THE POETICS OF PUNK

The Ramones

By Alex Taitague

In 1988, Regis Philbin, on his nationally broadcasted morning show, interviewed the Ramones—an unlikely event, the meeting of these two seemingly opposed worlds. Regis highlighted this when he probed Joey Ramone for lyrical content: "DDT did a job on me / I guess I'm a real sickie." This kind of lyrical work helped inaugurate a transatlantic music movement known as punk rock. The Ramones' twenty-two year long career, fourteen studio albums, and their total of twenty-two hundred live shows has earned them the status of leaders of the genre. Their music is fast and aggressive, funny and sarcastic, blurring the lines between pop culture and trash culture.

I'm Alex Taitague, and full disclosure: I'm a big fan of the Ramones. So much of a fan that I wanted to credit them with something artistically valid—so when the opportunity came up to propose a project for the summer, I decided: the poetics of punk. I asked Lyn Hejinian of the English Department to mentor me, and I wanted to thank her for that even though she couldn't make it today. In my project, she helped me look at punk lyrics through a literary lens. I've been looking specifically at New York and London bands of the 70s, trying to situate their music into a context of cultural poetics to investigate if and how punk made an impact on social and political realms. Today I will talk about the Ramones and how their songs, though seemingly anti-intellectual, constitute cultural works to which we can apply literary analysis. I will discuss not only the presumed amateurishness in the lyrics of the Ramones, but also their use of irony and shock, as well as the interaction of low and high artistic forms with these techniques in mind. Even in supposedly low-brow fields like punk resides literary value, and by studying the Ramones scholars can learn to apply literary analysis to more forms of popular culture.

My research this summer involved reading oral histories, anthropological and cultural studies, and occasionally a few literary studies. The bulk of my work involved lyric triage. I engaged in many close readings in an attempt to find overarching patterns or universal literary techniques.

I began by finding direct links between poetry and the punk scene of New York: the tutelage of Velvet Underground singer Lou Reed under Delmore Schwartz, a poet and faculty member of Syracuse University, reflects a poetic background in Reed's approach to his proto-punk music; Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine of the band Television, both named in reference to French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud's A Season in Hell and his lover, Paul Verlaine, respectively.

But best known among literary punks is Patti Smith, whose integration of Rimbaud into her work has been treated by Carrie Jaurés Noland. She places Smith in an "intermediary position between high culture and the far less literate noise of punk."[1] Noland attributes the punk-Rimbaud attraction to Rimbaud's decontextualization, his displacement of semantic sense, which she argues is "paradigmatic of the type of cultural displacements, odd juxtapositions and forced ambiguities promoted by punk subculture."[2] Noland grants Patti Smith credibility, more so than the illiterate cacophony of the rest of genre. For her, the study of Patti Smith's reception of Rimbaud, her patron saint of poetry, is important to understanding the subculture, but it comes almost exclusively by way of an artist already linked to literature, leaving the "less literate" stuff unattended.

Here is a verse of Teenage Lobotomy:

"Lobotomy, lobotomy, lobotomy, lobotomy!

DDT did a job on me

Now I am a real sickie

Guess I'll have to break the news

That I got no mind to lose

All the girls are in love with me

I'm a teenage lobotomy"[3]

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1 Noland, Carrie. Rimbaud and Patti Smith: Style as Social Deviance. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1995.) 607

2 Ibid. 603

3 The Ramones. Rocket To Russia. (New York: Sire Records. 1978)

On the surface, the lyrics of the Ramones are anti-intellectual. They clearly weren't reading Rimbaud. Within "Teenage Lobotomy" there are two different verses, six lines each, excluding the repeated shouts of the word "lobotomy." As we can see, any unique qualities wear down upon closer inspection. The shared end-words between the verses—"me," "lobotomy," and repetition of "DDT"—betray an unoriginal amateur quality; the limited vocabulary gives away their inability to find more rhyming material. Moreover, both verses exhibit the same rhyme scheme (aa/bb/aa and aa/cc/aa). But even the b- and c-lines, when we get down to the level of the words, repeat themselves:

Verse 1

"guess I'll have to break the news

that I got no mind to lose"

Verse 2

"now I guess I'll have to tell 'em

that I got no cerebellum"[4]

Anatomical inaccuracies aside, the simplicity here is appropriate to the topic. The lack of neuro-activity implied by lobotomy is enacted insofar as the amateurishly written song is played with brain-dead repetition and deadpan humor.

"Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue" is even more indicative of amateur writing. There are only two words rhymed, and four unique lines:

"Now I want to sniff some glue

Now I want to have somethin' to do

All the kids want to sniff some glue

All the kids want somethin' to do"[5]

The song runs for a minute and a half harping on glue-sniffing and boredom. No variations lyrically. More so than "Teenage Lobotomy," this song limits its vocabulary. Yet the chanting rigidity may be called anthemic for its one other variation between lines: the expansion from "I" to "all the kids." If this does not reflect a demotic, an of-the-people quality inherent in anthems (and there are punk-anthems), then the rigidity at

4 Ibid.

5 The Ramones. The Ramones. (New York: Sire Records. 1976)

least contributes to its commercial appeal in the sense that its simplicity lent itself to a catchy, instantly learnable tune. And despite the mindless subject matter, when we look at both of these songs in concert with each other, a much more complex story begins to unfold.

The rigidity of both songs is telling of a formula, one carved out by the Ramones as a form in itself. Though we may not recognize this kind of formal rigidity as a literary form, it is characteristic of almost all songs by the Ramones, which, coupled with self-proclamations of lobotomy, intoxication, and pinhead buffoonery, broadens the visibility of their sarcastic intent. Thus their amateurish quality becomes a mode of expression. Now we begin to see the cultural displacements, odd juxtapositions, and forced ambiguities in action: pop songs seemingly pro-glue-sniffing and pro-DDT, pro-lobotomy, pro-shock treatment, pro-sedation, anti-education and anti-domestication, and in the song "Pinhead," the band finds themselves accused of dumbness, spouting nonsense lyrics ("Gabba Gabba Hey") all of which works to spell it out for us: THEY ARE DUMB IMMATURE AND UNRESPECTABLE. When laid out like this, the songs taken together work in much the same way that poems interact and inform each other in a serial work. We can see the thematization of anti-social, weirdo, dumbness at play, and can hear it played in the amateur mode. The genius is that the "bad writing" (or preferably minimalism) employs pop sensibilities distilled to the point of moronic absurdity. It is this absurdity of repetition, thematized in their songs, that is coterminous with the Ramones' secret to their modest commercial success: a simple, catchy, fast, humorous body of work that gave the band their punk image; just some dumb perhaps violent punks, without frontal lobes in their brains.

Beyond the extreme simplicity, the Ramones' lyrics exhibit a willingness to shock. On their first album especially, the Ramones flirt with Nazi and fascist language. "Blitzkrieg Bop" and "Judy Is A Punk" are good examples of this, but the song "Today Your Love, Tomorrow The World" has perhaps the most shocking instance:

> "I'm a shock trooper in a stupor
>
> Yes I am
>
> I'm a Nazi, schatze
>
> Y'know I fight for the fatherland"[6]

6 Ibid.

This verse ups the complexity relative to the songs we just examined, but the fundamental simplicity is still there. The couplet rhyme, here an internal rhyme, is still standard: trooper/stupor and nazi/schatze. But the significance of this song, aside from its participation in the Ramones-formula, ultimately lies in the content.

