Not only were many in this scene not hierarchically separate from other bands, they weren’t from their audiences either. A vivid example can be found in Mekons gigs where audience members were free to pick up instrument and join in. As also exemplified by the Russian protesters and punk collective Pussy Riot, ‘there was no set group as such, anyone could get up and join in … there’d be no distance between the audience and the band … we were nobody special.’ (Kevin Lycett (of Mekons), cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.114)

The opposite of this attitude is what can be called the ‘X Factor fallacy’ (Hanscomb, 2017, p.223), the idea that making it in music is an either/or. The belief the show encourages is that you either have the ‘X factor’ or you don’t, and that there is nothing in between stardom or a Mc-job. While this works as superficial reality TV drama, it is of course false. Worse is how this myth reduces music to something undertaken for the fame rather than for the intrinsic pleasures of creativity and performance, and for the community it can bring with it (especially with folk and punk (see Dale, 2012)).

Reynolds (2005, xxvii) also highlights blurred lines between music and other art forms (poetry, spoken word, performance art), between musicians and those who commented on the music (journalists, review-writers), and between musicians and technical and organisational functions such as record production and distribution. It was also common for band members to swap instruments, and

⁴ Punk has also been identified as an influence on the more recent DIY variant the maker movement (Anderson, 2013).

⁵ ‘You don’t need to know how to play an instrument to write a good song.’ (Tobi Vail from Bikini Kill (at Brixton Academy, 2019) on her ‘imperfection instinct’, reported in *Mojo*, Sept. 2019, p.116)

as will be discussed later, the amateurism implied by an atmosphere of role-fluidity has not just social but existential significance.

2.3.2. Challenging

Identification also comes from punks – whether performers or audience – sharing a desire to challenge norms. A composite of explanations of punk attitude from Jim Jarmusch, Henry Rollins (once of Black Flag), and Glen Branca (of the no wave scene) at the start of Don Letts' documentary reads:

The fight against complacency is punk rock. All you need is one guy or girl to stand up and say, “fuck this” and [others say] “thank you, I’d been thinking that”. These people find each other, and all of a sudden “fuck this” has a back beat. You’re kicking ass, you’re doing something new, and you don’t give a shit about commerciality. That’s what punk is.

The style, delivery, and in many cases the message of punk is novel by design and considered shocking or dangerous by some. It is defined in opposition to the mainstream, an ‘outsider aesthetic.’ (Savage, 1991, p. xiv) The tone and message of bands like the Sex Pistols was nihilistic - a ‘loud raucous ‘No!’’ (Mulholland, 2006, p.35)

Punk attitude is a spirit of rejection, sometimes one of anger and cynicism, initially directed at politics and society in general. However, a strand within it that later came to define post-punk demanded something completely new from the music. The result was experimental, often art-school influenced, and in some cases this meant ditching guitars, or at least the thick-sounding chords and riffs of rock music. ‘Who wanted chords, all these progressions that have been used to death in rock?’ says Lydia Lunch of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, ‘I’d use a knife, a beer bottle … Glass gave the best sound. To this day I still don’t know a single chord on the guitar.’ (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.52)

The increasing affordability of synthesisers in the late ‘70s allowed people with limited musical ability to be experimental, and for many the aim was to be anti-rock ‘n’ roll. Synths are very easy to play, can repeat sequences, and so make it ideal for beginners. You don’t need multiple instruments, and they make recording songs much more straightforward.

With confidence, then, we can say that punk attitude is a fierce independence that can take the form of the rejection of cultural and political institutions, or a creative individualism determined to take control of the processes of artistic production and to generate something radically different to what is offered by the mainstream. In order to help reveal deeper, more subtle contours and textures though I will now turn to existentialism.

