

A Critical Study of Punk Narratives and Politics Through the Music of Poly Styrene

A dissertation by Nora Kristine Tveten



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Abstract

In this dissertation I have reviewed the history of the punk genre with particular focus on developments that happened in the 1970s. I have explored theories about how capitalism and neoliberalism have influenced punk and vice versa, and how musicologist and music journalist write about the genre and subculture. In light of this a need to revise and review popular music history is revealed, because of developments in fields such as gender politics, and critical race theory. This dissertation does that by negotiating gender politics and racism in punk through a case study on the artist Poly Styrene from the 1970s punk band X-Ray Spex. I have looked at typical criteria that are used to define punk, and how she compares to other more popular bands that have been used to set those criteria. The assignment concludes that there is much to learn about punk from Poly Styrene, and that further research should be done on women and people of color in punk subculture.

Acknowledgments

Most of my musical journey has been spent idolizing male musicians, and although I would never discard the music I have loved up until this point of my life, to conscientiously delve into the world of female artists has been like opening Pandora's box (of fun, not curses upon mankind).

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	V
CONTENTS	VII
INTRODUCTION	1
METHOD	4
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
CAPITALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM	5
CAPITALISM	5
BIOPOLITICS AND NEOLIBERALISM	7
HOW PUNK HISTORY GETS TOLD	10
PUNK HISTORY	11
PUNK POLITICS	12
PUNK AND RACISM	15
BEING A WOMAN IN PUNK	17
PUNK SOUND	20
PUNK AND FASHION	21
WHAT GETS WRITTEN ABOUT WOMEN?	23
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON POLY STYRENE	25
HER HISTORY	26
IDENTITY	27
IDENTITY	29
BEING A WOMAN IN PUNK	30
OH BONDAGE! UP YOURS	31
THE ANTI-CONSUMERIST ALBUM	33
THE DAY THE WORLD TURNED DAYGLO	34
GERMFREE ADOLESCENTS	35
VOCAL SOUND	36
INSTRUMENTATION	38
VISUALS	39

PUNK HISTORY REVISED	41
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>43</u>
CAPITALISM	43
GENDER	44
RACISM	45
MENTAL HEALTH	45
AUTHENTICITY AND BIOPOLITICS	46
WHAT DOES POLY STYRENE ADD TO PUNK?	46
FURTHER RESEARCH	47
<u>LITERATURE</u>	<u>48</u>

INTRODUCTION

“Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard. But I think Oh Bondage, Up Yours!” (X-Ray Spex 2013). With her colorful clothes, big smile and commanding voice, Poly Styrene leaves no doubt about her punk opinions when she opens the song “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!”. She demands to be heard, and she is not afraid of being crass.

The punk genre that came into existence in the 1970s became a tool for young adults to voice their concerns about the troubles of the world. It was a domain that allowed anger and nihilism about what the future might hold for them. Punk was a flourishing new subculture that challenged the norm on how to dress, act and what to listen to. There was suddenly an opening to oppose the male dominated rock scene and its contradictory message about sticking it to the man while simultaneously worshipping rockstars like gods. There became more room for young women and teenagers to express feelings of anger and injustice without being expected to simultaneously have sexual appeal. However, when we talk about punk today it is mainly the all-male bands such as the Sex Pistols, Ramones, the Clash and Buzzcocks that get mentioned. Female fronted bands such as X-Ray Spex, The Slits, and Siouxsie and the Banshees only have cult followings, and the conversation too often has to be led to the topic of female performers before they are mentioned. With this as my foundation, I want to take a closer look at what the punk subculture was like in the 1970s, and how the artist Poly Styrene fits into the popular retelling of punk and the ways in which she deviates or adheres to norms associated with the genre. Additionally, I want to examine how ideas from capitalism and neoliberalism provoked punk into existence and shaped the movement, the music, and how we write punk history.

Part of the intention of this dissertation is to look into the possibility that female artists are omitted from the history of punk, and if so for what reason. Punk as a subculture still exists, but the history 1970s punk has been formed to a glorified myth. Punk style of clothing and the history of the Sex Pistols has been commodified. The tragic tale of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen has been sold as a murder mystery depicted in movies, books, and tv-series several times, with little to no regards to the privacy or personal troubles of the people involved. This commodification of specific stories has formed how we think about the subculture, and

narrowed our perception of it. My goal is to take a closer look at one of the stories that has been deemed less important in the broad narrative of music history. I want to give a more nuanced insight into what the punk movement of the 1970s was, and take a closer look at the diversity within the genre, both in terms of gender, ethnicity, and how these factors might have been affected differently by the politics punk protested.

