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Four-letter Revolutions: Dada and Punk

A revolution has the power to radically change society, and the Dada and punk rock movements were important artistic revolutions in modern social history. The movements share many similarities, which suggests that they both represented important aspects of humanity. The movements go hand in hand, with punk rock acting as a kind of soundtrack to Dadaism. They were both anarchistic and nihilistic in nature. Dada was an art movement, but called itself anti-art. Punk, on the other hand, was really a stripping down of the commercialized beast rock and roll had become, rather than a completely new form of music. Both movements were full of anger and destruction. Dada made fun of all the art that came before it, used trash to make pieces, and was nihilistic. Punk was also nihilistic and used “trash” to make music, meaning that singers usually were not musically gifted, and they filled their songs with profanity. Both influenced later styles of art and music. Both Dada and punk exposed the emptiness and pretense of their respective societies. They developed into a mentality and a way of life. Both represent a segment of culture at a certain time, although the ideas behind them are relevant to other periods of history as well. Dada put into images and words what people could not express after the horrors of World War I, and punk put into music the disgust people felt about the vapidness and meaninglessness of modern life. Despite their negative reputations, these two destructive movements managed to tap into some fundamental

human truths, such as the struggle of living in an existential world and the need for artistic expression. They sought to expose the truth in a world that was dazed and confused.

Both movements grew out of similar political and social scenes. Dada grew straight out of World War I. It was a direct reaction to the death and destruction of the war. According to the Ades and Gale, “The Dadaists channeled their revulsion at World War I into an indictment of the nationalist and materialist values that had brought it about” (1). Dadaist art can be offensive and repulsive, but it was a reflection of the time and the general attitude of the world in which it was created. The Dadaists used visceral and revolting images to depict the horrors of war. Although not as drastically tragic, the culture that fostered punk rock was similarly hopeless. In Britain, punk sprang up in the mid-1970s in a time of great economic downturn. As can be seen in the documentary *The History of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Punk*, the English economy was sluggish, and the British were dissatisfied. In the slums of London, where punk got its start, the conditions were squalid and there was a sense of desperation among the people (Haimes). This society of stagnation bred discontentment within its people, which eventually erupted into a movement of anger and rebellion. Punk in America developed partly as a reaction to the negative political atmosphere of the mid-1970s. Al Spicer, author of *The Rough Guide to Punk*, explains: “Reeling from the double-whammy of the Watergate scandal (1972-1974), which led to the collapse of Richard Nixon’s presidency, and the end of the Vietnam War (1973), America was in shock, denial, and a state of deep emotional trauma” (3). Like the Dadaists of the 1920s, American punk musicians were fueled by the atrocities of war and the failure of the government to live up to its people’s

expectations. However, punk was not only a reaction to the Vietnam War; it was also a way to deal with the boredom of everyday life. According to *Punk: The Whole Story*, punk rock came about as a, “Quest to beat the boredom...Coupled with a sense of rejection among displaced, alienated teens, [the boredom] would bring on the birth pains of American punk” (51). Both movements were reactions against the existential philosophy that became more mainstream after WWI. Both of these movements were precipitated by the social and political spirit of their respective times.

One of the major characteristics that Dadaism and punk rock share is their appreciation of devastation. The destruction seen in Dadaist art is representative of the destruction of World War I. Dada was called anti-art, and it tried to destroy, both physically and theoretically, all that art had been up to the 20th century. Marcel Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* physically defaced a da Vinci masterpiece. Indeed, most Dadaist works tried to destroy the tradition and dignity of art. This need for destruction can also be seen in the subject matter of Dadaist art and punk lyrics. Many Dadaist collages consist of pictures of body parts of different people ripped apart and pasted back together in a mismatched fashion. One form of destruction that appealed to both Dadaists and punk rockers was anarchy. In the song “Anarchy in the U.K.,” Johnny Rotten, the lead singer for the Sex Pistols proclaims himself an anarchist and an antichrist (Cook et al.). Many Dadaists used their art to push their political agendas, which were usually comprised of nihilism or anarchy. In Berlin, Dadaism was a vehicle to spread anarchy and rebellious political beliefs. The punk appreciation of destruction can be seen in their song lyrics, clothing, and on-stage antics. Many punk songs contain allusions to death and destruction. For example, “London Calling” by the Clash states: “The ice age is

coming, the sun is zooming in / Engines stop running, and the wheat is growing thin / A nuclear error, but I have no fear / London is drowning and I live by the river” (Jones and Strummer). This song presents a very bleak outlook, and yet the singer is not afraid of these apocalyptic happenings; he is almost reveling in the impending devastation. He seems to be welcoming his own drowning in this song, because he knows that the world is ending and he has no control over it. The punks felt powerless to control their lives, so their reaction was to fight the destruction of their world with more destruction.

