The Sign as Battlefield

Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel

Alekszandra Rokvity

Abstract

If we assume that culture is built by signs and their meanings and that ideology is what naturalizes those meanings, what follows is that the battle between the classes is often but a battle over the sign. Punk was an anti-capitalist movement that used this logic, making the attire of the individual the battlefield over the meaning of signs. Punks rebelled against the dominant ideology through the subversion of signs on the level of fashion, challenging hegemonic rule by destabilizing the meaning of its signs. However, as punk slipped from subculture into popular culture, the meaning of the signs once again shifted as they became re-integrated into mainstream culture. Punk thus proves to be a case study for the fluidity of the meaning of signs, one which furthermore foregrounds the sexist nature of meaning-making processes.

In this context, the contemporary fashion industry functions as a weapon that the bourgeoisie deploys to sabotage the use of style as a vehicle for carrying anti-hegemonic messages. This article aims to foreground the significance of gender in the mechanisms that attempt to preserve hegemonic rule. As I demonstrate, the journey of the meaning of the signs employed by punk illustrates the significance of female voicelessness to maintain capitalist ideology as the ruling ideology.

Suggested Citation: Rokvity, Alekszandra. "The Sign as Battlefield: Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 67–82, DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v2i1.17.
Keywords: capitalism; fashion; gender; punk; subculture
Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and two external reviewers.
Copyright: © 2020 Alekszandra Rokvity. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which allows for the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The Sign as Battlefield

Punk, Gender, and the Power to Rebel

Alekszandra Rokvity

The 1970s saw the birth of a youth movement dubbed "punk." Bands such as the Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, Dead Kennedys, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, the Slits, and Siouxsie and the Banshees were at the forefront of what was to become perhaps one of the most notable subcultures in modern history. Drawing on garage rock of the 1960s (now often referred to as "proto-punk"), the punk movement created a uniquely distorted sound with fast-paced, aggressive instrumentals accompanied by often purposefully out-of-tune singing or reciting of politicized lyrics. Punk aimed "to disassemble traditional and puritanical value systems through musical messages, the semiotics of fashion, and public displays of disaffection."[1]

A subversive aesthetic of postmodern parody usually accompanied the music. The style that emerged from the movement "butchered" existing fashion trends and formal uniforms, only to subvert their meaning, challenge conventions by citing them, and foreground the politics of representation by doing so—strategies that conform with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody.[2] Over time, the movement spread beyond music and fashion (and geographical borders) into realms of literature, visual art, and film, using these outlets to speak out against social issues and hegemonic rule. Punk's mode of operation was a type of artistic expression that relied heavily on the power of sign subversion.

Gender is one of the cultural constructs that the punk movement attacked most vigorously. In his book *Homopunk History* (2018), Philipp Meinert writes about the New York "pre-punk" (or "proto-punk") scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its deep ties with (homo)sexuality and gender-bending: the underground scene offered the possibility of uncensored self-expression.[3] The "artistic discussion" of gender as a concept laid ground for what we now call the "heyday of punk."

Writing about the position of women in punk, Helen Reddington remarks that "there is perhaps no better example of male hegemonic control over popular cultural history than the rewrite of punk to exclude the very large and productive presence of young women in the subculture from its very beginning."[4] Today, we predominantly associate punk with the all-male bands that went on to have international

mainstream success. However, punk started as a platform for all young people to challenge the status quo and voice their concerns about the state of affairs in their socio-cultural environments. Both in the United Kingdom and in the United States, the DIY nature of punk facilitated the creation of a large feminist platform in the movement, supported by developments in the hippie subculture, the implementation of the 1975 Equal Opportunities Act, and the "equalizing effect of mass unemployment."[5] In punk, women shared the stage with men and had the same opportunities to voice their concerns about the social system they lived in. Both men and women challenged cultural myths about femininity and masculinity. Accordingly, gender deconstruction became a prominent element of the punk movement. While song lyrics and visual arts addressed issues of gender identity as well, fashion was the main tool used to highlight the constructedness of gender. The distinctive fashion style that punk invented and used as a form of rebellion has outlived the movement. However, this style has now been absorbed by the mainstream popular culture that punk once sought to undermine, and the meaning of the subverted signs that defined punk's ideology has come full circle and been re-integrated into the mainstream narrative.

This article will explore the mechanisms that transformed punk fashion from subculture into popular culture. My goal is to highlight that these very mechanisms are gender-biased and reveal the fundamentally sexist nature of capitalism. I will examine how punk culture developed its politicized style, and how it ended up in the hands of the mainstream fashion industry devoid of its intended meaning. I will illustrate how the signs that comprised punk fashion were integrated into the ideology of the ruling class that they originally set out to subvert, which, in turn, will allow me to highlight the continued cultural relevance of punk to feminism and the deconstruction of gender conceptions.