An article published on Ballade.no sums up the recurrent discussion surrounding women in the music industry and how they are being systematically excluded. It brings up the lack of female nominees in the category “Årets låt”, which translate to “song of the year”, at the Spellemann 2022 awards that took place in April 2023 (Tolstad & Hagen, 2023). A key point is how “song of the year” becomes synonymous with “this year's commercial success”.

Women have been a part of the music industry and music history for decades, yet this is not reflected in the level of recognition they get. A popular argument that is often brought up is that there is a lack of female role models, and as a consequence less women want to become musicians. It is used in the discussion about why there is a lack of women receiving awards, or why there are few women in the popular music history canon. This argumentation can be heard especially within genres that are considered more masculine, such as punk (Leonard, 2007, p. 23).

A popular argument when there is a lack of female artist in history is if they are good enough to be remembered. Renowned musicologist Simon Frith says: ““bad” is really a political rather than an aesthetic assessment, a comment on markets, not form.” (Frith, 1998, p. 14). Therefore, it could be argued that distinctions of “good” and “bad” should not be a decisive factor in understanding why female artists are often neglected in popular music history. Frith also mentioned that what earned the most money on the popular musical market cannot be a factor in deciding whether it is “good” or “bad” music, nor if it is influential, because punk was not a commercial success in comparison to Elton John at the same time. Yet punk's cultural impact has been a lot bigger (Frith, 1998, pp. 15-16). These arguments challenge many of the arguments used to justify omitting female artists from history, awards and general recognition. Systemic exclusion from music history and the music industry must be known, understood, and acknowledged to be changed. The goal of this dissertation is to be part of that chain by analyzing punk, politics, and Poly Styrene.

In an effort to further define and delimit the boundaries of this dissertation I have chosen to compare two different general retellings of 1970s punk, with additional information from *American Popular Music* (Starr & Waterman, 2018). A book from an American point of view to get an idea of the origins of punk and the New York scene that inspired punk in Britain, and a compilation of essays written about the British punk scene. I have limited the theories of capitalism and neoliberalism to more generalized understandings of the concepts and their consequences. Both the gender theory, and the critical race theory is directly related to punk and subcultures, and is limited to what is relevant to Poly Styrene. I have chosen to only look at her music from the original run of X-Ray Spex, not their reunions, nor Poly Styrene's solo material.

I will be employing concepts of “authenticity”, “good”, and “bad” in this dissertation. These are terms that have their own discourse in the world of musicology and I will be operating with the philosophy of Jeffrey T. Nealon and Simon Frith when discussing these. Further explanation of the terms will come in the literary review. Another ambiguous term I will use in this dissertation is “music industry”, which will refer mainly to the record industry of the 1970s, but might also contain multitude meanings such as commercial success in the form of being signed by a record company, selling tickets to concerts, or having high streaming numbers (Starr & Waterman, 2018, pp. 14-16). In the analyzation of both general punk vocals and in the discourse analysis of Poly Styrene I will be using terminology from Catherine Sadolin *Complete Vocal Technique* (2021). Neoliberalism, capitalism, biopolitics, and partially post-Fordism, are terms that have their own part of the literature review, and will be defined or elaborated upon there.

Hopefully this dissertation will offer new insight on punk as a genre, challenged assumptions about punk that we take for granted, and examine how capitalism has affected its development in the public eye over the past four decades. This is the overall aim of the dissertation. Select examples and analyses will serve to delimit and highlight key ways in which the discourse surrounding punk can be revisited and potentially revised. An in-depth study of Poly Styrene will provide a lens through which to revisit and revise this discourse on punk. Of greatest significance will be a revised understanding of her role as a female front figure in a male dominated genre.

The main question to be addressed in this dissertation is therefore: How has punk evolved as a genre and how has its reception changed over the past decades, with particular focus on gender politics and capitalist involvement, seen through the career of artist Poly Styrene.

METHOD

To get a better understanding of the different parts of Poly Styrene's role in punk music, and to better answer the main question of the dissertation, I have split the literary review and the discourse analysis into four chapters:

- 1) Music, Identity, and Capitalism
- 2) An exploration of Punk
- 3) Writings about women in music
- 4) An exploration of the life and music of Poly Styrene

In the first part I have used the theories and philosophy of Mark Fisher (2009) and Jeffrey T. Nealon (2018) concerning capitalism and socio-political changes throughout the 1970s in order to get a better understanding of the environment surrounding Poly Styrene and punk subculture.

In the second part I have reviewed different literature that aims to retell the story of punk. I have split the information from these sources into history, politics, racism, being a woman in punk, and the looks and sound of punk. This part is to give an introduction to punk history, and to look into the different aspects that popular media has discarded or changed in their retellings.

In the third part I have looked into how research and writing about women in subcultures is approached. This is a more general exploration of gender and punk, and what type of struggles female performers might encounter, as well as an exploration of patriarchal struggles in relation to capitalism and the music industry.

