

Against and Beyond

Against and Beyond:
Subversion and Transgression in Mass Media,
Popular Culture and Performance

Edited by

Magdalena Cieślak and Agnieszka Rasmus

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

MAGDALENA CIEŚLAK
AND AGNIESZKA RASMUS

Subversion and transgression, although widely used, are quite elusive terms and constantly need redefining, especially when discussed in the context of dynamic cultural changes. Still, there exist several points in common for possible various approaches to both subversion and transgression treated as cultural phenomena as well as methods for creating and understanding cultural output.

Subversion is most often associated with the realm of politics. Although synonymous with such pejorative terms as sabotage, conspiracy, or revolution, in contemporary cultural discourse subversion has begun to be seen as an inevitable, and much welcomed, means of contesting the existing status quo and eroding predominant cultural forces. As such, subversive elements are observed in all areas of cultural activity and engage in discourses spanning from class, race, religion, to gender, sexuality and identity.

Transgression operates primarily in the context of the mainstream, or the norm, and its boundaries. Foucault claims that it is “an action which involves the limit” (33) and “has its entire space in the line it crosses” (34). Its main operating principle is that it “crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable” (34). Transgression, therefore, is an essential concept in discussing areas such as subculture, gender, identity, taboo, form, or aesthetics.

This collection of essays seeks to address the purpose of subversive and transgressive works across various media: theatre, film, television, music, and electronic literature. Discussed against the background of major political and cultural movements, such as 60s counter-culture, punk and post-punk, Thatcherism, totalitarian regime in Communist Poland, third-wave feminism, and alternative and activist new media, it is not limited to one specific cultural region but takes a global perspective,

encompassing the works of Swedish, Slovenian, Argentinian, and Polish artists alongside American and British ones.

Chapter 1 uses the well established aesthetics of punk, post-punk and gothic to discuss the problems of cultural subversion and transgression. Emilia Borowska presents two controversial artists—Kathy Acker and Marilyn Manson. Through Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Borowska argues that their strategies can be seen as resisting the hegemony of the capitalist culture industry. Michael Goddard analyses the phenomenon of post-punk music and through the presentation of several key bands, The Fall, The Mekons, The Gordons and Laibach, shows how they engage in subversive cultural practices.

Chapter 2 analyses transgressive identity and transgressing identity. Applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to his discussion of *Performance*, Martin Hall reads the problem of the two protagonists merging in the film as well as interprets the work in terms of its historical context, characterised by Utopian discourses of classlessness and freedom. Małgorzata Myk, on the other hand, applies Foucault's idea of transgression as a “a complex interplay of forces of a transactional [...] nature” as a starting point for her discussion of mental as well as physical transactionality between the two female protagonists in an equally enigmatic and elusive film, Bergman's *Persona*. Finally, *XXY*, an Argentinian film from 2007, serves as a springboard for reading a rigid female/male framework as too limiting. Looking at the main character, Alex, born as “sexually ambiguous,” Katarzyna Poloczek shows the complexities and scope of human sexualities and gender identifications.

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which traditionally understood forms of literature, theatre, and television (theatre) can be contested, challenged and expanded. Tim Bridgman's paper examines transgression from the perspective of online activism and asks if digital literature's role in oppositional and activist new media must now go beyond challenging form alone if it is to make a productive transgressive statement in today's free market society. Paweł Schreiber analyses *Cherry Blossom*, a joint project of Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz (2008). While content-wise the play presents a potentially subversive subject in a non-controversial way, the form of the performance transgresses the traditional concept of theatre in several ways. Finally, using the examples of Shakespeare adaptations, Jacek Fabiszak looks at a specific form of performance—television theatre—and touches upon the problem of its genre, balancing between stage and small screen, integrating both theatrical and televisual aesthetics, and producing a novel quality of poetics.

Chapter 4 analyses the subversive and transgressive potential of horror as a genre that specialises in shock tactics and thematic provocations. In her discussion of *Teeth*, a Hollywood B movie, Nina Czarnańska-Pałka employs Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to analyse the motif of *vagina dentata*, while Dagmara Zając shows a deconstructive approach to the genre itself analysing a popular TV series *Breaking Bad*. Employing the theory of haptic gaze she aims to prove that the series' stylistics is more transgressive than that commonly associated with gore cinema.

Chapter 5 touches upon the issue of gender and its representation in film adaptations. Barbara Chyła analyses Sally Potter's film version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a seminal work in the discourse on gender, to show how the film adds to the discussion on the arbitrariness of gender, transgression of gender roles in Western culture and the construction of gender and social identity. Agnieszka Łowczanin discusses three different cinematic appropriations of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and examines how different cultural contexts and varied cinematic aesthetics, French New Wave, Swinging London, and Camp, comment on gender related anxieties, sexual dichotomies and social normativity.

