

How Punk Can Change Our Bodily Consciousness, Even Today - From a Japanese Perspective

Tetsuya TAGUCHI

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Abstract: The more we talk about Punk, the less sure we become about what it is. But, once we listen to, say, the Sex Pistol's "Bodies", we easily get at least what it was. Thinking should help us elucidate an experience and give meanings to it. Then, why are we faced with such a contradiction as this? And why do we continue to discuss Punk in this century? And why must I, as a Japanese, try to join the discussion, even though admittedly Japan is one of the countries that had been much influenced by the British Punk scene? Who could have imagined in the 70s that Punk should have become a long-distance runner, still maintaining a due impact on a lot of people throughout the world? While answering these questions from a socio-political point of view, thus giving some plausible explanation to the Punk phenomenon, I would like to focus my paper on how Punk can affect, change, and transform our bodily consciousness with a special attention to the case of the Sex Pistols.

1 The Vietnam War and Punk

When the Vietnam War was over, most of us did not know what the war was really like. We thought we knew it, because we had been exposed to a great deal of media coverage. We sat and watched TV news every night. The following morning's newspaper was on the breakfast table and we would read a correspondent's report with a photo of bare-footed Vietnamese women and children screaming and running down a country road. The war we thought we knew must have been pretty different from the one the people in Vietnam went through, and different from the one American soldiers experienced.¹

Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) fell on April 30, 1975, and the U.S. went into decline over the following ten years, while the U.K. had seemingly already reached its nadir, though from different reasons and in different ways. The West – led by Anglo-American capitalists at the time – was less confident than ever. But the youth missed the right moment to defeat them because they were disillusioned with their fate. The student revolt of May 1968 in Paris and the American hippie movement in the 60s gave great hope to the younger generation in the West and Japan. They denied the establishment and advocated freedom, but they failed to deliver. Perhaps Holland can be counted as an exception. In any case, the younger generation had high expectations, so when they knew they had lost their hope, their sense of loss was profound. They were disenchanted, hence Punk's byword: "Never trust hippies."

Historically, the Punk movement started when this universal disillusion clouded the skies of the West. Sociologically, punks started literally as "punks." Clint Eastwood in the Dirty Harry series, for example, chased a serial killer and when he finally caught him, he would berate the psychopath: "You dirty little punk!" That's why in Julian Temple's movie, *Rock'n'roll Swindle*, Sid Vicious, rambling on the street of Paris, spotted a

movie poster and spat at the photo of Clint Eastwood. “Teachers would call the worst boys in the class punks,” says Legs McNeil, who started a magazine with John Holmstorm called *Punk* in the winter of 1975. He recalled those days as follows: “All of us drop-outs and fuck-ups got together and started a movement. We'd been told all our lives that we'd never amount to anything. We're the people who fell through the cracks of the educational system.” Their magazine is believed to have codified the name of the new movement. They were the lowest, but they had their own historic sense. McNeil talked of the Vietnam War : “The war in Vietnam ended, which I think helped a lot. If you were kid, you grew up afraid that you were going to have to go, and that was a release, a party. The previous year you'd had Watergate, it was a time of change. Something was going to happen: it confirmed your feeling, this government sucks, Nixon's an asshole, and then we had Ford, who was a real klutz. No one in New York had any money: the city was nearly bankrupt and that's when Ford said to the city: ‘Drop dead’.”²

We can argue that Punk was a form of the youth rebellion the post-war British society had nurtured since “The Angry Young Men.” Or we can argue that it was one of the post-war modes British teenagers had experimented with since the Teddy Boys.³ Or we can argue that it was a rock'n'roll revival, celebrated by those who had been long dissatisfied with the overly sophisticated progressive rock. Rock'n'roll had been commercialized by the music industry and the youngsters felt robbed of their own particular music, which they could identify with. In any case, we cannot disregard the fact that Punk on both sides of the Atlantic lived a short life. It was like a spasm when an older order was perishing. People were about to see the New Right come to power with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who prepared the present globalization at the expense of ecology, trade unions representing common workers, and community life in general.

2 Punk as Cultural Phenomena

Although Punk was short-lived, it left many interesting facets to be discussed for later generations, as I have suggested above. What interests me most is the fact that Punk, as a fashion or a mode, outlived most of its players and participants. Like the Vietnam War, people who lived through the Punk era have a different view from those who missed it. Despite the resentment of the original punks, Punk as a mode has come to have its own life and has been enjoyed by those who came along later when the era was over, and even by those who are far from the places of its origination. Then, why is this so?