In the fourth part I have reviewed literature and documentaries about Poly Styrene's life, and performed an analysis inspired by discourse analysis of some of her songs and lyrics. I have used the theories from the three previous parts to take a closer look at how her music was shaped and if it diverges from the punk norm of the 1970s. Among other things I will take a closer look at her vocal style, visual look, and how the instrumentation used in X-Ray Spex

differs from the traditional punk band. Additionally I will discuss the overall topic of anti-consumerism of X-Ray Spex first album in relation to Nealon and Fishers theories about capitalism.

I intend to address issues or topics related to gender, ethnicity, class, and mental health and look closer into how these play into Styrene's career. Additionally I hope to be able to decipher the larger social structures surrounding both her success, and why she is rarely talked about in punk history. The general methodological approaches I will be drawing inspiration from are interpretive and critical approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Capitalism and Neoliberalism

Punk was a reactionary movement, and in this part of the dissertation I will try to explain partially what it was that punk reacted to. It is a complex topic with several contradictions and I will look into different -isms that instigated punk and shape how we write and read about it today. Punk aspired to be anti-capitalist because the people who created it were affected by capitalism, but they couldn't escape participation. They choose to point out specific results of capitalism, such as consumerism and mass production using cheap materials. I hope to give an insight into the effects of capitalism, and neoliberalism, how it affects us, and how we try to understand this effect by creating art to protest it. Further on, capitalism affects how we end up writing about punk because we end up writing about the ones that make the most capital in the long run and continue to shape how we think about punk. By including this in the dissertation it can help understand and create guidelines that help us give a more accurate picture of what punk was.

Capitalism

Capitalism is what rules the political and economic system, it has become reality itself (Fisher, 2009, pp. 3-4). The reality of capitalism is that we live in a contradiction which ends up creating confusion between our values, our identity, and how we have to live our lives (Fisher, 2009, pp. 4-5). Punk encapsulated this confusion and protested it with a genuine belief that they could change the future. Unfortunately the 1980s established capitalist reality as the only option, and with Margaret Thatcher in England, and Ronald Reagan in the US

fronting it as having no other alternative, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Fisher, 2009, p. 8).

Anti-capitalism is an inevitable part of capitalism, and will be exemplified in the next chapter both by the 1960s hippy movement and 1970s punk, it never manages to operate outside of the capitalist reality. Punk music criticizing capitalism but having to be part of the record industry for the bands to make a living is taking part in capitalism. A lot of consumers and creators take an ironic distance to capitalism, but continue to engage in capitalist exchange. The belief seems to be that if we know it is bad it is not that bad to continue doing it. Capitalism depends on its consumers to reject the responsibility (Fisher, 2009, pp. 12-13). The “Do It Yourself” movement of punk was an opposition to modernization because modernization aims to make it impossible or impractical for small communities or individuals to create what they need such as clothes and tools. Instead the dominant oligarchy aims to make a profit by mass producing materials that are needed by everyone in everyday life for as little cost as possible and sell it with profit (Fisher, 2009, p. 17). One example of this was the increasing use of plastic as a cheap material to create tools for everyday life. The anti-consumerism in X-Ray Spex lyrics gets its philosophy from experiencing this shift where you lose connection to material value because you are no longer the one who is making it.

Another part of capital realism that influenced Poly Styrene in particular is its effect on mental health. Fisher's theory is that mental health problems are neurologically instantiated but the causation of the problem is political. As I understand Fisher, what he means by this is that a lot of mental health diagnoses are mainly seen as a problem because it stops the person from participating in a capitalist society. A problem such as depression, which is the most treated mental issue in Britain, is worsened by stress. Stress is growing *because* of capitalism. Therefore an institution, often privatized, is invented to cure it. This is one of the reasons capitalism is inherently dysfunctional. The cost for it to work is too high (Fisher, 2009, p. 19). Additionally the treatment of a health or behavior condition as if it were a medical condition rules out questions of circumstances or systemic causation (Fisher, 2009, p. 21). In short: The problem is triggered by capitalism and instead of removing the problem there is invented a new profitable solution to the symptoms of the problem. This creates a continuous cycle (Fisher, 2009, p. 37).

Mark Fisher theorized, through the research of Marxist economist Christian Marazzi, that capitalism and post-Fordism mirrored the states of bi-polar disorder. The manic period mirrors the economic growth fueled by the delusion that it can go on forever, and the depression mirrors the inevitable crash. This makes the mood of the population mirror the state of the economy, and is why we get “economic depressions” and concepts such as the Norwegian “Jappetiden”, which was a period of economic growth. This affects the general population, worsens mental health, and creates the illusion that anyone can be a successful entrepreneur. This is relevant in the way that it can be theorized that capitalism worsens bi-polar disorder by systematically fueling the mania and worsening the depression. (Fisher, 2009, pp. 35-37).