The Meaning of Punk

During the 1970s, cultural studies developed significant interest in the phenomenon of youth subcultures when the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies started viewing subculture as a subgroup of Western society that exhibited a level of integration, structure, values, and style.[6] A significant figure in bringing these issues to light was Dick Hebdige who, in his work *The Meaning of Style* (1979), clearly distinguished between the idea of youth as an age category and youth culture as a social category. In his understanding, youth subculture constitutes a social group of young consumers who challenge bourgeois hegemony. Hebdige provides an in-depth analysis of youth subcultures in their various forms from the late 1950s up to the late 1970s as he discusses hipsters, mods, teddy boys, beatniks, skinheads, and punks. He argues that the emergence of youth subcultures signaled "a breakdown of

consensus in the post-war period," and foregrounds that they challenge hegemony "obliquely, in style," at the "profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs."[7] When discussing the value of how subculture uses signs to construct style, Hebdige refers to Marxist structuralist Valentin Volosinov, who understands the sign as "the arena of the class struggle," and argues that style operates as a tool for the transmission of ideas within a subculture.[8]

However, as decades passed, subculture became popular culture, and the battle over the meaning of the sign continued in a circular manner, with the fashion industry as the new soldier on the battlefield. Most notably, although not limited to these forms of expression, punk expressed its ideological resistance to the bourgeoisie through music and fashion. In music, punk puts forth its anti-establishment message both through politicized lyrics and the composition of the songs. Punk also defied the mainstream musical tastes of the time, as it purposely sounded out of tune and often aimed to create "noise" rather than "melody" to portray rebellion and discord. The music refused to obey the rules of form in the same way that the individuals refused to abide by the rules of society. The fast-paced songs with distorted cords, often interspersed with shouting, narrating, or reciting, provided a stark contrast to popular music at the time. The melodic composition was just as significant as the lyrics: both delivered the message of non-complacency. Punk fashion pursued a similar goal: style constituted a form of refusal.[9] If we accept the semiological point of view and understand culture to consist of signs that acquire meaning through their relationships with other signs, and if we accept Roland Barthes's claim that culture is ideology, using myth to naturalize the meaning of signs, then it becomes clear that the battle between the classes is the battle over the meaning of the sign.[10] When subculture rebels against hegemony, it subverts the meaning of the signs used by the bourgeoisie—it appropriates the signs; punk does so through artistic expression, most prominently through fashion.

Punk fashion was an artistic statement, a cultural text. Its unique style was constructed by re-inventing garments that already existed in a new context and thus giving them a new meaning. For example, while bourgeois ideology regarded ripped and stained clothing as markers of poverty and disgrace, punk sees them as markers of freedom. While the bourgeoisie regarded the school uniform as a symbol that indicated belonging to a system of education, order, and structured learning—a system that, by implication, is a primary agent for producing uniformity (of opinions along with moral and ethical stances), the same uniform was re-appropriated by punks. To underline the confinement uniforms originally represented, punks mutilated the fashion items, ripping apart their fabric and decorating them with politicized messages and other symbolic accessories (e.g. chains). Women, in particular, have fetishized the school uniform by sexualizing it. For instance, they made it

shorter, showed more cleavage, or accessorized it with fishnet stockings and high heels. In this way, punk has taken the school uniform and turned it into a sign of rebellion against the oppressiveness of a system that imposes the uniform and produces "uniform copies" of people stripped of their individuality. Another example are Converse All-Star signature training shoes: once worn by professional athletes, who were viewed as honorable and revered members of society, the shoes were claimed by punk fashion and became the most popular punk footwear. This completely changed their symbolic value and turned them into signifiers of rebellion worn by social outcasts who belong to the lower rather than the upper class. Similarly, Dr. Martens—a shoe brand that originally created footgear for soldiers—was appropriated by punk subculture. Shoes that signified combat acquired another layer of meaning: worn by punks, Dr. Martens became a sign of combat against hegemony.