Chapter 6 focuses on two artists whose works share a common goal of expressing their opposition and criticism of the state, one communist, the other capitalist. Magdalena Cieślak and Agnieszka Rasmus interpret Jerzy Skolimowski's debut student film made under the auspices of Łódź National Film School whose subtext of *Hamlet* becomes a pretext to ponder over the status quo after the October Revolution. Derek Jarman's avant-garde *Last of England*, although set in a different place, time and a political system, is equally critical of Thatcherite politics, as analysed by Justyna Stępień.

The selected material ranges from popular culture to avant-garde works, deals with form as well as content, and touches upon an interesting variety of contexts: gender studies, psychoanalysis, film, television, e-literature and politics. Using recent methodologies and perspectives, such as Freudian and Lacanian concept of Self and Other, Kristeva's theory of abjection, Foucault's social and socio-political approaches, culture critique of Adorno and Horkheimer and Deleuze and Guattari or Butler's gender politics, the collection offers an important contribution to the discourse on understanding the mechanisms and functions of subversion and transgression in contemporary media and popular culture.

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CHAPTER ONE

PUNK'S NOT DEAD— POST-PUNK AND GOTHIC IN MUSIC AND FICTION

TRANSGRESSING CAPITALISM IN KATHY ACKER AND MARILYN MANSON'S PUNK AND GOTH AESTHETICS

EMILIA BOROWSKA

Transgression is central to both Kathy Acker and Marilyn Manson's work, operating in their trademark obscenity, shock tactics and excess, and in the borderline figures they have created. Both artists collapse binary oppositions and celebrate abject terrains, transgressing gender and bodily boundaries. Aesthetically, those artists have aligned themselves with the two inherently subversive cultures of Punks (Acker) and Goths (Manson). Acker became an iconic punk novelist, whose political writing expanded the limits of female self-expression and created new forms of resistance to the hegemony of capital. Following the Punk subculture she had embraced since its emergence in New York in the late seventies, and her seminal literary influence William Burroughs, whose cut-up method she emulated, Acker constructed a distinctive form of social critique. It included plagiarism and juxtaposition, the collapsing of low and high art, the fusion of text and image, the fragmented, non-linear odysseys of her female pirates and "wild boys." Later in her career, she collaborated with the first-wave British punk rock group The Mekons. By using punk strategies in her fiction, and embracing piercings, tattoos, leather jackets, shaven hair and motorbikes, Acker adopted a specifically Punk style, which was seized upon by her publishers to increase sales. "The best of punk writers, she has an unmistakable voice that's brash, feisty, sexy and smart"—so runs the review on the back cover of the Grove Press edition of her *Don Quixote*, a labelling and publicity Acker treated with suspicion. Packaged in glossy, aggressive covers, embossed in neon, with photographs of Acker with piercings and tattoos, her published books have become volatile territories where the punk anti-capitalist revolt and the marketplace clash.

The uneasy rapprochement of subcultural content and mass culture is also embedded in Marilyn Manson's appropriation of Goth aesthetics. The

attitudes of Acker and Manson towards publicity, money and fame differ significantly, the former highly critical and the latter complacently cynical. While Acker throughout her writing career consistently made herself unattractive to the mainstream, Marilyn Manson's capitalising on transgression appears to be a fully conscious plan which he is pursuing with the skill of a businessman, involving personal branding. The charge of turning the Goth aesthetic into a sellable product is one of the main reasons why the status of an authentic Goth is denied to him by purists, as one of their fundamental prerequisites is isolating oneself from the pop and mainstream.¹

The Punk subculture, which emerged in the United Kingdom and United States in the mid-seventies, evolved into a number of different forms, including its Gothic offspring during the early eighties.² Literature on Punk and Goth aesthetics and ideology is too substantial to consider at length. Rather, I want to trace and theorize the wanderings of a vulnerable "subcultural desire" in the work of Acker and Manson, and consider self-fashioning in late capitalism. The aim is to demonstrate that while in their negotiation with the capitalist apparatus the transgressive potential of the subcultural is possible, it is not naively or immediately available. In an attempt to find a way out of the oppositional movements' apparent impotency in mass culture, I will explore two models: Adorno and Horkheimer's radical critique of the culture industry and Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis. I suggest that while Adorno and Horkheimer's "closed" model which they developed in response to historical fascism dramatises desire's annihilation by capital, Deleuze and Guattari in their abandonment of dialectical thinking and emphasis on the social, open new avenues for the subcultural ethos as a viable instrument of social transformation.

¹ Joshua Gunn notes that although Marilyn Manson is repeatedly referred to by the media as a Goth-Rocker, he is not accepted as a Goth by the Goth subculture members because of his appropriation of Goth's products and turning them into a commercial success. As Gunn and Hebdige assert, Goth subculture participants fear assimilation by the mainstream which, they believe, "inevitably [leads] to the diffusion of the subculture's subversive power" and coherence (Hebdige qtd. in Gunn). Gunn argues, however, that "mainstreaming" can be vital for subcultures' survival (410-411).