Most punk lyrics criticize capitalism directly, or a problem that’s a result of capitalism. One of the topics that you hear in punk lyrics, and that informed punk philosophy is how, at work, being satisfactory is not enough, you need to be above and beyond. There is less of a pyramid workplace hierarchy, and more a flattening where everyone is an equal (Fisher, 2009, pp. 39-40). This should be good, but it leads to the pressure of constant improvement because you become your own quality control. By losing contact with those on top, who no longer have their office in the workplace you end up working under the belief that the Other will arrive at any given moment to inspect your work (Fisher, 2009, pp. 48-53). This state of bureaucracy is a common topic for punk lyrics, and the feeling of dread created by this paradox helped inspired the nihilism punk is all about.

Biopolitics and Neoliberalism

I have selected this literature, despite its main focus being American popular music, because of Nealon’s argument that popular music is the twentieth century's most important art form because we so closely tie it to our identity, and because we use it a lot in everyday life, it applies to the general western world (Nealon, 2018, pp. 5-6). Music gives you an escape from what is expected from you, and it can help you create an identity different from your peers and find others that are similar to you because you share taste in music. Identity is not a set destination to find, but something that is constantly evolving and changing based on actions (Nealon, 2018, p. 70).

In a further exploration of capitalism we need to look at the ideology of neoliberalism and the illusion of eternal growth. The way Neoliberalism gets defined by Mark Fisher is through the

desire to eradicate the state, or in gentler terms, to have marked control of politics instead of politics controlling the market. There is a wish for no price controls, an unregulated market, and making it easier to trade. It is done by privatizing and giving the state less influence on the economy (Fisher, 2009, pp. 2-4). Neoliberalism and modernism present themselves with great confidence and self-assurance as the norm of how society should be run (Fisher, 2009, pp. 16-18). Even though neoliberalism got discredited after 2008, the belief that the market will self-regulate still very much exists (Fisher, 2009, p. 78). The results of this are often still very much apparent in the music industry in relation to artist diversity, the lack of women, LGBTQ+, and people of different ethnicities. It was evident in the attempt by Spellemann to excuse the lack of female nominees in the category “song of the year”, which is a topic I will return to later on. It denies any responsibility for the outcome, or the history that resulted in the outcome, and lays blame only on the consumers.

Jeffrey T. Nealon (2018) takes a closer look at how neoliberalism affected our idea of identity, and by extension how neoliberalism influenced punk. He uses Michel Foucault’s theory and terminology to understand this. Through the twentieth century there was a shift in how we think of our identity that Foucault called the shift from “discipline” to “biopower”. Previously individuals had a series of roles to fulfill that they defined themselves by, such as what your family relation was, or your profession. This was a Fordist understanding of factory society. In neoliberalist thinking and consumer society every individual's job is to become yourself, and not let outer factors define you. Especially those factors that are set by the government. This shift creates a hostility towards following the previous ideology so that it is viewed as almost totalitarian. This again creates the illusion that nothing we do is about optimizing our community, but rather about optimizing our individual life. This is biopower, and it has become the domineering logic of western society. Nealon suggests that the ideology of biopower and individuality has been taught to us in part through popular music, because it is the artform that surrounds us the most, and because we use it to define our identity. Additionally music's logic of authenticity has furthered this because its main purpose is to create a feeling of individualism; “I listen to punk, and that separates me from the rest of mass society” (Nealon, 2018, pp. 8-9). It ties to identity because it feels like a break from a rigid society where everything you do is to teach you to comply and be disciplined. Music as an important part of your identity is particularly noticeable for teens because it is a period of life where you have very little control of your own schedule. You go to school, go to work or activities after school, do homework, and then go to bed (Nealon, 2018, pp. 15-16).

One of the most influential things to punk opposition was rock and the concept of “authenticity”. To clarify the use of quotation marks: authenticity as a term in cultural studies falls into the same vein as “good” and “bad”, and is hard to define. As Simon Frith puts it “If social relations are constituted in cultural practice, then our sense of identity and difference is established in the process of discrimination.” (Frith, 1998, p. 18). This is echoed in how Jeffrey T. Nealon identifies rock authenticity. It is not about pointing out what is “true” rock, but to exclude whatever is not (Nealon, 2018, p. 55). Punk was not just a cry for the end of rock authenticity, but a breach through the veil of capitalism to “name the moment where there is no outside anymore: we’re all inside the machine.” (Nealon, 2018, p. 60). Unfortunately this type of anti-capitalism cannot remain in its bubble in a capitalist world, and punk has fallen prey to the same destiny (Nealon, 2018, p. 60). The idea of authenticity by exclusion is for an example resonated in the commonly used saying that punk is dead.