This philosophy of destruction is manifest in other aspects of the movements as well. The style of clothing and the on-stage antics that developed during the punk era are also representative of the destructive nature of the movement. Punks wore purposefully torn and tattered clothing, usually kept together by large numbers of safety pins. Punks would take t-shirts and tear holes in them or write slogans on them. Johnny Rotten gained attention when he sported a Pink Floyd t-shirt, to which he added the words “I Hate.” (*History*, Haimes). Punk bands were also destructive on stage. The cover art for the Clash’s album *London Calling* depicts the band’s bassist smashing his guitar onto the stage in true punk fashion. After only a short time, both movements destroyed themselves. For trends that were grounded in destruction, it would only be appropriate for their destructive attitudes to turn against themselves. As Josef Hodin bluntly states in the *Encyclopedia of World Art*, “Dada, whose aim was to destroy, destroyed itself, according to schedule” (“European Modern Movements” 193). Dada was anti-art, so as an art movement, it would inevitably become suicidal. Punk was a danger to itself. The movement led to the death of Sid Vicious, the bassist for the Sex Pistols, who died of a drug overdose in 1979. One interviewee from *The History of Rock’n’Roll: Punk* likened

the movement to a fire kept alive by the bodies of the musicians and fans (Haimes). Punk rock exploded onto the social scene in the mid-1970s, but really only lasted for about five years as a movement. The main agenda of both punk rock and Dada was to destroy just about everything, even themselves, and they were very effective in this respect.

A stylistic similarity between the two movements is the emphasis on imperfection and the concept of “anti-pretty”. By typical standards, Dada art is not considered aesthetically beautiful, and most punk singers were not gifted vocalists. Punk songs are raw, emotional, and unmelodic. As asserted by several interviewees in *The History of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Punk*, Johnny Rotten, the lead singer for the Sex Pistols, could not, ironically, sing, and most of the other band members could not play their instruments well at all (Haimes). Spicer attests to the Sex Pistols’ non-talent: “[They compensated] for lack of technical ability by using volume, aggressive audience baiting, and obnoxious antics on stage” (280). Although the music may not be pretty or pleasing to the ears, the emotion behind the music is striking. The rawness of the voices is realistic and disturbing. The musicians’ suffering can be heard through their music, which gives their music an air of cold, hard truth. Punk music was meant to be gritty and real; it is not pretty, but it was never intended to be pretty. This holds true for Dada works as well. By conventional standards, Dada art is not beautiful in the way that a Monet painting is beautiful, and yet, there is beauty in the truth of Dadaist art. This celebration of the “anti-pretty” is representative of reality. For the punks and the Dadaists, reality was ugly, and they wanted society to face this fact instead of pretending that the world was pretty and simple. Although punk music and Dadaist art are imperfect, they are powerful because the emphasis on imperfection makes them human and authentic.

Both movements either theoretically or literally used trash to create their art.

Many Dada pieces were created completely out of litter found on the streets. As Hodin explains, “Sand, hair, post-office receipts, string, inflated bank notes, bus tickets, broken glass—all these materials were used by the Dadaists to express a new chaotic, devalued reality” (“Surrealism” 718). Anything and everything was made into art by the Dadaists. According to Fleming and Marion, the Dadaists, “Challenged polite society and protested the pretense of fine art by concocting nonpictures from the contents of wastebaskets and gutters” (576). Marcel Duchamp was a champion of readymade art, which, according to Hodin, is made up of, “Intact or slightly doctored objects from the everyday world that were chosen by the artist as works of art” (“European Modern Movements” 193). One of Duchamp’s most famous readymades is *Fountain*, which consists of an upside down urinal with the words “R. Mutt, 1917” scrawled on the side. The exhibition of a urinal at an art show would have been very offensive, which was probably Duchamp’s goal.

Duchamp used crude items, be it trash or urinals, to shock his audiences and to challenge them to think unconventionally. Duchamp himself said, “ ‘A painting that doesn’t shock isn’t worth painting’ ” (qtd. in Colegrave and Sullivan 24). According to Hodin, the Dadaists, “Forced [art] to share in the dirt and noise of the street” (“Surrealism” 718).

