

## INTRODUCTION – Thesis, methods, and results

*Je voudrais faire un Livre qui dérange les hommes,  
qui soit comme une porte ouverte  
et qui les mène où ils n'auraient jamais consenti à aller,  
une porte tout simplement abouchée à la réalité.<sup>1</sup>*

Subversive, irreverent, and ferociously anti-authoritarian, punk questioned everything through music, poetry, literature, fashion, makeup, visual art, cinema, theater, politics, and gender. It is operated by means of shock, imposition, and impertinence, by Situationist *détournement*, and by deconstruction of images and sounds, often revealing the hypocrisies of the establishment. It has challenged and violated conventions, “good taste,” and ordinary values, prompted experimentation with drugs and exploration of ambiguous sexual identities, and thus inspired the emergence of queer culture. It has defied the relationship between the body and identity, explored themes of sex, death, and decay, impeached conventional artistry and beauty, incited apostasy, and, above all, encouraged and demanded an attitude of absolute uncompromisingness and unconditional rebellion.

Although punk is generally regarded as a musical and artistic manifestation that culminated in 1976, contemporary analyses of the movement, such as Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, have pushed that origin date back even further. It has been established that punk’s fundamental attitude of negation can be traced to historical avant-gardes of the 20th century, such as Dadaism, Lettrism, and Situationism, to the *poètes maudits* of the turn of the century, and even earlier to the dissident troubadours of the Middle Ages.

If we set ourselves on this alternative timeline of punk, going deep in time and executing an extensive search of its origins and sources of inspiration, we are taken down a hidden route of subversion, counterhistory, and blasphemy. On this underground path through the history of Western culture lives a cast of poets, thieves, and assassins. It includes François Villon, William Blake, Patti Smith, Anita Berber, Genesis P-Orridge, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Antonin Artaud, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Witkacy, Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, Brion Gysin, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Bertolt Brecht,

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<sup>1</sup>*I would like to write a Book which would drive men mad, which would be like an open door leading them where they would never have consented to go, in short, a door that opens onto reality.* Antonin Artaud, *L’Ombilic des limbes*, NRF, Paris, 1925. English translation from: Antonin Artaud and Susan Sontag (Ed.), *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, University of California Press, 1988, p. 59.

Iggy Pop, Jim Carroll, Valeska Gert, and countless others. For at least 500 years, this motley, nomadic group has been inventing and reinventing, constructing and deconstructing, and formulating and reformulating their own ideas and those they encounter on history's course, all driven by gusts of politics, polemics, and pandemics.

Punk artists were infatuated with the *poètes maudits*, and many explored their complex legacy in lyrics. They worshipped the Beat poets, French Symbolists, Futurists, Dadaists, and Fluxus artists, and, as I have claimed, the rebel troubadours of the Middle Ages. Fundamental texts read and passed around in the scene included *A Season in Hell* (1873) by Rimbaud, *Howl* (1956) by Ginsberg,<sup>2</sup> *Song of Myself* (1892) by Whitman, *The Waste Land* (1922) by T.S. Eliot, *The Songs of Maldoror* (1868) by the Comte de Lautréamont, *To Have Done With the Judgement of God* (1947) by Artaud, *Story of the Eye* (1928) by Georges Bataille, and *Le Testament* by Villon (1461).

With this alchemy of ideas across eras came a reclamation by punk of medieval thanatological concepts such as apocalypse, *ars moriendi*, *memento mori*, and *danse macabre*. As was the case in the Middle Ages—although certainly in a different manifestation—death and desolation were a social reality in the 1960s and 1970s and seemed to be present everywhere in all their banality. AIDS, drugs, and criminality were ravaging cities, poverty and disillusion infused daily life, and to many, there was no future. The context was no less than apocalyptic, and appropriately, medieval themes of death, decay, sacrifice, and the end of the world manifested in punk lyrics. Punk slogans “No future” and “Please kill me” resounded with cruel literality; the abolition of power, memory, history, future, and time were at stake here. In New York, London, Paris, Detroit, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, “youth culture was left unattended”<sup>3</sup> and unguided, and as much from boredom as rebellion, it found a home in the punk movement.