3. Existentialism and punk attitude

Before exploring what is shared by existentialism and punk attitude it seems appropriate to point out some very explicit, if sometimes superficial, points of contact between these two movements. While Simon Reynolds does not provide anything like a systematic or developed comparison, he does recognise existentialism's influence of some of punk's protagonists, including Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* on Howard Devoto (of Buzzcocks, then Magazine) (2005, p.20). More broadly he comments,

Joy Division's Ian Curtis, Magazine's Howard Devoto, Paul Haig of Joseph K were steeped in the shadowy unease and ... anxiety of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Conrad and Beckett. ... their songs grappled with the classic existentialist quandaries: the struggle and agony of having a 'self'; love versus isolation; the absurdity of existence. (2005, p. xxiv)

In this we see mention of the band Joseph K, the name taken from Kafka's protagonist. The Pop Group's first album (released in 1979) opens with 'She's Beyond Good and Evil', and in their 1992 song 'Free Range' The Fall (named after the Camus novel) repeatedly name-check *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In an early spoken word set Henry Rollins (1992), originally of Black Flag, imagines Nietzsche's return as a stand-up comic: 'There's the crazy crowd at the back - Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger!', and in 2016 Mekons released an album called *Existentialism*.

Considering my thesis some overt influences and references are to be expected. In another sense it would not damage my argument if there were none since the claim that punk attitude and the existential impulse share something important does not require one movement to know about the other. What follows is my main business, though: Punk and existentialism are discussed under three main headings: anti-institutional, freedom (through rejection and creation), and authentic belonging.

3.2. Punk and existentialism as anti-institutional

'The fight against complacency' (Jarmusch, in Letts, 2005), reminiscent of Socrates' 'gadfly' to Athens' out-of-shape thoroughbred, is one of the tamer renderings of punk attitude. It has a reformist rather than radical flavour to it, like Kierkegaard's attack on Copenhagen's 'levelled' Christianity, or the mirror Sartre's plays held to 1940s France. Less political and very Nietzschean is John Lydon and PiL's rejection of the rock tradition as 'a church ... a religion ... a farce'. Lydon, the 'antichrist', says Reynolds (2005, p.13) declares that rock is dead ... or ought to be.'

Devo presented themselves as America's 'clean-up squad' or a laxative for a 'constipated' culture (Reynolds, 2005, pp.46-7). Their slippery, comedic approach contains traces of dada. It was unclear whether they were serious or just taking the piss, committed musicians or true amateurs, looking to

write good music or just to entertain through weirdness. Other post-punk bands were explicit about this influence (for example, Cleveland's Pere Ubu are named after dada inspiration Alfred Jarry's play). Dada, says Dawn Ades (p.210),

was essentially a state of mind, focused by the war from discontent into disgust. This disgust was directed at the society responsible for the terrifying waste of that war, and at the art and philosophy which appeared so enmeshed with bourgeois rationalism that they were incapable of giving birth to new forms through which any kind of protest could be made. In place of the paralysis to which this situation seemed to lead, Dada turned to the absurd, to the primitive, to the elemental.

This is an extreme, nihilistic variation of various 20thC. counter-cultural movements, including the surrealism that succeeded dada, beat culture, hippies, and situationists. Punk has documented connections with all of these, even the hippies. (see Letts, 2005; Prinz, 2014; Wilkinson, 2016⁶) In philosophy and psychology we see a parallel in the anti-scientism of phenomenology, existentialism, humanistic psychology, and anti-psychiatry; and prior to that Kierkegaard's critique of the excessive systematising of Hegel and what Nietzsche pejoratively saw as asceticism in his contemporaries.

The DIY ethos is about originality, the desire to find out for oneself, and rejection of tradition. The emphasis on novelty can be problematic if it becomes a fetish (see Dale, 2012), but a more measured version can serve as a vital corrective for human tendencies towards the conservative. It is linked to virtues such as creativity, courage, persistence, curiosity, and a willingness to take responsibility for one's actions and beliefs. These are both punk virtues and existentialist virtues.

The more intellectual figures in punk (such as Lydon and Mark E. Smith of The Fall) were self-taught: 'the anti-intellectual intellectual, ravenously well-read but scornful of academia and suspicious of 'art' in all its institutionalized forms.' (Reynolds, 2005, p. xviii) There is also a flavour of the amateur among existential philosophers. Camus was perhaps the greatest 'outsider' in this respect, but Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's works are symptomatic of a disconnect from mainstream academic philosophy. Their distinctiveness and popularity are linked to their stylistic deviations, and the literary outputs of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus (and in the UK Colin Wilson) set them apart from most philosophers. This can be part of an attempt to reach wider audiences, but it also reflects a willingness to experiment with their professional or vocational identities.