Sawaragi Noi, a Japanese art critic, holds the view that the movement can be compared with Dada. Sawaragi was a junior-high school student when the Punk wave hit Japan for the first time. He was shocked, because until then he had thought that in order to have a good performance, any band must practice hard, but Punk seemed to have no such intentionality behind it. He would not have been alarmed if a talentless musician had attracted media attention, but he found that musicians with no skill were actually more interesting to him than those who knew what they were doing. The rock scene underwent a fundamental change. Rock had been popular music, but with the emergence of Punk, it began to take an aspect of avant-garde art. Sawaragi found that Punk was not merely a revival of rock'n'roll music, but also had the potential to become an amalgam of experimental art and philosophy of the twentieth-century. His encounter with Punk propelled him to reconsider seriously the concept of contemporary art.⁴

I am aware of the contention that a view such as Sawaragi's is simply bohemian cafe talk as ex-Punks deride the middlebrow discourse of Greil Marcus, for instance. Here I am interested in discussing the impact of Punk and its later development as a mode. If Punk had died out completely, and

we were considering the Punk bands and their music historically, we would not need to compare Punk with Dada. However, now that Punk has become an established fashion, it is worthwhile to theorize about the movement in order to approach its essence.

3 Punk in the Light of Renato Poggioli's Avant-garde Theory

Hereafter I will apply the theory of Renato Poggioli (1907-1963), Italian expatriate literary critic, to the Punk phenomenon from three reasons. First, I believe it will help define Punk as an art form and place it in a historical overview. Second, it will explain why Punk still continues to influence people throughout the world. And finally, it will embellish my main point: how Punk affects our bodily consciousness. First I will introduce Poggioli's theory in general, and then apply it to the Sex Pistols' case.

Poggioli claims there are four aspects to avant-garde movements. According to him, a movement often "takes shape and agitates for no other end than its own self, out of sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure," and this is defined as activism or the activist moment. Secondly, the movement, in part or in whole, agitates against something or someone. "The something may be the academy, tradition; the someone may be a master whose teaching and example, whose prestige and authority, are considered wrong or harmful. More often than not, the someone is that collective individual called the public." This spirit of hostility and opposition is called antagonism or the antagonistic moment. Thirdly, there is an attitude which derives from antagonism, but transcends it in the end. "The taste for action for action's sake, the dynamism inherent in the very idea of movement, can in fact drive itself beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation, scruple or limit. It finds joy not merely in the inebriation of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, razing

obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way,” and this attitude is given the name of nihilism or nihilistic moment. Finally, the fourth aspect or posture of avant-garde movements is given the name of agonism or agonistic moment. This aspect is the most extreme. Poggioli states: “in the febrile anxiety to go always further, the movement and its constituent human entity can reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements.”⁵

As for the first aspect, we know Punks, particularly the Sex Pistols, agitated “for no other end than” their own selves, “out of sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action.” The Pistols, for example, enjoyed the “emotional fascination of adventure” on their first tour in Paris. They screamed, puked, and annoyed Parisians. They made a good contrast with the Anglo-American intellectuals who inhabited Paris in the early twentieth century and made strenuous efforts to be temporary and contemporary Parisians. Their “activistic moment” is now recorded in Ray Stevenson’s historic photographs. Punks and their movement had totally agitated against the so-called “old farts,” such as Rod Stewart, whose music, authority, way of life were “considered wrong or harmful.” Very often, their enemy was the “collective individual called the public.” The Pistols had nothing but a spirit of hostility and opposition and the public was not able to understand their antagonism. One well-known episode is that when they first faced their small audience (on November 6, 1975, at St Martin’s) and shouted at them, “I want you to know how much I hate you,” people did not know how to respond. In the mid 1970s, the Pistols were avant-garde, anti-audience, biting the very hands that fed them.

Poggioli’s third aspect is particularly relevant to the Punk movement. Punks used to say that it was not technique but attitude that mattered. What they meant by attitude was quite similar to Poggioli’s remark: “The taste for

action for action's sake, the dynamism inherent in the very idea of movement, can in fact drive itself beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation, scruple or limit." This attitude led to the banning and cancellation of their gigs. There was a ludicrous carol-singing protest in a religious town in Wales when they passed through that area. The townspeople thought devils were coming to visit. The guitarist Steve Jones at that time responded to those Christian fundamentalists by saying, "They are crazy."