The sound and aesthetics of punk then developed into an alchemical mixture of raw punk, hard-core rock, New Wave, Dada noise, experimental sounds, sawing guitars, dark grooves, ska, reggae, and dub of diverse traditions, along with dark, irreverent, hilarious, and often brilliant lyrics referring to boys and girls, adolescence and

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Kane, *Do You Have a Band? Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City*. Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Punk Lust: Raw Provocation 1971–1985*. Exhibition curated by Carlo McCormick, Vivien Goldman, and Lissa Rivera. The Museum of Sex, November 29, 2018–November 19, 2019. Retrieved in July 2020 from: [https://www.museumofsex.com/portfolio\\_page/punk/](https://www.museumofsex.com/portfolio_page/punk/)

coming of age, demons and angels, the end of the world, de Lautréamont, Kurt Tucholsky, William Golding, Aleister Crowley, and the Bible.

Appropriately, in my own exploration of punk, I applied alchemy as a method.

The result, my punk opera, *Alchemy of Punk*, was created using processes of amalgamation, deconstruction, distillation, and transmutation.

A principal concept in its creation was the concept of the sublime. As described by Simon Morley, author of the anthology *The Sublime*:

*The word “sublime” (...) comes from the Latin sublimis (elevated; lofty; sublime) derived from the preposition sub, here meaning “up to,” and, some sources state, limen, the threshold, surround or lintel of a doorway, while others refer to limes, a boundary or limit. In the Middle Ages sublimis was modified into a verb, sublimare (to elevate), commonly used by alchemists to describe the purifying process by which substances turn into a gas on being subjected to heat, then cool and become a newly transformed solid. Modern chemistry still refers to the “sublimation” of substances but of course without its mystical alchemical connotation, whereby purification also entailed transmutation into a higher state of spiritual existence.<sup>4</sup>*

Modern concepts of the sublime evolved throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, with contributions from numerous eminent thinkers. One of those figures, of course, was Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), he called for abandoning reason altogether to achieve the sublime, proposing that the truly sublime individual “was someone willing to abandon the safe dream of ‘Apollonian’ rationality, where all is light and sanity, in order to embrace instead ‘Dionysian’ intoxication—the frenzy of the god of wine and madness.<sup>5</sup> Punk is a manifestation of Nietzschean Dionysian art, and punk poetry is a transmutation through what we could call “dirty sublimation,” or rough alchemy. In its essence, it is the tale of a tribe, a community of vagabonds and outcasts articulating their common aspirations, unifying myths, outrage, and revolt in a timeless dimension.

Therefore, in my work, I trace performative and theatrical history through the traditions of ancient Dionysia, medieval mystery plays, ballads, pastorals, folk songs, ditties, madrigals, cabarets, chansons, beggar’s operas, and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, and highlight their echoes in punk. In this thesis, I delve into the most

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<sup>4</sup>Simon Morley, “A Short History of the Sublime.” *The MIT Press Reader*, 2021. Retrieved in July 2020 from: <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-short-history-of-the-sublime/>

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*.

heterogeneous, rebellious, and unsettling forms of artistic expression that shape the basis of punk. I have endeavored to avoid firm definitions and instead used an organic approach to reflect the fluidity and living character of my object of study, punk.

Based on both archival and literary research and study through performance—with actors and musicians onstage, interviews and oral history, experimental films, a scenic opera, poetry, and compositions—my research is concerned with transgression and subversion in the punk avant-gardes. My purpose here is above all poetic and visual as I seek to challenge the existing norms of gathering and generating knowledge.

Following Michel Foucault's definition of genealogy, as formulated in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,"<sup>6</sup> I strove in my research to seize the punk phenomenon at its origins and observe its nature and dispersions; and, following Judith Butler's theory of performance, where masquerade breaks subject/object and human/non-human binaries, I strove to disclose punk's alchemical complexity through performance—its violent rejection of the sovereign, sacred, and beautiful, and praise of insufficiency, imperfection, inadequacy, and failure.

Certainly, punk can be seen as "a tribute to diletantism, a hymn for the awkward, and a short-lived moment of rebellion" (Dieter Meier<sup>7</sup>), and its actors may be seen as "a gang of the perpetually maladjusted" (Prof. Dr. Siegfried Zielinski<sup>8</sup>). But I, along with other punk scholars, have found that there is more to punk than that; there is a complex alchemy in force, of literacy, historical references, and even mastery.

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<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In: John Richardson and Brian Leiter (Eds.), *Nietzsche*. Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 139–164.

<sup>7</sup>Shared in conversation.

<sup>8</sup>Shared in conversation.