The identification of the signer as a Nazi, and the rhyming term of endearment has ominous undertones to say the least. The juxtaposition of Nazis against the German word for sweetheart, darling, or treasure (schatze) comes as a shock to the world of commercial and popular music. The gesture—comparing love and fascism, bringing together almost antithetical topics—strikes a dissonant chord. This is in fact counter to what was deemed admissible in the music industry. The association with fascism would have done much work to discredit the Ramones, to place them outside American society, and harm their record sales. But the publicity that came with the controversy and shock quickly became marketable. The irony and affectation, as with their posing as anti-intellectual, eventually came to reconcile the commercial world of music with the absurdity of punk's amateur forms and lyrical content.

Fascism, dumbness, and glue-sniffing are all affectations; in essence they are all forms inhabited by the characters Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, and Tommy Ramone—which of course are all pseudonyms. The psychosocial performance of these outrageous, shocking, and semi-fictional characters demands a reassessment of stupidity, the interrogation of amateur lowest common denominator anthems, and the celebration of the intentionally controversial metaphor in which the vehicle of fascist world domination poetically expresses the vehemence of one's love (or rather one's desire for it). All of this is just to say that the Ramones are in line with Noland's interpretation of Rimbaud in Patti Smith.

While they may not be functioning quite at the capacity of Rimbaud, or even Patti Smith's integration of him, the lyrics of the Ramones deserve independent analysis. In contrast to Noland's high-cultural comparison, Dick Hebdige analyzes punk fashion, worn by the "less literate" hoi polloi. Surprisingly, his findings resonate deeply with the notion that Rimbaud's decontextualized poetry acts as a guiding principle to punk culture. He writes: "[Punk] introduces a heterogeneous set of signifiers which are liable to be superseded at any moment by others no less productive."[7] He refers to the arbitrary value placed in things like industrial leather style, or

7 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture, the Meaning of Style. (London: Methuen, 1979.) 126

the safety-pin patchwork aesthetic, or the eventual use of the swastika in punk and even skinhead scenes. The idea was that anything could enter the punk lexicon, upsetting its past meaning in favor of a new one. The lyrics of the Ramones are applicable to this semantic upheaval. Their flaunted dumbness ceases to signify stupidity. Their Nazi sympathizing becomes a stand-in for the violence and brutality of their music. Their glue-sniffing songs summarize the drug abuse prevalent in their lives and the rest of the punk scene, criticizing its monotony and futility.

It would be unwise to assume that, just because the Ramones lack an obvious connection to a literary or academically approved cultural figure, literary analysis cannot occur. It is in light of this fact that I am interested in the Ramones as agents of literary work; I am just as much interested in the interaction of high and low spheres of culture, even if that interaction means bringing the presumably high cultural practice of poetry to commercially successful music. Ultimately, I want to credit their artistic work. Despite their best efforts to appear unrespectable, like any punk should, it is clear the Ramones created, if not a literary form, then a formula whose techniques parallel literary ones: amateur constraint as a mode or form, thematization and intertextuality that highlights their sarcastic, ironic, and shock-value strategies. If the Ramones' work teaches anything, I might have to argue that it ultimately has to do with respecting the unrespectable: though they are decidedly a part of low-brow culture, and though they were a commercial success, though they have no patron saint of poetry, and though their audience may have no literary reading of their lyrics whatsoever, it is possible for the literary to be present even in a band that reigns king of a genre known for its unrespectability. Tallying up all of their performances, the Ramones played a show every night for six years; the music they made, no matter how low-brow as a cultural product, is most definitely work worth studying. It is with this idea in mind that I proceed with my research, bridging the gap between the presumed high and low cultures of poetry and punk. Now if you'll excuse me..."I'm gonna get my PhD—I'm a teenage lobotomy."

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The Ramones. Rocket To Russia. Rec. 1978. Tony Bongiovi and T. Erdelyi. Issued: 1978. New York: Sire Records. Vinyl recording.

Universal Resource Locations:

On Regis and Kathy Lee: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpcSm3coamw

Teenage Lobotomy: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ssoBUb2cJk

Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfDogCLoXA8

Today Your Love, Tomorrow The World: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6Xae9jsqxU