The Dadaists used trash to shock their audiences into thinking critically about society. In a similar vein, punk rockers used “trash” to make music. Much punk music is filled with profanity and innuendo. The Sex Pistols caused a huge uproar when they cursed on live television in 1977, something that was still a taboo at that time. The members of the bands themselves were the refuse of society. Most punk musicians came from humble or rough backgrounds. Many were drug addicts or vagrants, loners and outsiders. Most

punk singers could not sing. They were the rejects of polite society, and they purposefully reveled in filth to show their contempt for the “polite” society that had ruined their lives. Punk rock brought vulgarity into everyday life in a way that it had not been before, and that has not gone away in modern times. The Dadaists and the punks used shock tactics and trash to make a statement, and to shove their societies’ faces into the gritty reality of their lives.

Both movements are also characterized by a disdain for tradition and the upper classes. Dadaism completely rejected traditional art, while punk attempted to strip away the vanity and pretentiousness of rock music of the early 1970s. This derisive attitude toward all things civil and conventional can be seen in Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.*, in which the artist has drawn a mustache on a reproduction of da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. All respect for tradition has been lost. As stated by Fleming and Marion, Duchamp desecrated da Vinci’s masterpiece, “To make a point about the futility of Western culture” (575). Similarly, the Sex Pistols ridiculed the Queen of England, a national symbol of tradition and all things English, in their song “God Save the Queen”. The song proceeds to insult the Queen and everything she stands for, and it was appropriately released during the celebration of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, which commemorated her 25th anniversary of ascending to the throne. This attitude of ambivalence and hatred for tradition is found in most punk music. Both movements also sought to expose the injustices of social stratification. They were underground, working-class movements. They wanted to strip away the hypocrisy and pretense of the bourgeoisie. Most punks were unemployed or worked in lower class jobs. As Johnny Rotten proclaimed in “God Save the Queen”: “No future for you no future for me” (Cook et al.). The punks were unhappy with the power

and the music of the upper classes, and they made that quite clear through their music. The Dadaists and the punks fought the upper classes by exaggerating the vulgarities of their own lower class. They wanted to make the bourgeoisie uncomfortable, and they succeeded.

Unfortunately for the members of the movements, Dadaism and punk rock were greatly misunderstood by the general public. Some punk music is satirical, with the intended purpose of reforming the ills of society, but most listeners could not detect the satire. For example, the Dead Kennedys' song "Kill the Poor" is not literally advocating the extermination of the poor, at least not any more than Jonathan Swift was advocating the eating of the children in Ireland in *A Modest Proposal*. The song "Johnny Hit and Run Paulene" by the American band X is a song against rape and assault, but when the band performed it, the audience did not understand that it was a satirical song and became violent (*History Haimés*). Dada was also greatly misunderstood. The Dadaists were so far beyond the norm that the general public was not able to appreciate it. Dawn Ades relates the story of one infamous exhibition:

Visitors on the opening day were met by a small girl dressed in a white communion gown reciting obscene poems. A sculpture by Ernst had an axe attached with which the audience were invited to destroy it ... [One work] consisted of a small glass tank filled with water coloured red (blood-stained?) with a fine head of hair floating on the surface, a human hand (wooden) protruding from the water and an alarm clock at the bottom of the tank ... the exhibition was closed while the authorities investigated

complaints of obscenity [but was later reopened]. (“Dada and Surrealism” 118-119).

The world was not quite ready for Dadaism in the 1920s, and may still not be ready for it in the 21st century. The public perceived it as obscene and perverse, and people did not realize that that was the point: to help people recognize the obscenity of the war and modern life. Dadaism was, and is today, dismissed as strange and incomprehensible by people that do not have a background in art. Both Dada and punk rock were misunderstood by the majority of society, but they were able to affect enough of society that they have remained influential in modern society.

Although Dada and punk rock fell apart quickly, they still affect modern society. Both influenced later artists and musicians, and both developed into ways of life. As Hodin says, pop art and Neo-Dada were influenced by Dada, and Dada morphed into Surrealism only a few years after its inception (“Surrealism” 715-716). People still create art in the Dada style, and there are still punk bands forming, playing, and self-destructing in the 21st century. Some modern bands that have carried on the punk style include Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, the Dropkick Murpheys, Green Day, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. There are countless garage bands that are carrying on the underground legacy of the punk movement. Punk rock also spawned a style of dress. In every city in America there are young punks roaming the streets in torn t-shirts, black jeans, safety pins and worn out sneakers. The punks’ use of profanity has also outlasted the original movement. Their casual use of profanity led to a wider use of profanity in other styles of music, such as rap and heavy metal. Both movements became a way of life for their followers, and vestiges of these lifestyles can still be seen today. According to Mark Perry, the creator of *Sniffin’*