Punk was not the first genre to claim that their music was authentic. In most of American popular music history white musicians claimed their music to be authentic when in reality it was stolen from black cultures and communities. There is a history of white mainstream media stealing aesthetics from black culture throughout the 20th century in America (Nealon, 2018, pp. 37-39). The history of music and cultural theft is similar in Britain, and British punk was largely inspired by reggae music and had a strong kinship to the genre. Nealon speculates that part of the reason for this phenomena is partially the myth that the black experience is more authentic because of the additional pressure of racism in everyday life, and thereby their music is experienced by a white audience as “cooler” and more sincere (Nealon, 2018, pp. 39-40). The description of alienation from society resonates with everyone, but a white musician chooses this alienation, and will always have the option to return to societal norms, whereas a black musician does not have the same option (Nealon, 2018, p. 41).

Marketing under neoliberalism has shifted from mass producing a product to producing niche products to specific consumers to convince the consumers that they are defined by their products, not their actions. This is perhaps one of the more noticeable changes in today's market (Nealon, 2018, pp. 11-12). You are expected to identify with what you wear, own, and listen to, not what you do. There is of course also a positive angle to this: musical taste, and in extension subculture, can get you in touch with a community. In a capitalist society individualism is important for the system to work (Nealon, 2018, p. 11). The consumer must

not be made aware about the line of production, because it might highlight that the product is unethical, and that there are consequences to a product that outweighs its value. Therefore, the establishment of a community where you get in touch with people from all social classes, talk about consumerism, and learn to “do it yourself” is positive. As Nealon says through Foucault: “We are connected, rather than disconnected, by our everyday struggles with power...” (Nealon, 2018, p. 70).

Punk and other genres that are plagued with the discussion of authenticity did not sell out. Sell-out is another term that gets debated the same way authenticity does. It usually refers to abandoning political or aesthetical values to earn more money. In an entirely commodified business where both original, and new image or persona becomes “self-branding” the action of “selling out” loses its meaning (Klein, Meier, & Powers, 2017, pp. 222-223). In a similar way, capitalism has morphed into how we form our identity, and popular music has developed a system for subjects to create their identity by exclusion of inauthentic music in a field where everything is commodified (Nealon, 2018, p. 33). I will elaborate on how 1970s punk was a reaction towards the contradiction 1960s rock had become. But to properly understand how it became a contradiction, and how the same happened to 1970s punk, we have to see the development of the 1960s rock as a natural development under capitalism.

How Punk History Gets Told

...at a very basic level, we can say that punk was/is a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976 to 1979, and was most visible in Britain and America. It had its primary manifestation in music - and specifically in the disaffected rock and roll bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash. (Sabin, 1999, pp. 2-3)

This quote describes how most people know punk today and this understanding has been the foundation for how I have explored the genre. To define punk in a way that includes all the factors of what the musical genre and subculture is would be difficult. It has been used to describe a period of popular music history, and an ongoing genre. I have chosen to look at punk in relation to some parameters that makes it easier to relate to Poly Styrene. These parameters are the history, the politics, including racism and what it was like being a woman in punk, the sound and the fashion.

Punk History

When the history of punk gets retold it starts out in America with a variety of bands that inspired and started the subculture. Roger Sabin suggests that punk started in New York, America in 1973-74 (Sabin, 1999, p. 3). In similar fashion Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain started their story of punk mainly in New York but also in Michigan and California, but in the late 1960s (McNeil & McCain, 2016). As described in the book *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3* (2018) punk's ancestors are the bands the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls, both from New York. It also include The Stooges from Michigan. All three bands influenced the punk sound, attitude, and image (Starr & Waterman, 2018, p. 436). Regardless of its exact origins in America punk eventually found its way to Britain in the late 1970s where its defining element was introduced: class politics (Sabin, 1999, p. 3).

Although the British scene introduced punk's key element, the American scene formed the original expression and philosophy of punk. In *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* the story of punk is told all the way from the late 1960s until the early 1990s. Through a collection of interviews we receive insight into the early 1970s New York scene with artists and bands such as Iggy Pop, Pattie Smith, Ramones, and the Clash. It details the different bands career development, their rise to fame, and how the punk sound and attitude developed in New York in a small environment of musicians and artists. There was a desire to shock the audience and a nihilism in the art. There is an abundance of interviews with male musicians, and very few female artists are mentioned unless they tie into the male musicians' story, mainly romantically or sexually. The book has its main focus on the art scene where the genre had its origins, and it details elements that came together to become punk. The story is riddled with drugs, sex, and purposely getting attention for being outrageous (McNeil & McCain, 2016). It is one of the most popular books about punk in mainstream media, yet it doesn't include how punk as a subculture captivated the teenagers that made it into a movement. The sole focus lies on the artist that created the original expression, not its reception.