² While currently the term "subculture" has become widely used to describe a wide variety of alternative exclusive cultures, it was originally a concept developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham in the seventies, devised to highlight class-based, loosely organized resistance to the dominant culture.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were productive participants of the Institute for Social Research, later to be known as “the Frankfurt School,” founded in Germany, during the 1920s. In the thirties they emigrated to the United States fleeing fascism, where they continued the project of the Institute. Although their sustained criticism of the culture industries is a direct response to 1930s Germany, their claims remain valid. Their explicit antipathy towards mass culture was a result of them witnessing Hitler’s use of media organisations as propaganda tools, and their subsequent dramatic encounter with American popular culture. They valorised high modernist art, which they considered to be truly authentic, unique, emancipatory, and unscarred by the capital tool of social transformation. Mass cultural art forms, they argued, deflated revolutionary energy and, by offering a realm for escape from the cares of everyday life, manipulated the audience into the uncritical acceptance of the status quo. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is not a “flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance” (144). Furthermore, they were disillusioned with Marx’s promises of the total revolution of the proletariat. In their view, Marx, with the insistence on crudely materialistic economic determinism, had neglected the relationship of culture and social change. Having adopted Antonio Gramsci’s theorisation on hegemony, Adorno and Horkheimer believed that in order to fully understand the mechanics of social change, the studies of culture should be integrated into the studies of economy and society.

Their dramatization of the culture industry appeared in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1947. It contained the essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” whose ideas Adorno revisited in “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” The use of “culture industry” instead of “mass culture” was intentional, they explain, as it showed that the consumed culture does not emanate from the masses but rather is administered from above: “[w]e replaced that expression [of mass culture] with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of art” (Adorno 98). For Adorno and Horkheimer, under capitalism all production is for the market; all products of the culture industry are exactly the same in the sense that they all reflect the values of the established system, hence their uniqueness is illusory. Adorno would suggest that Gothic and Punk aspects of Acker and Manson’s works would be immediately absorbed as mere additions to the market, predicted and pre-planned by the culture administration that

wishes to cater for every consumer's needs. Although Marilyn Manson's rock performances appear challenging, they are in fact an effective realization of the capitalist formula. Thus, purchasing his music is seen by Adorno as mere acts of consumption rather than participating in a rebellious activity.

Adorno's main concern is that the overwhelming impact of the culture industry on society leaves little opportunity for resistance, promoting passivity, conformity, and even more consumption: "[t]he power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness" (104). In his view, critical thinking has been replaced by the feeling of complacency facilitated by the entertainment offered by the culture industry. He does not claim that the consumers are deprived of any ability to reflect on manipulation, yet they "feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them" (Adorno and Horkheimer 167). The success of the entertainment industry's integration within the society and the homogenisation of culture under capitalism, Adorno implies, are dangerously linked to the political triumph of historical fascism.

The fascistic interpretation of contemporary culture as a closed system that represses desire leaves no potential for producing revolutionary action. While most forms of popular culture fit into Adorno's categories, "Adorno's model of the culture industry," as Douglas Kellner has observed, "does not allow for the heterogeneity of popular culture and contradictory effects, instead straightjacketing media culture in the form of reification and commodification as signs of the total triumph of capital and the total reification of experience" (102). In their diagnosis of culture in crisis, Adorno and Horkheimer do not include oppositional subcultures, claiming that all culture mediated forms of resistance belong to the capitalist script. Consequently, their monolithic model disqualifies Punks and Goths from emancipatory aesthetics. I suggest that a multidimensional approach to the intertwining of culture, society and the economy can be found in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of desire contained in their collaborative volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Although those philosophers acknowledge and theorise capital as hegemony, they claim that revolutionary desire is available on the other end of the continuum, access to which is possible by using what they call "minoritarian" strategies of becoming, in other words, creative flights of resistance. The Deleuze-Guattarian open model does not offer an immediate access to transgression but suggests potential openings that lines of flight could depart from.

Deleuze and Guattari describe capitalism as an inherently ambiguous and problematic system with the aspects of decoding and axiomatisation. They claim that all existence is based on the structuring of the flows whose main operations include coding, decoding and recoding. The way capitalism differs from preceding systems is in its radical decoding and axiomatising properties of previously coded social formations. In the pre-capitalist states, the social flows were coded, thereby guaranteeing fixed ways of existence subjected to an external authority. Capitalism decodes these flows through the process of deterritorialization. In essence, deterritorialization is a movement which produces change, “by which ‘one’ leaves the territory. It is the operation of the line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 508). The decoding of flows creates the utopia of immanence because it involves a radical deterritorialization of the fixed code or a territory and thus creates conditions for new relations or a complete collapse of societal organization which they call “the body without organs.” Under the transformative vector of capitalism, the flows are no longer subjected to an external authority, which is the case in what they label the barbarian/despotic systems; in other words, capitalism appears to have no limit and expands through maximum exchange. Deleuze and Guattari refer to capitalism as the ultimate, cynical stage because although it works on the immanent plane where all is allowable and permissible, the flows are caught in the double-bind of the axiom: life is nothing more than a flow and exchange of capital. All values, relations and productions are measured and ordered by the capacity to generate and accelerate the flow. For this system to function, its vector of decoding is necessarily coupled with the vector of reterritorialization, or recoding, whereby intensive processes are captured by the axiomising machine and solidified into exchangeable commodities. The deterritorialization through capital is therefore relative—it moves towards fixity. Is there a meaning, a morality, an existence, that can transgress capitalism? Deleuze and Guattari’s answer to the impasse of the relative and move onto the absolute is schizophrenia, which, they argue, is the ultimate, absolute transgression of capitalist society:

Capitalism is the limit of all societies, insofar as it brings about the decoding of the flows that the other social formations coded and overcoded. But it is the *relative* limit of every society; it effects *relative* breaks, because it substitutes for the codes an extremely rigorous axiomatic that maintains the energy of the flows in a bound state on the body of capital [...]. Schizophrenia, on the contrary, is indeed the *absolute* limit that causes the flows to travel in a free state on a desocialized body without organs. (1990, 245-46)

Punks and Goths aim at mobilizing schizophrenic subjectivities, but not in the sense of a pathological illness. Theirs is an anti-capitalist project, a revolutionary becoming that actualizes modes of existence other than those overdetermined by the normative code or the capital. In their becoming-molecular, Punks and Goths are living the fantasy of approaching the absolute limit: the full body without organs, which Deleuze and Guattari define in the following way, “We shall speak of an *absolute limit* every time the schizo-flows pass through the wall, scramble the codes, and deterritorialize the socius: the body without organs is the deterritorialized socius, the wilderness where the decoded flows run free, the end of the world, the apocalypse” (1990, 176). At the heart of the subcultures of Punks and Goths is a releasing of revolutionary desire by transgressing the limits of capitalism. Although in different ways, Punks and Goths have positioned themselves against or outside the mainstream, challenging the regimes of normalcy by experimenting with alternative modes of existence and defying authority: disrupting the orderly sequences of behaviour, subverting the norm by cultivating new, often deviant eroticisms and reversing that which is traditionally considered acceptable, beautiful, artistic or profitable. Thus, Punks harassed the public with their deliberate obscenity, deviance, parody, blasphemy, violent masculinity, crudeness, or even filthiness. The Sex Pistols’ single release of “Anarchy in the UK” put across Punk’s radical position, summed up by the band’s manager Malcolm McLaren: “Anarchy in the UK is a statement of self-rule, of ultimate independence, of do-it-yourself” (qtd. in Marcus 9). The Goth community is an offspring of the Punk subculture’s bifurcation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, forming a more refined, romantic and sophisticated version based on notions of death and decay which contrast with Punk’s cultivation of a Do-it-Yourself ethos and Dada-inspired play with found objects. As Carol Siegel writes:

Goth might be best understood as a reaction against Punk’s anti-romanticism, its anti-intellectualism, and, interestingly, its contempt for masochism [...]. In reaching back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ Gothic, with its highly intellectual, grotesquely beautiful celebration of unreason and the unnatural, contemporary Goths depart from the deliberate crudeness of Punk. (52-53)

Acker’s explicit affinities with punk are discussed in McCaffery’s 1989 article, “The artists from Hell: Kathy Acker and Punk Aesthetics.” McCaffery focuses upon her “fictional strategies, [which] like those underlying punk, are designed to liberate herself and her audience from a

number of linguistic, psychic, sexual and social networks” (12). He points to Acker’s use of the Punk strategy of noise as rebellion against commercialised music, which in a literary context is expressed in plagiarism, a cut-up and cut-n-paste method, and sexually loaded language. Acker explains her artistic technique by arguing that: “Well measured language, novels which structurally depend on the Aristotelian continuities, on any formal continuities, cannot describe, much less criticise, [American] culture” (1997, 2). There is a discernible correspondence between Kathy Acker’s disordered, graphic narratives and the interplay of content and design of Punk Fanzines. Punk Fanzines, the blending of fan and magazine, were informal, underground, non-commercial publications that communicated the Punk word within their community. Duncombe describes fanzines as “little publications filled with rankings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design [...] falling somewhere between a personal letter and a magazine” (1, 11).