DIY culture defined punk at its core and presented a way to oppose consumer culture and capitalist forms of cultural production.[11] Gerfried Ambrosch has pointed to the differences between the punk movements in the United Kingdom and the United States: while both strands were anti-capitalist, they were differently affected by problematic consequences of capitalism. For the British punk movement, mass youth unemployment signaled the failure of the capitalist system that led them to define itself in terms of class struggle. In the United States, the punk movement emerged from disillusionment about the American Dream and the failed mythology of American suburbia.[12] They both tried to fight capitalism in the same ways, turning to cultural production rather than consumption.[13] Punk musicians had no aspirations of commercial success, and their objective was not to record and distribute music but to create live experiences and spread their message through improvised, unedited performances.[14]

Punk fashion carried the same message: punks did not purchase their outfits; they used recycled pieces of clothing and remodeled them. The key figure in the creation of the punk aesthetic was Vivienne Westwood, who, with her partner Malcolm McLaren, opened a boutique called Sex in 1974 on London's Kings Road. The shop, with its graffiti-covered interior and eccentric staff, sold original designs by Westwood and McLaren. Creating unique and provocative designs, Westwood played with "the paraphilia of pornography" and "devised confrontational rubberwear, ripped slogan-daubed T-shirts and infamous bondage trousers."[15] The boutique became the center of punk activity, not only dressing the first punks but serving as a meeting point, as well. Westwood inspired the collage-fashion of the movement, which prompted others to imitate her ideas and create outfits by combining, modifying, and appropriating already existing pieces of clothing in an unmistakably anti-consumerist move. The unique aesthetic blurred gender lines, resulting in provocative pieces of clothing undermining existing ideas of femininity and masculinity. Ren

Aldridge has argued that this DIY sentiment gave punk its political power and fueled activism: punks were building their own spaces and creating their own narratives, which inspired a feeling of control and hope to instigate tangible change. Mainstream culture, on the other hand, promoted complacency and deemphasized people's individual influence over the social and political situation.[16] Ironically, as punk eventually got entangled with the mainstream music industry, Vivienne Westwood herself became a fashion mogul, moving away from her DIY anti-capitalist roots.

The Punk Aesthetic and Gender Deconstruction

The idea of gender as a cultural construct entered academic discussion in the late 1970s and 1980s with the works of Erving Goffman (*Gender Advertisements* [1976]) and Candance West and Don H. Zimmerman ("Doing Gender" [1987]). In 1990, Judith Butler introduced the term "gender performativity." In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she argues that gender is a socially sanctioned performance, further asserting the idea that gender is a social and not a biological category.[17] We can only speculate whether any of the individuals who formed the punk movement in the mid-1970s were aware of this new way of thinking that emerged in academic and feminist circles, but inspired by one thing or another, their artistic expression started toying with the idea of the constructedness of gender, as well. Punk challenged different notions of gender in music and visual art as well as fashion. In the United States, punks rebelled against the idea of idyllic American suburbia with its rigid gender roles and the conservative, happy, pastel-colored aesthetic that it promoted. In the United Kingdom, punks used the economic crisis as a platform for the discussion of gender inequality. On an international level, the entire movement fought against the restrictive prescription of gender roles, focusing on the objectification and voicelessness of women across the Western world. Punk addressed global issues—the failure of capitalism and the oppression of women in public discourse and domestic settings alike.

Punk identifies two problems of contemporary society that are deeply connected: the first, gender, is a myth that is naturalized by the second, capitalism. Capitalism creates, perpetuates, and reinforces essential gender constructs and roles. The idea that two genders that correspond to two biological sexes with rigidly prescribed psychological and physical traits exist, keeps capitalism afloat in two ways. Firstly, this assumption allows one gender category to be considered central, while the other is subordinated. The gender wage gap and other systemic discriminations that prevent women from reaching positions of power that would allow them to influence social (infra)structures are manifestations that illustrate how one gender category benefits from the marginalization of the other. Secondly, the economy largely depends on the gender myth: there are a number of industries that sell the

tools required for this performance. The beauty and fashion industries, for instance, are almost entirely built on, and sustained by, the idea of gender, as they sell products that enable people to "perform" their prescribed gender "correctly." The market is competitive and driven by the advertising industry that promotes the idea that a particular product will enable a person to be "better" at performing their gender than others, which, in turn, gives the consumer higher social standing. This is a vicious circle that allows these industries to both profit from and re-produce the gender myth that also constitutes the backbone of consumer culture. It prompts people to keep buying new products that will enhance their gender performance, and it creates demand for two versions of fundamentally identical products under the pretense of having to produce a version of the product for both men and women. Subsequently, consumers are culturally blackmailed into purchasing the product that corresponds to their assigned gender.