What is most often defined as punk in its original form is the development of the genre that happened in England from the mid to late 1970s, and in particular the career of the Sex Pistols (Sabin, 1999, pp. 2-3). Sex Pistols is often the first band that comes to mind when you talk about punk, and partially that is because the story of punk is often told by the timeline of the

band's success (Sabin, 1999, p. 23). The band was largely inspired by the American band Ramones, which is often credited as being the first punk band (Starr & Waterman, 2018, p. 438).

Sex Pistols was formed in 1975 and was managed by Malcom McLaren, owner of the clothing store Sex, and previously manager of New York Dolls. Glen Matlock, Paul Cook and Steve Jones were introduced by McLaren to John Lydon, more famously known as Johnny Rotten, and they formed the band. They had a rapid rise to success and were signed by EMI records in 1976 and released the singles "Anarchy in the UK" before the end of the year. In the same month they released their single they appeared on a live television interview where Lydon shockingly uttered an obscenity with the consequence being that the single was withdrawn from record stores and they were dropped by their label within a month. In spring 1977 Glen Matlock was replaced by John Ritchie, who became known as Sid Vicious. They were signed and dropped by another label before finally being signed by Virgin Records and released their second single "God Save the Queen", and released their only studio album *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. Then the band broke up before the album tour was over (Starr & Waterman, 2018, p. 442).

One of punk's most famous stories is that of Sid Vicious, who started a turbulent relationship with Nancy Spungen which ended with him being imprisoned for her murder in 1979. The record company paid his bail and he overdosed on heroin and died shortly thereafter (Starr & Waterman, 2018, p. 442). This story in particular has been made into movies and tv-series several times, and is perhaps the most commodified story in punk. It has become the blueprint for how punks are views in popular media: young men and women with leather jackets, prone to substance abuse and violence. The interest in punk and punk stories from the 1970s are still prominent in today's society, but oftentimes the story of punk is retold with focus on The Sex Pistols and a romanticized version of what punk was (Sabin, 1999, pp. 1-2).

Punk Politics

There is a belief that the British punk scene was outspokenly and conspicuously left-wing, and that the preferred political ideology was an undecided version of anarchism. There is no proof that punks were more political than the average citizen at the time (Sabin, 1999, p. 4).

Punk had no set agenda in the same way as the 1960s hippy movement. Philosophically there was not one unifying idea in the 1970s about what punk was. The hippies believed in an utopian revolution that could be achieved by non-violence and pacifist means, whereas punks were painted as to be ideology's evil twin that believed in anarchism, violence and chaos. The truth is a lot more nuanced, and punk did draw a lot of its philosophy from hippies. Punk might not have a "Peace and Love" slogan, not the same stance against war, but there were some unifying attitudes that could be identified: The consciousness of class-based politics, an opposition towards bureaucracy, the idea of "Doing It Yourself", and an emphasis on negationism were some of them. These attitudes were neither right wing, nor left wing in origin, but came as a result of the subculture consisting of working-class kids. Another recognizable unifying belief that is often reflected in punk fashion and music is the belief in spontaneity (Sabin, 1999, pp. 2-3). The debate about punk philosophy and politics have spawned theories of how punk was only influenced by situationism, meaning that whatever happened was a result of the circumstances and that punk was no more political than everyone else at the time. Nevertheless, this theory has been disproved. Situationism did have an impact, but no substantial influence (Sabin, 1999, p. 4). Punk in the 1970s had no traceable political agenda that united all punks.

Although bands were not all that interested in taking political standpoints, some political views were used in creating an image or persona. One particular case is the one of Malcom McLaren when he tried to front The New York Dolls as communists. He was acting as their manager in the early 1970s, and thought fronting the band as communist would get attention in the American market. No one in the band, nor McLaren himself, subscribed to communist ideology (McNeil & McCain, 2016, pp. 212-213). The Sex Pistols fronted themselves with an anarchist ideology, although it is not known exactly what form of anarchy, nor is there any proof that it was a widespread ideology among punk (Sabin, 1999, pp. 4-6).

The idea that the subculture created space and liberation for marginalized voices to be heard is a popular belief. Punk's involvement with Rock Against Racism might be to blame for this reputation. 1970s punk gets framed as a place where women and gays and lesbians could be themselves safely, and where anti-racist sentiments were strong. Unfortunately there is plenty of evidence against these claims, and later on in this dissertation racism existence in punk communities gets elaborated upon (Sabin, 1999, p. 4). Another reason why punk is associated with the left is because a lot of journalists, zine creators, and big music magazines such as

NME and Sounds subscribed to a left wing world-view. They wanted to claim punk as their political ally (Sabin, 1999, p. 200). Subsequently, punk has been written about through the lens of the 1980s and 1990s as something ideologically much more pure than it actually was (Sabin, 1999, p. 202).