Glue, a British punk fanzine, “ ‘Getting into the Sex Pistols was a lifestyle choice. That’s how dramatic it was’ ” (qtd. in Blake 61). Punk was a mentality that many people identified with and turned into a lifestyle. As Spicer states, “Punk is still as bitterly relevant today as when it crystallized out of an oversaturated rock’n’roll stew three decades ago” (8). Likewise, the Dadaists immersed themselves in Dada. As Hodin states, Dada was, “A rebellious attitude of the mind, a drug, an intoxicant” (“Surrealism” 715). Dada was an existence. Modern people look back to these periods for guidance and commiseration when they find themselves in similarly drab situations. The rebellious spirit of these movements lives on into the 21st century in the hearts of disaffected youth and artists.

Were the Dadaists and the punks successful? Did they really change society like they wanted to? The Clash’s song “Revolution Rock” lays out the hopes of the punks to change the world: “Everybody smash up your seats and rock to this brand new beat / This here music mash up the nation / This here music cause a sensation” (Jones and Strummer). They may not have made as radical of an impact as they intended to, but they certainly caught the public’s attention with their unconventional antics. People still study Dadaism as a legitimate art movement, and punk rock music is selling better today than it did 30 years ago. However, neither movement has retained the purity of its original form. Both have changed over the years. Dadaism paved the way for new art styles, and punk has become much more mainstream in the past thirty years, so much so that most of it barely resembles the early days of the Ramones and Patti Smith rocking out in CBGB’s in New York City. As Andy Bennett, author of *Cultures of Popular Music*, says:

Youth style can function as an object of 'authentic' expression only as long as it remains 'undiscovered' by the market. When a subcultural style becomes incorporated into the market it is simultaneously stripped of its cultural message and becomes simply another meaningless object of mass consumption. (64)

The punk style has become so pervasive in American culture that it has lost much of its meaning. In fact, it was success and the mainstreaming of their music that killed the Sex Pistols and the Clash. They had become so well-known that suddenly they were no longer representing the underground attitude that was a main tenet of the punk philosophy. When it first came out, punk was despised, but now it is popular, which goes against its own manifesto of being a coalition of outsiders. Perhaps it will take another musical revolution to return to the underground, grungy, do-it-yourself attitude.

Although they no longer exist in their original forms and no longer stand for many of the things they used to stand for, the influence of punk music can be seen in the contemporary music industry, and Dada has had a lasting influence on modern art.

Dadaism and punk rock directly attacked the meaninglessness of life. In a postmodern world, despair is rampant. The hopes of the Dadaists and the punks had been dashed against the rocks, and they retaliated with violence and cynicism. Authority and tradition had failed them, so they had to create their own authority. The Dadaists attacked the meaninglessness of life by creating art that had no meaning. Jean Arp's piece appropriately titled *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* represents the lack of meaning in Dadaist artwork. According to Kissick, "To produce this image, Arp simply dropped pieces of torn paper in a random manner onto a field of background

color, and then glued the shapes down exactly where they fell” (386). Even the name, Dada, was randomly chosen. Dada, which means “hobbyhorse,” suggests a child’s babbling, or nonsense. The Dadaists decided that since life was meaningless and absurd, art should be meaningless and absurd. Punk rock was a reaction against the existentialism of the modern world. The Clash’s song “Lost in the Supermarket” represents this search for meaning in a meaningless and absurd world. The singer says, “I’m all lost in the supermarket / I can no longer shop happily / I came in here for that special offer / A guaranteed personality” (Jones and Strummer). The singer does not know who he is, so he tries to buy a readymade personality, but he cannot even find one to buy. The singer represents society, which was completely lost and too concerned with fitting in to be authentic. The punks wanted people to figure out who they were, and to be themselves, even if their true selves were unconventional. The punks were fed up with the pretenses of society, and they wanted everyone to know it. The Dadaists and the punks had to create their own meaning in life, and they created it out of the dirt of the streets, the despair of the political climate, and the gritty reality that they saw around them.

What these movements were able to do effectively was challenge society to look at the world in a new way and to accept reality, even if it was not pretty. Dadaism, intentionally or unintentionally, provided a social commentary on the destructive nature of war, punk put into words the dissatisfaction of a modern, materialistic society, and both attacked the meaninglessness of life. By challenging the status quo and authority, these artists were able to explore some fundamental human truths: the power of artistic expression, the importance of independent thinking and criticism of the establishment,

the human tendency towards destruction, the continual struggle for social justice, and the search for meaning in a meaningless and crazy world. In the modern world, chaos and fear reign. Maybe the time has come for another artistic revolution to shock the world back to its senses.

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