The fourth aspect can be best visualized by the too-fast-to-live, too-young-to-die life of Sid Vicious. He was the most agonistic of the group. Poggioli says, "in the febrile anxiety to go always further, the movement and its constituent human entity can reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition." Whether Sid welcomed and accepted "this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements" is open to question, but apparently he took no heed of his own catastrophic destruction in the Pistols' notorious American tour when he carved the letters "fix me" on his bare chest with a razor. His subsequent New York life came to an end when he earned his nickname by stabbing his girl friend to death at the Chelsea Hotel, leading to his own death.

Poggioli determines that the first and the second moments – namely activist and antagonistic – produce the third and the fourth moments, that is, nihilistic and agonistic. Interestingly he claims that the latter moments transcend the former ones. Now bearing in mind Poggioli's classical, but still valuable theory, let us notice the development of the Sex Pistols.

It cannot be denied that Malcolm McLaren masterminded the early Pistols. Around McLaren, his allies got together - Vivien Westwood as fashion designer; Jamie Reid as art director, and the hardcore supporters such as Jordan, Cat Woman, etc. Sid Vicious was one of them before he replaced Glen Matlock. They had a gig at London small clubs such as

Nashville, 100 club, etc. They just had fun and did not care if they didn't make money or weren't taken notice of. It took many months before they recorded their first single, but they had a clear target. They attacked the establishment: rock stars, executives of record companies, TV presenters, etc. with their fierce language and provocative attitude. As Johnny Rotten once remarked, they were into chaos rather than music, thus transcending their career as a London punk band. But by the time they became famous throughout the world, they were destroying themselves as if there were nothing left to destroy but themselves.

4 Punks Made Differences as Casual as a Disposable Lighter

The Pistols transmitted raw energy which was so anarchic it stunned even a Japanese junior-high school boy named Sawaragi, who did not understand the English language well, much less the angst-ridden English working class in Britain that was in its long but steady decline. It was possible for a boy like him to perceive the power of Punk because it was an art form par excellence as avant-garde as Dada. First Dada did it visually but also with Bruitist music, and then the Punks did it with their music.

I lived in England from 1994 to 96. When I returned to Japan, I found, to my amazement and amusement, young people starting to bleach their hair. Until the mid 1990s, Japanese bleached their hair only when they had such blind aspiration that they physically imitated gaijin (Westerners), or when they were recruited by yakuza (Japanese mafia) or bar managers, depending on their gender. The majority of Japanese teenagers and college students today have their hair bleached in various colors and even wear pierces. For them, bleached hair and pierces are simply fashionable and there's no aspiration for the West or the sense of guilt. It took almost two decades and along the way the politics of Punk has been completely disregarded by Japanese youth, because they cannot understand or relate to it. I would like

to pose the question: “After twenty years, is there any significant difference between teenagers in the West and in the East?”

I would like to end my paper by mentioning Sid Vicious, who embodied Poggioli’s theory and has perished. Swinburne is perhaps the most unlikely figure to refer to on such a occasion, but the dead poet wrote a good line for us and Sidney the deceased: “From the graves they have made they shall rise up never.”

Notes

- 1 According to John Solt’s unpublished manuscript, 2002, “The Semiotic Halitosis of Capitalism, Communism and Colonization,” Vietnamese never used the words, the Vietnam War. Instead the war is called the American War. Fair enough.
- 2 Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber, 1991), 131.
- 3 About Teddy Boys and their significance in the history of youth culture, see the brilliant essay of Robert Cross, “The Teddy Boy as Scapecoat,” *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture* Vol. 1, No. 2, 266-291.
- 4 Sawaragi Noi, “As an Interface of Art World,” *One Purpose*, No. 101 (December, 1994), 14-16
- 5 Renato Poggioli, *Teoria dell’ate d’avanguardia* (Società editrice il Mulino, 1962), or *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Translated by Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Icon Editions, 1971), 25-26. The four concepts are discussed in detail: 25-40, 61-68.

要旨

田口哲也

1970年代中葉にニューヨークとロンドンを中心にして起こったパンク・ムーブメントは70年代末には早くも音楽シーンから撤退する。しかし、60年代のヒッピー・ムーブメントと同じく、パンクは現代においてもその強い影響力を残している。本論では単に音楽だけではなく、ファッションやライフス

タイルなどを含めてパンクが私たちの身体表現にどのような影響を与えているのかを、主としてレナト・ポッジョーリのアヴァンギャルド理論を援用して論じた。