Being anti-establishment and anti-capitalist, punks had recognized these logics, so that undermining them became one of the most significant aspects of their rebellion. They appropriated particular gender signs and gave them new meanings. By breaking gender norms, punks questioned their presumed essence and exposed their artificiality. Punk fashion denaturalizes gender and reveals its constructed nature by drawing attention to stereotypes associated with binary notions of gender and their oppressive purpose. West and Zimmerman are known for their observation of the concept of "passing" as being of certain gender.[18] They revealed that gender is something you "do" (Butler later used the word "perform") and is not connected with biological sex: an individual "doing their gender wrong" proves that gender is a performance with a strict set of rules that can either be obeyed or disobeyed. Punk prominently featured this kind of disobedience: people started "doing their gender wrong" on purpose, turning their gender performance into a political statement. Men began to wear tight, sexualized clothing, often made of fishnets and accessorized with jewelry, while also putting on makeup and dying their hair. Women started to wear "masculine" footwear such as Converse sneakers and Dr. Martens, leather, neckties or bowties, cut their hair short, and generally appropriated men's fashion. As mentioned above, many of the appropriated fashion items were worn by women in a sexualized manner as a form of rebellion—in particular when it came to the notorious trend of school uniforms, which were, in their punk versions, defying everything considered "proper" and "lady-like." However, when it came to appropriating men's fashion, there were two ideas at play: an androgynous look that served as "deconstruction" of gender or a feminized look which served to prove femininity as equally powerful as masculinity.

Gender Boxes and the Fashion Industry

Betsy Lucal has suggested that gender codes and rules of social conduct and appearance ascribed to a certain gender are the result of a "building of boxes"—that is, "the process of social differentiation" that ultimately aims to perpetuate social inequalities.[19] The existence of such "boxes" is illustrated by the ease with which both men and women not only recognize the signs of a male and female gender, but also by how readily they appropriate those signs for their own purposes. The content of those "gender boxes" is of particular interest for the meaning of style.

The flexibility of "the feminine box" seems to be directly tied to the economic dynamics of the fashion industry. To phrase it more directly: it is a consequence of capitalism. We can speculate that if gender were to be suddenly abolished, the world economy would (at least temporarily) collapse under the shock. The female body is at the heart of entire industries, as many of them rely on the denaturalization of the female body to generate profit. Even though the fashion industry caters to men and children as consumers, as well, it is centered mainly on women, and it profits most from constantly re-defining femininity. Setting fashion trends means distributing a set of rules for gender performance to the general public. These rules are performed on the level of the body and are constructed by the dominant ideology that dictates women's appearances. The nuances of these rules change seasonally, continuously forcing consumers to purchase new items as the media and advertising exert pressure to keep up to date with the latest rules of gendering yourself. The fashion industry finds inspiration in various places—some of the trends come from the creative minds of designers, others are inspired by personal styles of celebrities or borrowed from other cultures. All in all, the fashion industry is ever-changing and ever-evolving, constantly reacting to social developments.

When the punk subculture emerged, its greatest appeal was the shock effect. Radically different, punk disturbed the status quo, provoked the general public, and therefore effectively promoted its message. In view of their goal to provoke the establishment, punks saw no limits in toying with symbolism, no matter how sensitive it was—which led to bands like the Sex Pistols and Siouxsie and the Banshees sporting swastikas although they were anti-fascist.[20] However, it was not long before the movement started to crumble under its own popularity. With the major innovators gaining worldwide fame, both the musical and the fashion styles slowly became popularized, eventually entering the realm of the mainstream. Many consider this moment of mainstreamification "the death of punk." For example, Dylan Clarke describes "the time of death" as the moment "when it [Punk] became the object of social inspection and nostalgia, and when it became so amenable to commodification."[21] While there are still active groups that sonically, visually, and artisti-

cally fit under the description of punk, I would argue that punk simply cannot exist anymore, as it was a response to a very particular time in the world, and its shock value and newness gave it its power. Clarke further argues that punk "needed a perplexed and frightened 'mainstream' off which to bounce," but when "the mainstream proved that it needed punk, punk's equation was reversed," making it negatively commercial. However, Clarke offers another interpretation, one in which the signs of punk are unimportant, with politics being its core; he argues that "punk was forced out of a costume and music based clique, but that it still exists: the actors however deny the name or that they have any uniform, what is left is a political movement."[22] The debate on "punk's death" is, however, a complex discussion that extends the scope of this article. Alive or dead, punk's political power and social engagement are presently limited due to the loss of the shock effect. It exists on the margins, but it is familiar, normalized, and kept under control. As Penny Rimbaud has remarked, the revolutionary spirit of punk was "killed with cash" as punk "degenerated from being a force for change, to becoming just another element in the grand media circus."[23] Today's post-punk represents merely a "hegemonic caricature" of the original movement: "a set of prescribed rules of music and style which is a phase mostly white juveniles go through before coming back to their prescribed mainstream roles."[24] The assimilation of certain elements of the punk aesthetic into mainstream fashion normalized punk fashion and thus rendered the whole movement "an inherited social form, and one which is heavily interactive with capitalist enterprise."[25] However, the mainstreaming of punk worked differently for men than it did for women.