3.3. Punk, existentialism and freedom

David Wilkinson makes the point that politically and culturally

⁶ David Wilkinson discusses this in terms of Raymond Williams' notion of 'culturalism'.

popular music became a way to imagine alternative fulfilment, however hazily defined. Martin Bramah of The Fall and the Blue Orchids recalls that ‘we were really just factory fodder. It was our way out from what the world was offering. (Wilkinson, 2016, p. 22)

Wilkinson explains this fulfilment in terms of pleasure and freedom, and acknowledges that the meaning of these ideas extends beyond simply social freedoms - options for how to live our lives. It is also ‘deeply’, ‘personally’ felt. (2016, p.21) Punk attitude is expressive of a desire to be, or feel, a certain way. This is perhaps best articulated by the term ‘freedom’, especially when untied from political moorings. I will attempt to chart its expression in punk, first in terms of rejection and nihilism, and then in terms of creation and experimentation.

3.3.1. Rejection

“‘Question everything’ was the catchphrase of the day” says Simon Reynolds (2005, p. xxiii); and Jim Jarmusch explains punk attitude as ‘reacting from your own self, your own spirit ... and not accepting what’s supposed to be established’ (in Letts’, 2005). The energy and simplicity of punk expresses a basic kind of frustration – a sense that there is something more than what’s offered or apparent, but not quite knowing what this is. The self or spirit Jarmusch speaks of is inchoate and trying to find form in a world that is not providing suitable alternatives. Punk was a manifestation of and response to such a desire.

This somewhat formless drive will lend itself to black and whites and to extremes: attitudes and preferences that don’t fare well when soberly articulated, but which contain desires that are very real and, I would argue, deep and revealing. Through its simplicity punk provides an expression of a desire for omniscience and omnipotence – we simply have to ‘rip it up and start again’, and complex, ambiguous, shaded reality is obscured. Art can amplify and legitimize certain feelings beyond their rational limits, and raucous punk music allows just this for certain impulses familiar to the existentialist.

At their most primitive these are nihilistic. In Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1972, pp.33-4) we are told,

It is indeed possible, and sometimes positively imperative ... to act directly contrary to one’s own best interests. One’s own free and unfettered volition, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness - that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all systems and theories to the devil.

Nihilism – that ‘desperate stubborn refusal of the world (Savage, 1991, p.136) – is an element of the anti-institutional cultural pattern previously mentioned. Jim Morrison, influenced by beat culture and himself sometimes cited as an influence on punk (e.g. Letts, 2005) – was, he said, ‘interested in anything about revolt, disorder, chaos, especially activity that appears to have no meaning. It seems to me to be the road towards freedom.’ (Cited in Savage, 1991, p.150). The visceral expression of this motivation is evident in the early ‘80s US ‘noise rock’ (or ‘noise punk’) movement. ‘Our music should be as physical and unavoidable as possible’ says Swans singer Michael Gira ‘... I like anything that seems to nullify the sense of being ... Or nullify consciousness.’ (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.401)

The more nuanced extremes and grotesques prevalent within existentialist literature don’t ‘nullify’, but subvert in a different way by engendering a radical and dark reframing of the world. Kafka writes about the surreal worlds of dung beetles, hunger artists and burrow-dwellers; Camus offers stories of hapless murder, despotism, plagues and the punishment of Sisyphus; Sartre began with the ontological horrors of *Nausea* and was subsequently galvanised by the uncompromising trials and dilemmas of war; Kierkegaard investigated the human condition via infanticide, and Nietzsche challenged us with the abyss of eternal recurrence while styling himself the antichrist.

The point is that human existence is vividly exposed by exploring its boundaries, but the unusual and lethal situations the theories and stories of existentialism sometimes deal in also provide expression for a range of emerging anxieties. Metamorphosis, murder, war, betrayal are dislocating devices that prime us for the recognition that life itself is an extreme situation. It is absurd, meaningless, but at the same time incredibly demanding. We are fundamentally alone, yet authentic relationships are basic to well-being. We accept responsibility while recognising that so much about the lives we lead is outside of our control. We are deeply committed to truth and the good all the time knowing that such absolutes are illusory or unachievable. It is this intractable ambiguity that the emerging adult must find a way to live with, and this will initiate a variety of existential emotions, including disillusionment, cynicism and revolt.