Confessional style, sexual, aggressive language, swear words, misspellings, handwriting, typing in caps, abbreviations, plagiarism, blending of image and text, and, importantly, alternative, anti-commercial publishing, are attributes that establish a strong affinity between Acker’s work and Punk Fanzines. These publications make little if any sense to the devoted readers of traditional fiction or mainstream magazines. On the contrary, to Acker and Punks it is the “ordinary or verbal language” (Acker 1997, 143) that freezes the meaning in compliance with fascistic and phallogocentric canon failing to accommodate the voice of the other. In *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), Hester begs Dimwit to provide her with an alternative means of communication that would be unrestricted by the male-dominated regime of signs: “TEACH ME A NEW LANGUAGE, DIMWIT. A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME” (96). In capitalism, the language of the body, of the repressed, marginal content is often discarded as a rebel’s nonsense and ought to remain silent. Acker illustrates explicitly the problem “The Capitalists” have with the abject language: “Those rebels are never clear. What they say doesn’t make sense” (1984, 136). Against the orderliness of language, Acker points to the body’s unpredictability, contradiction, simultaneous sameness (1997, 148-149), which translates to the labyrinthine linguistic structures in her novels. In Acker’s view, those in power position themselves as the owners of language, while “tampering” with their property discloses its fragility since it relies on a highly artificial structure that locates the man at the top and represses revolutionary desire. To tamper with the language of capitalism, in the Ackerian amalgamation of Punk, is to deterritorialize it, push it to its limits and subvert it; to steal its

regime of signification and turn it against itself; to explode the linguistic sign into thousands of molecules of meaning.

Both in Acker and in Punk's ethos, there is a deliberate tension between the original image or text and the manner it is re-contextualised to open the signifier into completely new, usually subversive readings. Just as Jamie Reid manipulates the respected image of the Queen in the Sex Pistols' single's cover, Acker takes a safety pin to fragments of grand narratives such as *Don Quixote*, *Great Expectations*, *Treasure Island*, mixing them with bodily fluids in uncompromising positions, aiming to break their literary over-coding so as to advance the becoming-minor of language, a process by which the molar aggregate is removed from the familiar territory. Deleuze and Guattari call it the deterritorialization of language that transforms itself into new becomings. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari describe a literary deterritorialization that mutates content, forcing enunciations and expressions to "disarticulate" (1986, 86). Guattari maintains that:

In Kafka's writing, this kind of deterritorialization of language is obvious. That is, his work is located on an edge, a border, at the limit of a huge aggregate in order to deterritorialize, a way of fighting [...] [that] transforms itself into becoming. (1985)

The Punks and Acker share their project with Kafka. They are all, however, vulnerable to the threat of reterritorialization. The liberated flows can easily become a commodity if they fall victim to the capitalist axiomatic force that fixates and homogenises desire. For the band Crass, this threat has already taken its toll on the subversive potential of Punk and has turned it into pure monetary value. Punk is dead:

Yes that's right, punk is dead
It's just another cheap product for the consumers head
Bubblegum rock on plastic transistors
Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters
CBS promote the Clash
Ain't for revolution, it's just for cash
(Crass 275)

Acker's fiction has also been at a constant risk of commercial consumption, a concern she expresses in all her novels. Furthermore, her own Punk image, defined by piercings, tattoos, thick lipstick and shaven hair, renders Acker an attractive target for commodification. It is often the case that rather than her fiction, which is intellectually challenging and thus not easily assimilable by the mainstream, her artistic persona is emphasized

for publicity purposes.³ Hence the publishers have insisted on placing images of Acker on the covers of her books. In addition, the media have selected and exaggerated controversial aspects of her biography, such as her working as a stripper and a pornographic actress, while her fiction is usually merely defined as a non-linear narrative of explicit sexuality and violence. Acker resisted being turned into a counter-cultural star in interviews and conferences, yet it is her fiction that more thoroughly criticises the commodification of culture. Her final answer to consumerism may be embodied in her creation of pirates in her later novels, such as *Empire of the Senseless* and *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. Ackerian pirates, who live in a realm of fantasy, can be seen as contemporary deterritorializations of the concept of traditional Punk; they create “the whole new world.” Female piracy is “as utopian as I can get at the moment,” she concludes (Garrett 17-18). This is an exercise in Deleuzian absolute deterritorialization, which, however, remains within a utopian realm. Acker’s practices of theft as a type of becoming open a discussion on the controversial and yet untested consequences and potentials of uncontrollable present-day piracy on the Internet.

While Acker remained highly resistant to the commodification of her artistic work and image, Marilyn Manson demonstrates a distinctively cynical attitude towards it. His work has been assimilated to a considerably greater extent than that of Acker. Firstly, he is well aware that a show with “lurid melodramatics” is more likely to attract the attention of the masses than poetry (Baddeley 12). Furthermore, as Baddeley has observed, “Manson regards publicity and interviews not as a distraction from his work, but as a vital part of it” (12). Next, Manson has appropriated a number of underground aesthetics, of which Goth is a prime example. He skilfully takes advantage of capitalism’s reliance on the counter-culture to create new markets, turning the youthful rebellion into a business opportunity, a mechanism Naomi Klein in *No Logo* refers to as cool-hunting and Thomas Frank further discusses in his insightful *The Conquest of Cool*.⁴ Is cynicism an example of the final triumph of capitalism? Is there more to Manson than money-making?