Punk might not have been political at its core, but it was formed by its political circumstances. The New York scene where it originated was all about annihilation and destruction, which came as a result of the political circumstances in America and the world at the time. The recent loss of the Vietnam War, the resignation of Richard Nixon, and the bankruptcy of New York that was poorly handled by then President Gerald Ford created the collective emotions that punk was inspired by. It created a sort of decadence that urged people to be less well behaved (McNeil & McCain, 2016, p. 278). Additionally, in the music scene punk tried to oppose the “authenticity” of rock that had dominated the 1960s and early 1970s. These rock bands sang about being regular people with relatable problems all while becoming rich and famous. Living through the ongoing political shift that resulted in the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and the negative economic shift in the United States and Britain from the 1960s to the late 1970s forced culture to come with a reaction (Nealon, 2018, p. 59).

By 1980 neoliberalism, and its reaction to the economic cultural “excesses” of the 1960s, was in the process of being installed by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and by Ronald Regan’s election in the United States. As Marcus points out, punk rock’s negation works largely to dramatize this historical situation at the dawn of every-man-for-himself neoliberalism and the parallel commodification of everything, even - maybe especially - authentic oppositional or subcultural identity. (Nealon, 2018, p. 59)

Part of the reaction to the rise in neoliberalism, the idea of eternal growth and a free market with little to no regulations, was the ideology of making music that was “unsellable” (Sabin, 1999, p. 225), or having an image that could not be capitalized (Sabin, 1999, p. 25). This ideology was sometimes used as an excuse to use imagery tied to Nazism, which I will elaborate on in the “Punk and Racism” part of this chapter.

The myth of authenticity is full of contradictions, which can be seen and heard in how we view punk today. Punks were against commercial fashion but got their own “uniform” that could potentially be very expensive. The subculture was full of political contradictions such

as how some were very far left while others flirted with Nazi imagery. Many lyrics had a nihilist “I don’t give a fuck” attitude, but it is hard to be authentic when you do not care about anything (Starr & Waterman, 2018, p. 438). In 1950s rock, authenticity the way we know it in relation to rock and punk was not yet that important. It really took hold in the music scene in the 1960s with folk music. Within this genre the idea of an authentic artist and audience was used to create an opposition towards commodification, consumerism, and alienation of modern life (Nealon, 2018, p. 67). An artist would create a persona that was supposed to be their authentic selves, and voice their “correct” opinions. Fans would again adopt their stance and personality traits which become a sort of mass individuality, which by made it lose its meaning because it is a contradiction. In the 1970s punk lyrics doubled down on the “I’m not like everybody else” sentiment that was so dominant in folk and rock by separating themselves as a group. By saying things in a similar vein to “I’m not one of those sheep that follow the government” they continued the mass authenticity logic and truly cemented the idea of the importance of authenticity (Nealon, 2018, p. 68).

Punk and Racism

As previously mentioned, there exists an idea that punk was very anti-racist. Partially because punk had close ties to the Reggae scene, Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. Punk has been portrayed as more left-wing in the media, especially in the mid 1980s when punk had its ten year anniversary. Despite this, there was more political ambiguity in the punk scene. There was room for right-wing interpretation, and it became a fertile ground for the fascist music scene that followed 1970s punk. Additionally, there was a rise in the fascist party National Front in England in the 1970s, and they saw their chance to recruit new members from subcultures. Punk youth were already in opposition to the people in power, which made them a natural target (Sabin, 1999, pp. 199-200).

Racism was a debated topic in both The Conservative Party and in The Labour Party, but none of them did much to tackle the systematic racism and violence that occurred by the police and in court. In pop culture there were racist gags in tv-shows and in the book publishing industry. There was a lot of it, and those who actively wanted to work against racism were quick to claim punk as their own. There were a lot of left leaning music journalists that wanted punk to be a part of activism against racism, and therefore pushed the view of the genre in that direction (Sabin, 1999, p. 200). This view continued on into academic writing about punk, and was cemented by the ten year anniversary of punk in

Britain. The truth about the 1970s scene however is a lot more nuanced (Sabin, 1999, pp. 200-202). A lot of activism in Britain at the time was concerned about racism towards Afro-Caribbeans, whereas Asians, who experienced a lot of violence and racism at the time, were not cared about the same way. There were a lot of immigrants in Britain from South Asia that came after the disintegration of the British Empire and its colonies following the second world war. The postwar immigration boom caused a lot of racism and racist politics aimed towards South Asians (Sabin, 1999, pp. 203-205).

There did exist openly fascist punk bands and some of them used punk rhetoric to justify their actions. They used the punk philosophy of “telling the truth” as an opportunity to say what they considered to be wrong with the country. By using punk to express their concern about the “race problem” they remind us that music used to express political views is not solely done by the left (Sabin, 1999, pp. 207-208). Both skinheads and antisemitism was also prominent, and bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees had lyrics such as “...too many jews for my liking” in their song “Love in a Void”. They explained it to be about the existence of “too many fat businessmen” which is just a continuation of antisemitic rhetoric about Jewish people (Sabin, 1999, p. 208).