Discussing the assimilation of the punk aesthetic into mainstream female fashion also requires an overview of the development of punk fashion. Vivienne Westwood described the style as "confrontation dressing," which Hebdige rephrases in the following way: "if the cap doesn't fit, wear it."[26] Punk fashion disregarded all rules: rules of gender as much as rules of color or fabric pairing and added the previously addressed symbolism. Gradually, the fashion industry took over the aesthetic punk women had created. With the rising fame of the punk movement, the fashion industry recognized the potential of the new and "scandalous" style that was getting much media attention and started to embrace some of punk's elements. The appropriation of fetishistic ensembles previously only associated with sex work was a symbolic way for female punks to claim their bodies and rebel against objectification—by commenting on the sexual degradation of women through sarcastically exaggerating sexual female aesthetics. However, this message was lost to the broad public once the industry recognized the appeal of turning lingerie items into mainstream fashion. Suddenly, the clothes representing rebellion and political engagement started to be advertised and sold as clothes that would make women more attractive to men, completely subverting the message once again. The emerging discussion of fashion

and gender became the battleground for the fight between mainstream and subculture over the meaning of the sign.

A number of items that used to be signs for taboo female sexuality, for immortality, and for sex work underwent a shift in meaning, signifying female empowerment, healthy sexuality, rebellion against objectification, and the fight for (sexual) freedom by female punks. These items included corsets, fishnet stockings, leather leggings, miniskirts, as well as latex outfits. Once punk became popularized, these signs returned to the hands of the fashion industry (and thus the ruling class), where they signified modernity, youth, beauty, and high fashion—in short: they contributed to the perpetuation of prescribed gender performance. This happened to most of the items that were part of the punk look created by women. Leather jackets, gloves, ties, Converse shoes—all of these fashion items went through the same process. Initially, they represented masculinity, wealth, or the mainstream, then they were taken over by punk, becoming signs of rebellion and empowerment, and finally, the fashion industry re-appropriated them for the mainstream, either as a seasonal or a more permanent, however completely acceptable, fashion trend. In this way, the dominant culture effectively leaves women voiceless. Women's ability to rebel through fashion is erased in the process of removing the signs they use for their rebellion.

It may seem positive that, nowadays, it is socially acceptable for women to style their hair in a way they choose and to wear leather clothing, miniskirts, flat shoes, ties, and suits. Having control over their bodies and being able to express themselves through fashion can certainly be considered a victory. Nonetheless, I would argue that this freedom is not only illusory, but causes women to lose the power to rebel through fashion. After all, the outfits are constructed from the limited items available on the market and, accordingly, were previously approved by the dominant culture and sanctioned for mass production. The signs punk women appropriated for conveying their messages have been taken away from them, were assigned new meaning, and can therefore no longer communicate their messages.

Once again, we witness the inequality of the genders. While punk women became trendsetters, fashion icons, and celebrated fashion designers, the same did not apply to men. Fans imitated the looks that the frontmen of punk bands sported, but the style never entered the mainstream and was never normalized—especially not those fashion trends that were androgynous or feminine. For example, it is socially acceptable for women to wear their hair short, to have undercuts, or to have different hair colors. This acceptance, however, does not apply to men. Ties worn by women are a trend that continues to be in and out of fashion; makeup worn by men, on the other hand, has never become a mainstream trend. And this list can be extended: on women, studded leather jackets have become a fashion trend that is constantly re-invented

with new colors and patterns; on men, they continue to symbolize belonging to a subculture. Multiple piercings worn by women are no longer unconventional; heavily pierced men, at the same time, are still perceived to break out of their "box."

There are two ways to interpret these observations: on the one hand, the limits and rigidity of the "male box" can be viewed as negative—that is, men are restricted in their expression through fashion, as male fashion is strictly coded and consists of a very limited number of items. This can be traced back to the codes of gender: if fashion, cosmetics, and a general focus on the body and aesthetics are associated with women, men must not be involved in these "feminine activities." However, this is exactly what gives men a voice when it comes to subculture: the signs that they are using in order to spread their message are not taken away from them, they are not modified, and they are not controlled by the ruling class. Whereas women are stripped of their voices as they try to rebel through fashion, men get to retain theirs. Witnessing men appropriate feminine fashion has not become less scandalous or less invested with meaning over time. A great example is a current punk artist, Fat Mike, the singer of NOFX. In 2016, the band released a book that detailed their experiences and inspiration, and Fat Mike openly spoke about cross-dressing.[27] Whatever his personal narrative is, being a male punk rocker wearing female clothes is just as rebellious, eccentric, and conversation-starting today as it was in the 1970s. Once again, we see privilege: the power to rebel, the power to make a statement, remains in the hands of white heterosexual men. Subcultures like punk have become equated with protest, rebellion, and power. Power, however, is associated with masculinity, which finally leads to the ultimate equation of subculture with masculinity.