³ Joe Moran writes that Acker’s celebrity status is “the product of a difficult mediation between bohemian and mass culture” (133). He reads Acker as a literary celebrity alongside such American literature giants as Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and John Updike—even though none of Acker’s books has become a bestseller and her fiction is very difficult to incorporate into the mainstream. Moran stresses the media image in accentuating the attractiveness of Acker’s unconventional image.

⁴ In the context of commerce, Manson’s artistry is perceived as a mere fabrication of a skilful businessman that capitalises on “an imitation and appropriation of

I suggest that Marilyn Manson employs subcultural aesthetics as a radical tool of destabilisation and critique of the culture industry. His cynical playfulness with the media is perfectly exemplified by his composite name of the screen legend Marilyn Monroe and the murderer Charles Manson. Manson's task as an artist and a businessman is to turn the capitalist machine against itself: to reach maximum publicity in order to attack the system from within, and criticize the ideological underpinnings of American society. The most obvious of Manson's appropriations of the Goth aesthetic is his carefully crafted image, and particularly his face. Following Goth-stylings, he perpetuates a sickly, fallen body ideal, which disturbs the mainstream preoccupation with fitness and health. His face is an explicit example of a Deleuzian deterritorialization of the face of power, which Deleuze defines as "not even a face of the white man, it is the White Man himself, with his broad cheeks and the black holes of his eyes. The face of Christ. The face is the typical European. [...] Jesus Christ Superstar: he invented the facialisation of the entire body and transmitted it everywhere" (1988, 176). The effect of his Goth-like make-up, which includes a hyperbolic use of feminine aesthetic, confronted with a pale, deadly face, and an uncomfortable asymmetry of his vampire eyes, is to dismantle traditional boundaries between male/female, human/animal, dead/alive, and suggest the undermining of the dominant Western signification, embodied in the face of Christ. His deterritorializations of face are further expressed in his watercolour project, which bears an uncanny affinity with a painter cherished both by the Goths and Deleuze, Francis Bacon. Bacon's paintings are known for his experimentation with the face-landscape and the process of becoming-animal. For Deleuze, Bacon is a painter of heads, rather than faces, as he endeavours to dismantle the structured spatial organization of the faces in order to make the heads emerge (2005, 15). Likewise, in Manson's visual projects the boundary between human and animal body is blurred: the face loses its coherence and the acts of butchery disintegrate the human form. His body-related imagery displays a vast number of influences, including the father of Goths, David Bowie, whose presence is most discernible in Manson's *Mechanical Animals*. His androgynous, alien, technological, prosthetic, hybrid body further destabilizes the fragile boundaries of the human body. Moreover, Goth-

others." Connected marketing situates Manson, who, according to them, by manipulation of the media has gained international popularity, not as an Alpha but a Bee—a laud, "buzzing" transmitter of ideas and products of others, of the true Alphas, such as Trent Reznor and David Bowie (Salzman, Matathian and O'Reilly 41-44).

inspired cross dressing, technological prosthetics and nomadism are all accelerations of lines of flight from the capitalist machine.

Manson also shares with Punks and Goths his flirtation with fascist iconography, firstly strongly accentuated by the gothic band Joy Division.⁵ By adopting an explicit fascist symbolisation in his live performances and videos, Manson insists that fascism, rather than a momentary reversion to barbarism in the past, is a present threat to society in such areas as the media, liberal politics, the family, educational institutions and language. As Felix Guattari writes, fascism “already has happened, and is still happening. It filtrates through even our more intricate defences, and continues to change and develop” (1984, 229). Throughout his career, Manson has drawn multiple connections between political authoritarianism and American-style consumerism. The fetishisation of fascism is yet another tool for parody, criticism, and cynical manipulation of the audience who do not recognize these subversive strategies. He notes that “when you focus it, it has a lot of power. A lot of people have learnt to do that over the years for evil purposes, whether it be Julius Caesar, Stalin or Hitler. Others, whether it be me, Madonna or Elvis Presley have used it for positive things” (qtd. in Baddeley 134). Manson believes that well-known celebrities such as Madonna, Elvis Presley and himself, have an authoritative power, whose charm is comparable to Hitler’s seduction of the German masses in the thirties. While the dictators used their power for manipulation and domination of the people, he is capable of using his popularity as a subversive weapon against the Western hegemony. Performing in Nazi attire, Manson is sending out a blatantly ironic message, which could be “I want to dominate you,” urging his audience to reflect on and negotiate their complacent attitude to contemporary culture.

Manson’s critical stance towards the media culture is summed up in a David Bowie inspired video clip of his single “I Don’t Like the Drugs (But the Drugs Like Me),” from his album *Mechanical Animals* (1998). Here, Manson appears in a white androgynous outfit with fair hair, possibly alluding to Marilyn Monroe, attached to a cross composed of television screens. The video is a montage of scenes that depict media and

⁵ For discussion of Joy Division’s use of fascist iconography see Michael Bibby’s “Atrocity Exhibitions: Joy Division, Factory Records, and Goth” in *Goth. Undead Subculture* (2007). Bibby argues that “while punk’s uses of Nazi fetishes may have been primarily used for iconoclastic shock value, such icons for Joy Division and the Factory style took on a stronger sense of nihilism—they signified that all life is atrocity, the concentration camp is the paradigm of existence, and history compels us to failure, demise, and apocalypse” (250). Manson seems to be continuing Joy Division’s gothicization and allegorization of fascism as always present.