3.3.2. Creation

The ambiguity of the human condition is sometimes discussed explicitly by post-punk artists and commentators. For example, after leaving Buzzcocks, Howard Devoto struggled to identify with either punk’s more direct and reductive forms (typified by the Oi! Movement), or with the emerging

leftist political acts (such as the Tom Robinson Band). ‘Shot by both sides’⁷, he saw the existential significance of this moment. ‘True enlightenment’ he says in an NME interview in 1977,

involves somehow making the paradoxical and contradictory the focal point of your life, just holding on to them and making them dance. In some ways it can seem like a cop-out place to be, but it can also be one of the most difficult places to live. (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.21)

There is a strong flavour here of the ‘dizzying crest’ inhabited by Camus’ ‘absurd man’. (1975, p.50) When the illusory world of absolute truths ‘cracks and tumbles’ and ‘an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding’ (pp. 23-4) the ‘absurd man’ chooses the ‘unceasing struggle’ of authenticity rather than giving in to his ‘nostalgia for unity.’ (p.34)

Two features of punk’s evolution can be seen as arising from this attitude: First, there is no definitive sound or formula, but rather an open space for creative experimentation, and hence a huge variety of music that is classified as punk. Second, the genre is instead united by a desire to express in its art, and engender in its audience, a continuous awareness of life’s ambiguous, contradictory, unstable and constantly changing nature. In one way or another the music, like Camus’ attitude of ‘revolt’, ‘challenges the world anew every second.’ (Camus, 1975, p.53)

To take some examples, synth music in the UK, and ‘no wave’ and its cross over with performance art in the US, see the beginning of new genres with odd instruments and sounds: dissonant, discordant, unexpected. Where guitars are still in use their effect is variously described as ‘thin’, ‘itchy’, ‘trebly’, ‘angular’. The result is an unpredictable and edgy vibe, one that makes it hard to relax. Bands like The Pop Group incorporate a wide range of styles, including funk, into unconventional song structures that shift and twist, creating something in between alertness and confusion in the listener. Gypsy punks Gogol Bordello mix an intense, slightly crazed delivery with a fluid and high-tempo Ukrainian folk style and lyrics that speak insightfully and humorously about personal and social freedom. Just when you think Lydon might have gone soft, the punchline to PiL’s 2015 album and song title ‘What the world needs now ...’ is ‘another fuck-off.’

Punk refuses to take you on a journey. In other rock genres – notably psychedelic, prog rock, heavy metal and goth – there is a strong element of escapism. There are Roger Dean’s album covers for bands like Yes, Gentle Giant and Asia, and Yes’s Jon Anderson’s mystical bent. Alice Cooper’s ghoulish stage persona, Gene Simmons’ vomiting demon, and the shallow associations between bands such as Black Sabbath and the dark arts, are nothing but theatre; essentially light-hearted fun, like a corny horror flick. In contrast the raw and serious elements of punk usually run far deeper. Whether it is politics, cultural commentary, sex, relationships, rants or angst it doesn’t stop at the fourth wall, and it is very important that this is the case. Punk musicians are meant to live in a way that reflects their

⁷ The title of Magazine’s first single

artistic outputs, and this allows for a form of life it is possible for a punk fan to inhabit without losing themselves to fantasy or illusion. If a youth takes up Satanism because of their love for Black Sabbath they are seriously misguided, but punk attitude is meant to transfer from art to life and life to art. Fundamental to this attitude is a strong desire to avoid escapism.

Simon Reynolds (2005, p.27) highlights Vic Goddard's (of Subway Sect) view of the genre. In an interview for *Melody Maker* Goddard says that the band's music should not be seen as a release or opiate for people 'so that they can go back to work the following morning' but as 'a really good secondary education system ... Teaching [people] to educate themselves.' This self-education principle is as crucial for punk attitude as it is for existentialists. Kierkegaard engaged with indirect communication because he didn't want to lead people to answers, but to demonstrate how they must find them for themselves. (see Kierkegaard, 1941, Ch.II, Appendix) The DIY ethos is precisely this, and for this reason music and performers described as punk must end up highly diverse. If pushed to define themselves the 'individualism and multiplicity' of the 1990s Riot Grrrl movement is typically, and rightly, what you get. (Marcus, 2010, p.423)