Gender-Bending and the Aesthetic Legacy of Punk

We have seen elements of gender-bending in ways of dressing that have emerged during the glory days of punk, and it has remained the subculture's most appealing aspect, flourishing also in the days of post-punk. Cross-dressing tendencies became increasingly popular, especially in the gothic movement, new wave, and the new romantics. Investigating the legacy of certain gender-bending trends that were "scandalous" at the time, and their different implementations depending on the gender that is being subjected to redefinition yields interesting results. For example, the fashion industry has embraced the idea of women wearing suits, and women in suits are now often seen in daily life as well as on the red carpet. Female celebrities in suits make a fashion statement; their fashion choice is no longer a political statement as it was when the members of the Bromley Contingent did it in the 1970s. Mainstream celebrities such as Rihanna, Dua Lipa, Emma Watson, and Victoria Beckham, to name only a few prominent names, can all be spotted on various A-list events wearing feminized versions of suits.

This feminization also constitutes a form of sexualization—but unlike early punk sexualization of uniforms, which was designed to provoke and enrage, the sexualized suits aim to have a seductive aesthetic. At best, the "female suit" is seen as a daring fashion choice, but it is void of any political meaning. Importantly, the suit is not just an accessory for the red carpet, it has also entered the realm of business. It is a popular choice for women in the workplace and considered professional—once again highlighting the idea of masculinity being tied to competence, leadership, business, and power: women who aspire to be taken seriously in the workplace opt for channeling masculinity even in their choice of clothes. By contrast, skirts and dresses have never become parts of male fashion, which means that they have retained the power to carry a subversive message when worn by men. Most importantly, the trend of men wearing skirts and dresses has never entered the mainstream and is therefore still associated with subculture. Male musicians, representatives of punk and its latter derivatives, garner attention and amplify their voices when appropriating female fashion. This offers an interesting insight into the meaning of adaptation in this context. For men, adapting a dress means simply putting it on. While traditionally masculine fashion items appropriated by women were feminized, this did not apply to traditionally feminine clothing appropriated by men. When looking at the post-punk era, and more specifically at the dresses famously worn by men—for instance by David Bowie or later, in the 1990s, by Kurt Cobain, Iggy Pop, and Brian Molko—we can see that they have in no way been adjusted or turned into costumes. They were left in their original shapes, as they were created for women, and they did not lead to any mainstream fashion trends. At the same time, when Siouxsie Sioux, Annie Lennox, and Madonna wore un-fitted male suits, the fashion industry quickly picked up the trend, feminizing the look of the suits and putting them on the market as mass-produced commodities. Not only were the suits feminized and sexualized in ways that supported the sexism that they were originally intended to combat, but they also became a tool in capitalist hands, constituting yet another gendered item to be sold.

Contemporary Appropriations of Punk

In contemporary popular culture, women who wish to make a statement by cross-dressing opt for a punk aesthetic to be able to perform masculinity more convincingly and without risking a slip into the realm of "fashionableness." In recent years, the performances of Lady Gaga and Ruby Rose have stood out.

Lady Gaga, for instance, created her male alter ego Jo Calderone in 2010, which we may read as an attempt at deconstructing and exposing the artificiality of gender categories. Refusing to break character or demystify the idea, she remained committed to acting as if Jo Calderone was a real person independent of Gaga, both when she was speaking to the media as Lady Gaga and as Jo Calderone. Jo Calderone had

various appearances: as a model for the men's fashion editorial for the Autumn/Winter 2010 Vogue Hommes Japan, as the star of the "You and I" music video in 2011, and during a live performance at the MTV Video Music Awards the same year.[28] Jo Calderone's masculinity was performed through a particular aesthetic: the stereotype of a "young rebel," a combination of James Dean and Sid Vicious. Interestingly, none of Jo Calderone's clothes were explicitly gendered. All of the clothing would have been appropriate for a woman, as well. Nevertheless, the implication of the outfit, the attitude, and the entirety of the image created by the clothing allude to a "rebel without a cause" and anti-establishment disposition, which renders the character powerful.