Christianity as sources of repression, control, and imprisonment. The snippets include him being chased by a group of headless policemen, or a scene of a family with unnaturally large eyes that suggest drug intoxication. They are watching a Jerry Springer-like reality show in which one of the female guests is pregnant with a television. This image implies a reproduction of mass cultural products that is deeply entangled with the social and private sphere, which echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's apprehension that the culture industry pervades and commodifies even the most human experiences. "I Don't Like the Drugs (But the Drugs Like Me)" narrates an addictive relationship with the media that seems impossible to terminate. As there is no alternative to the "televised existence," the video ends in suicide. In this nightmarish vision, the individuals fall prey to the homogenised, banalised and stupefying culture of contemporary capitalism.

There is scepticism both in Kathy Acker and Marilyn Manson about the promise of destabilizing and transforming what Debord called "the Society of the Spectacle." They are both aware that attempts to destruct and resist the capitalist machine are a part of its script. As Acker writes in *Empire of the Senseless*: "Any revolution, right-wing left-wing nihilist, it doesn't matter a damn, is good for business. Because the success of every business depends on the creation of new markets" (182).

However, following Deleuze and Guattari I would suggest that the politically subversive artistic practices enable access to revolutionary desire trapped in organized unities such as the family, the state and the culture industry. In contrast to the "arborescent," tree-like systems which determine the location of individuals hierarchically, they propose a "rhizome," a non-centric system that proliferates by schizophrenic processes of immediate and multiple connections. In Deleuze and Guattari's view, art and science hold a revolutionary potential which can blow up the blockages of desire by dismantling and deterritorializing the codes which have captured it (1990, 379). Once released, a fragile desire is capable of establishing new formations, new ways of thinking and pathways which threaten capitalism. Postmodernism is one of these moments. The collapse of the distinction between high and low culture, fragmentation, multiple selves and Deleuzian "thousands of tiny sexes" instead of a fixed gendered identity, the subcultural energy and plagiarism, are all postmodern strategies that push the system of power to the limit:

In such a society as ours the only possible chance for change, for mobility, for political, economic, and moral flow lies in the tactics of guerrilla warfare, in the use of fictions, of language.

Postmodernism, then, for the moment, is a useful perspective and tactic. If we don't live for and in the, this, moment, we do not live. (Acker 1997, 5)

The desiring potential of the audience is vulnerable yet possible, even though the acts of purchasing Acker's texts or Manson's music may appear to effectively undermine their attempts to disrupt capitalist mechanisms. While Manson is by no means resisting the commodification of his work, his modalities of transgression and critique of Western society are undeniable. Likewise, Acker's writing continues to shock and inspire. The two theoretical models that emerged in different historical contexts, rather than contradict, complement each other. They both help track the desiring potential of subcultural aesthetics in Acker and Manson's work. Adorno and Horkheimer's scathing attack on the culture industries teaches a salutary lesson that what appears oppositional or emancipatory may in fact be a part of the deceptive strategy of the media. Their uncompromising radicalism provides a counterforce to naïve affirmation of an active audience and idealist aesthetics. While the Frankfurt School confronted Hitler's propaganda and its catastrophic consequences, several decades later, Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and particularly the volume *Anti-Oedipus*, was written in response to extraordinary events in Paris in 1968. Such eruption of revolutionary desire, although later tamed by the authorities, inspires enthusiasm and belief in the transformative power of the social and validates the need for seeking instruments of change in such oppositional forms as Acker and Manson's work.

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NOISE AS CULTURAL SUBVERSION: THE RETURN OF POST-PUNK

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Over the last few years there has been a dramatic return of post-punk music, whether in terms of reissued recordings, live performances or, in some cases, films of post-punk groups including Joy Division, The Fall, Magazine, PIL (Public Image Limited.), and numerous others. The re-emergence of this “difficult” music is the result of several factors ranging from the decreased revenue for artists from recordings in the MP3 file sharing era, resulting in greater economic incentives to go on tour, to the rejection, at least on the part of older audiences, of both the bland pop fare offered in the present and the sanitised versions of rock and pop nostalgia, from which post-punk had, until recently, been almost entirely excluded. Similarly, there has been an interesting shift in both music criticism and cultural studies to a consideration of post-punk. If the 1977 punk explosion is considered as an event then post-punk would refer to those practices and cultures which sought to respond affirmatively to this event, without merely imitating the music, gestures, clothing and style of punk itself. Instead, post-punk groups took the initial subversive and transgressive effect of the punk event and extended it into new forms of experimental musical and cultural practice. This paper will firstly attempt to define the field of subversive experimental practices that constituted post-punk. Then, focusing on a range of post-punk groups including The Fall, The Mekons, The Gordons and Laibach, it will attempt to bring out some of the key questions raised by post-punk considered as a diverse range of subversive cultural practices, whose coherence lies, in Simon Reynolds’ words, in the desire to “rip it up and start again,” as he entitled his recent book on post-punk (2005). For Reynolds, the inventiveness and richness of the post-punk music of 1978 to 1984 by far outstripped the short lived punk explosion that preceded it, and was one of the richest musical eras in the history of modern popular music:

Young people have a biological right to be excited about the times they're living through. If you are very lucky, that hormonal urgency is matched by the insurgency of the era, and your built-in adolescent need for amazement and belief coincides with a period of objective abundance. The prime years of post-punk were like that: A *fortune*. (x, emphasis in original)

Furthermore, at the heart of this innovative and diverse forms of musical invention, Reynolds detects a cultural project in the affirmation of the world changing power of popular, or in some cases not so popular, music.

Before abruptly leaping into the field of post-punk music itself it is necessary to address the question of why this music and above all why now. Is this just another instance of the reigning pop cultural nostalgia that is seeing every group of the 70s and 80s of whatever style come out of retirement and perform Karaoke style, unproductively rehashing their greatest moments as a kind of inferior cover band of themselves? What is one to make of groups ranging from Echo and the Bunnymen to Sonic Youth and the Pixies, performing their own classic albums after 20 years, treating their own work more as a type of classical music repertoire than as a living evolving creative process? Leaving aside this phenomenon, although repetition is indeed key to the whole pop field, is this return merely a retrieval of forgotten greatest hits, a more edgy *High Fidelity* (2000) wanting to revive obscure musical gems from the period, as Simon Reynolds puts it, between the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* and Nirvana's *Nevermind*, whose history definitely should not be written, in Reynolds' opinion, from the point of view of the victors in terms of popularity (REM, Simple Minds, Nirvana)?

Post-punk is a field that has been relatively neglected both in contemporary music journalism with its fixation on the popular and academic studies of popular culture with their orientation towards subcultures and ephemeral moments of transgression. A key example of the latter is Dick Hebdige's highly influential book focused largely on punk entitled *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which virtually launched the entire field of subcultural studies. Whatever the richness of this field, it tended to subordinate music to at best an element of a socio-politically determined subculture and at worst to an ephemeral fashion statement; this was inadequate and distorting even in relation to punk and far more so in relation to the more complex and diverse musics of post-punk, which therefore tended to be ignored in subcultural studies. Against this neglect, post-punk can be understood, as Simon Reynolds suggests, as a range of heterogeneous responses to the following question: "Underneath the fractious diaspora of the post-punk years there still remained [...] a revived

belief in the power of the music, [...] which in turn made the question 'Where to now,' worth fighting over" (11).

This question was one that was being openly posed in the 1970s and 80s not only in post-punk and other domains of cultural and intellectual production but also in social movements, such as the German and Italian Autonomy movements and squatting practices throughout Europe, to give just two examples.¹ I would argue that the field of post-punk experimentation is symptomatic of the same seismic cultural shift that gave rise to a whole range of experimentation in thought, affect and cultural practices that took place in this period of economic, political and cultural transition, a period in which a certain modern disciplinary regime of stratification in all the above dimensions was breaking down, accompanied by multiple expressions of creativity and resistance, including free radio stations, autonomist and squatting movements and the emergence of politically engaged cultural critique, including that of British cultural studies, for example. In this light the range of practices that constitute post-punk can be seen as heterogeneous responses to Reynolds' question of "where to now?" which in political, cultural and economic terms in the 70s and 80s was one that was being openly posed in all domains of cultural and intellectual production, as well as in social movements.

Post-punk is as problematic a field to define as the postmodern not least because of the tricky temporality of the prefix post which both fields share. While Simon Reynolds' *Rip it Up* limits itself to the fairly restricted dates of 1978-1984, it soon becomes clear that many of the first post-punk groups were in fact playing music (if only in their living room) well before the punk explosion of 1977. Then again, there are a whole range of arguments about the spatio-temporal coordinates of punk itself: was it a phenomenon of London or New York in 1976-1977, does it date back to the Stooges, the MC5 and the Velvet Underground or even 60s garage music in general? In this regard there are key distinctions, as Stewart Home has suggested, between Punk with a capital P and punk music as a tendency that has accompanied rock music since its inception or at least since the 60s, as exemplified by the *Pebbles* and *Nuggets* collections of "punk music" from the 60s.² Rather than engage with those interminable debates, this paper will see Punk as a punctual event whose key proper name is indeed the Sex Pistols. This is not to claim any originality or advance in musical development on their part, relative to the rival claims

¹ On the history of the Italian Autonomia movement see Wright (131-151, 197-223).

² On the distinction between Punk with a capital P and punk, see Home.