In a way the more obvious this diversity is the more the 'don't follow me' message is communicated. A punk community walks a fine line trying to hold itself together while avoiding conformity, but the 'outsiderishness' of so many of its icons helps maintain the balance. Several of them are (or appear) unhinged (Ari Up, James Chance), eccentric (John Lydon, Captain Sensible, Henry Rollins), or enigmatic (Devoto, Goddard). In this way they are not really role models, but rather symbols and reminders: it is possible to be different and yet still find forms of engagement and belonging, and that 'different' is what each of us essentially is. So, find it, create it. Their otherness transfers to unusual perspectives and paradigm shifts. In our compromised lives this is not simply light entertainment or a breath of fresh air, it can have transformative effects: while feeling less alone we are better able to explore some of the deeper sources of life's inherent unease.

3.4. *Authentic belonging*

The problem with DIY is, of course, that the quality of the music will be erratic, and it is hard to progress and express yourself in the longer run if you don't have the means to do it. The important point about DIY though is that doing is generally more fulfilling than spectating. It means creative activity and it amplifies belonging. Something closer to the whole self is involved in what is a 'scene' (even if it's a small one) rather than a spectacle.

Key existential writers, and indeed their characters and exemplars (like the Übermensch or Camus' 'absurd men' (Don Juan, the conqueror etc.) are often isolated figures. However, not only is too much isolation psychologically unhealthy, it means we risk falling into inauthenticity. Primarily drawing

inspiration from Sartre, David E. Cooper (1999, Ch.10) argues that, in the face of the relentless temptations and trickery of self-deception, to remain authentic we need measures other than our own vigilance. This means input from authentic others, the clarity of whose own authenticity we (among others) help them retain.

Punk's DIY attitude, as manifest in its rejection of institutions and its emphasis on creative freedom, ought to facilitate the right sort of community for enabling existential authenticity. On the one hand, and in line with the 'reciprocal freedom' that Cooper discusses, it holds up an unambiguous mirror to our individual attitudes and behaviours. On the other hand, though, it will provide moments of intense belonging in the form of I-thou interactions or 'flow'. Raincoats manager Shirley O'Loughlin remembers

watching the group work in the studio together, it was like they were having a conversation and really relating to each other, and that seemed very different to other bands I'd seen who had a lead singer, guitarist, a hierarchy. They were all sparking off each other. It was raw, but in a tender way. (Wilson, 2019, p.65)

These moments I take to be good in and of themselves, and I would suggest that when striving to maintain authenticity we will at times need something other than the value of truth to motivate us. The genre and culture of punk is unsettling, and yet it takes place in the context of a collective mood of creativity and inclusivity. This is the respite and reward found on the reverse side of the mobius strip of punk attitude's demand for authenticity. The upshot is that through DIY culture we can sustain a steadier eye on our slippery ontology, moments of absorption replenishing energy for the 'courage to be' which punk attitude brings us back to. It's not just the art that does the work, it's the community too.

4. Conclusion

Punk and existentialism have retained remarkable degrees of resonance within western culture, and in part, I want to suggest, this is for the same reason. My argument has been that a revealing light can be directed at punk attitude if we understand it in terms of the desire for existential authenticity.

Existential authenticity, like punk attitude, is hard to define, but it involves courage and a tolerance of ambiguity in the face of anxiety-provoking and often hard-to-pin-down truths of the human condition. Punk attitude doesn't just generate a musical approach or social identity; it is an attempt to live with some of these challenging and elusive aspects of our ontology, and its artistic and social forms then contribute to a willingness and ability to achieve this.

Punk attitude resists definition because, like human existence, it is dynamic at its core. It is the acknowledgement of finitude and meaninglessness; of the personal trials, agonies and responsibilities

of embodied existence, and it is the maelstrom of the self that bends, twists and revolves in between these perspectives. Navigating the maelstrom is the challenge of existential authenticity and punk attitude as a response to this challenge.

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Biographical statement

Stuart Hanscomb is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy & Communication at the University of Glasgow’s Dumfries Campus. He teaches and publishes in a variety of areas, including existentialism and aesthetics.

Address: School of Interdisciplinary Studies, University of Glasgow, Rutherford-McCowan Building, Bankend Rd., Dumfries, DG1 1RU

stuart.hanscomb@glasgow.ac.uk