Calderone's performance at the MTV Music Video Awards openly pointed at what Lady Gaga was trying to achieve. Jo Calderone held a lengthy speech in which he addressed the notion of performing, and accused his ex-girlfriend Lady Gaga of not being "real" and incapable of having an "honest moment." He explained that she is constantly in costume, even when she is taking a shower, quoting her as defending herself by saying "I'm not real, I'm theater."[29] On the surface, this speech highlights that Lady Gaga is an invented persona that has taken over the actual person behind it. It could, however, also be interpreted as a performance meant to reveal the constructedness and performativity of gender. In her performance, which constitutes a subversive gender parody, she stages gendered acts of the body to foreground their artificiality. Lady Gaga remained purposefully evasive when speaking about Jo Calderone after he stopped appearing. She simply called it "*an invention of my mind*," and a "*mischievous experiment*."[30]

Ruby Rose is another artist who connects subculture and masculinity in a similar way. In the short film *Break Free* (2014),[31] we encounter Rose as a young woman, a very stereotypically feminine figure, slowly undressing and removing makeup. Once her body is a "clean slate," she proceeds to re-dress herself, but this time she alters her appearance to look like a man, and in this masculine form, she finally acknowledges and addresses the viewer. However, in addition to presenting a transformation from stereotypical femininity to stereotypical masculinity (like Lady Gaga, relying both on aesthetics and on body language, stance, and gesturing), Rose further presents a transition from mainstream to subculture. The beginning of the video features a traditional performance of femininity: Rose is shown with long blonde hair, nail polish, heavy makeup, high heels, and a dress. The moment her transformation begins, signs of the punk subculture begin to emerge: first, we see an undercut hairstyle, then the fading makeup reveals previously hidden tattoos, and ultimately, she is putting on an outfit that consists of mismatched socks, combat boots, low waist pants, a shirt, and a jacket with rolled-up sleeves. The latter serves well to accentuate her tattoos and multiple ear piercings. When portraying masculinity, Rose opts for recreating a punk look. Adding a comment on gender inequality and sexism, Rose's character gets

a voice only when the transformation is completed—the feminine figure is silent and looks away from the camera, while the masculine figure faces the camera and starts shouting and gesticulating in a heavily confrontational manner. The meek feminine figure not only resembles a stereotypical woman but also exudes a mainstream aesthetic—conventional and socially acceptable. Thus, Rose exposes power as associated with masculinity but also accentuates this power and the ability to speak for oneself through referencing the punk aesthetic. In her video, she reveals the connection between perceived agency and gender, for her performance of subcultural masculinity entails the power to take control and to rebel. Both Lady Gaga's and Ruby Rose's performances also promote a punk legacy, as they exemplify how remnants of the subculture are still visible in contemporary popular culture.

The connotation of punk style and its absence of female participation can further be observed in the examples of The Prodigy and Charli XCX. The frontman of the electronic dance music band The Prodigy, Keith Flint, recreated the classic punk look during all his public appearances. The same can be said of pop artist Charli XCX. Because of Flint's appearance, the media has treated The Prodigy as part of the subculture from the very beginning of their career. Charli XCX, however, whose appearance was also defined by the punk aesthetic in the early years of her career, was neither seen as rebellious nor as connected to the subculture. This example demonstrates the normalization of the punk look by the mainstream fashion industry and exposes the fluidity of the sign. Fashion items such as fishnets, the sexualized school uniform, metal jewelry with spikes and studs, heavy black eyeliner, combat boots, and leather jackets have all been commodified by the fashion industry. They have become part of mainstream female fashion, while their political connotations were erased in the process. Therefore, even though Charli XCX's music was both sonically and lyrically far more in line with punk than The Prodigy's music, she has never been associated with the subculture.

Concluding Remarks

Punk was an ideological anti-establishment movement carried out by groups of young people, primarily the working-class youth. The disillusioned American and British youth fought what they perceived as social injustices through artistic expression. The egalitarian and DIY nature of the movement also created a space for a budding feminist movement.[32] Punk music, visual arts, and predominantly fashion were used to address gender conceptions, and their deconstruction was an important element of the punk rebellion. Accordingly, punk fashion makes for a compelling study of the fluid nature of the sign's meaning. The punk subculture used signs that already existed in mainstream popular culture—the culture it rebelled against—and assigned them new meaning. These signs gained momentum in the new context, but

eventually transitioned back into the mainstream as punk slowly transformed from subculture to popular culture. Thus, when we trace the history of punk fashion, we can witness the battle of mainstream and subculture over the meaning of the sign. The subculture used clothing items, which already had symbolic value as markers of social status and gender, and subverted their meaning by embedding them in new contexts. Thus, clothing items and fashion accessories became signs of rebellion, discontent, and empowerment. However, as the subculture gained prominence, it was slowly integrated into the capitalist machinery it rebelled against. The fashion industry began to appropriate the style endorsed by the subculture, thus effectively reclaiming the sign. The sign has thus come full circle, as it has been reinstated as a commodity to gain profit by the very establishment it was initially extracted from with the aim to subvert and challenge its mechanisms.

In addition, the histories of certain fashion signs display a noticeable difference based on their conventionally assigned gender. The punk and post-punk movements have challenged gender norms and aimed to reveal the constructedness of gender through gender-bending fashion statements and cross-dressing. Women, however, were effectively stripped of the power to rebel through fashion when the fashion industry reclaimed and appropriated punk's subversive signs: the items that were once markers of masculinity used by women to challenge gender roles have since been feminized and popularized. They have been turned into products of mainstream fashion and have thus lost their political associations. On the other hand, it is still considered subversive if men appropriate female clothing and products to challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender. This dependence between the meaning of the sign and gender only serves to prove the persistence of (white) male privilege. The fashion industry majorly contributes to maintaining the categories of binary gender division, and the aftermath of punk is an excellent example of conserving and reinforcing the rules of doing gender. Punk constitutes a significant cultural phenomenon and milestone. While it is mostly thought of as a musical direction today, punk pioneered the deconstruction of gender as it astutely recognized that gender is a naturalized cultural myth.

Notes

1 Jennifer M. Woolston, "'You Jealous or Something? Huh? Oh, I Bet You're So Jealous Sweetheart': Vindicating Nancy Spungen from Patriarchal Historical Revisionism," *Women's Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012), 183, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2012.636569.

2 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

3 Philipp Meinert, *Homopunk History: Von den Sechzigern bis in die Gegenwart* (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2018), 15–57.

4 Helen Reddington, "'Lady' Punks in Bands: A Subculturette?" in *The Post-Subcultures*

Reader, ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 239.

5 Reddington, "'Lady' Punks in Bands," 239.

6 Jeff Lewis, *Cultural Studies: The Basics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 231.

7 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 2012), 17.

8 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 17.

9 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 2.

10 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 139.

11 Gerfried Ambrosch, *The Poetry of Punk: The Meaning Behind Punk Rock and Hardcore Lyrics* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 61.

12 Ambrosch, *Poetry of Punk*, 61–62.

13 Reddington, "'Lady' Punks in Bands," 239.

14 Reddington, "'Lady' Punks in Bands," 245.

15 Lucy O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," in *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), 189.

16 Ambrosch, *Poetry of Punk*, 61.

17 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

18 Candance West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125-51, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002.

19 Betsy Lucal, "Building Boxes and Policing Boundaries: (De)Constructing Intersexuality, Transgender and Bisexuality," *Social Compass* 2, no. 2 (2008): 519, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00099.x.

20 For an in-depth discussion of the divisive effects of the swastika trend, see Steven Lee Beeber, *The Heebie-jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2006), 163–78.

21 Dylan Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture," in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 234..

22 Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk," 233.

23 Penny Rimbaud quoted in Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk," 225.

24 Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk," 227.

25 Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk," 227.

26 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 107.

27 NOFX and Jeff Alulis, *NOFX: The Hepatitis Bathtub and Other Stories* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2016).

28 "Jo Calderone," *Gagapedia*, http://ladygaga.wikia.com/wiki/Jo_Calderone, accessed June 10, 2020.

29 LadyGagaTheQueenOfMonsters, "Lady Gaga - Speech + Yoü And I (as Jo Calderone) Live @ 2011 The MTV VMAs [HD]," November 5, 2011, video, 8:42, https://vimeo.com/31641475.

30 Clarke, "The Death and Life of Punk," 225.

31 Ruby, "Break Free - Ruby Rose," directed by Phillip R. Lopez, July 15, 2014, video, 5:17,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFjsSSDLl8w.

32 The large space for female voices resulted in various feminist movements within punk that didn't always agree. For example, the 1990s movement Riot Grrrls promoted feminist values and the punk vision, but did that by retaining a rather stereotypical feminine look, for which they have received a lot of criticism from fellow female punks.

About the Author

Alekszandra Rokvity is a PhD candidate at the University of Graz, working in the field of cultural studies. Her academic career includes teaching American literature and culture at the University of Graz as a student assistant and working as a doctoral fellow at the University of Alberta in Canada, where she is now a frequent guest lecturer. Rokvity's academic focus is on gender studies and medical humanities. Alongside her academic career, she is an avid activist for women's rights, collaborating with various international NGOs. She also writes literary reviews for *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine* and is a writer for the feminist section at *Medium*.

Contact: Alekszandra Rokvity; alekszandrarokvity@gmail.com.