A lot of bands were not outspokenly racist, but did not condemn racist fans. Sometimes because they could not afford to lose fans, and other times because they wanted to unite working class youth despite having different political stances. One could have a great moral discussion about this topic and whether not alienating the National Front youth could help make them more liberal, or if it would recruit more punk fans to join fascist movements. It certainly did not create a welcoming environment for minorities. Most of Punk's racist leanings have been edited out of history and have not been included in documentaries, on album compilations, or in movies about the bands (Sabin, 1999, p. 210). Several punk artists did distance themselves from their racist past and continued on doing anti-racist work, such as The Banshees and Joy Division, which could partially explain why their history of racism has not been brought up (Sabin, 1999, p. 211).

...punk was probably no more or no less racist than the society that birthed it. To argue that any subculture was, or is, any more ‘progressive’ politically than the mainstream culture it complements is highly contentious, and punk certainly exhibited no fundamental, gravitational pull to the left. To put it in more dramatic terms: sure,

punks were angry about lengthening dole queues, the privileges of royalty, the anguish of boredom, and police brutality. But they were also angry about ‘Pakis’ moving into their neighborhoods, Arabs buying everything in Harrods, Puerto Ricans nicking their girlfriends, and there being too many Jews for their liking. This aspect to the movement existed, and was very vibrant. To underplay it by ignoring punk’s historical context is not only a failure of investigative rigor, but a disservice to those who fought against racism at the time. (Sabin, 1999, p. 212).

In *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (2016) there are many mentions of the use of the Swastika and the popularity of Nazi memorabilia among different punk bands in the American scene (McNeil & McCain, p. 89). Mary Harron talks about how everyone outside of the scene thought punk was a right-wing Nazi thing. She says it was all just for shock tactics (McNeil & McCain, 2016, p. 270). While it was a different time, the memory of the second world war and the civil rights movement could provide context to why the use of hate symbols were wrong. There are little mentions of political activism in any of the interviews from the book, nor any collective ideological ideas.

Being a woman in punk

While punk did not have definite political leaning it did change the music scene for women. They were allowed to be angry, political, and non-feminine. Folk music of the 1960s had been political, but not without a certain degree of femininity and softness. There was less room for the anger that was expressed through punk. While previously they were expected to be sex objects as well as virtuoso performers, women now had the option to be neither while still participating in the music scene.

However, exploitation remained a problem, and there was little room to be delicate, insecure or self-deprecating if you wanted to succeed in the business (O'Brien, 2020, p. 108).

In the 1970s there was a wave of girl bands and female front figures that expressed themselves angrily through punk, but by the mid 1980s the hype had seemed to fade. The female artist that had had success lost traction in the media with the “end of punk” in the late 1970s. Those who survived were the ones that absorbed pop into their sound, or where the artist image played a lot more on sex and femininity, like Blondie and The Go Go’s. It was not until the 1990s that the rise of angry all girl bands made a comeback (O'Brien, 2020, p. 126).

The difference between what kind of female vocals were “acceptable” and “non-acceptable” in punk can be heard in X-Ray Spex’s “Oh Bondage! Up Yours”, which Simon Frith calls one of the most important tracks of punk in Britain (Frith, 1998, p. 195). The lyrics reference sexual bondage that Styrene had seen in the popular punk clothing store *Sex*, while its subtextual meaning is that of a young girl wanting to be heard. Her technique of singing is far from feminine and does not demonstrate how “proper” women should behave. The screeching vocals are not a result of a bad singer, but a deliberate choice to use it that way. By doing this X-Ray Spex challenges the idea that female voices have a “natural” sound and the idea that women are biologically unable to sing with the same demanding nature as men (Frith, 1998, p. 195). This way of performing music and singing was what separated punk from rock. Women were allowed to show anger and go beyond the social limitation of their sex.

There was a drug scene among punks in the 1970s, and bands such as Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls both got band problems because of their drug use. For women in a subculture taking drugs and hard drinking has more nuanced risks than just addiction and overdosing. McRobbie writes about how girls in subcultures were more careful and found less appeal to drug use than boys because of the risk of being sexually assaulted, being less appealing as a partner, and the risk of becoming less attractive (McRobbie, 1991, pp. 28-30). This gives us the information that sexual abuse was a risk, even if punk has been connected to Rock Against Sexism (O'Brien, 2020, p. 106). Although McRobbie carried out her study on teenagers in the 1990s, it is not unlikely that being appealing to men was important to young heterosexual women also in the 1970s punk scene. On that note, it is essential to remember that even though something is important to a young woman on a personal level, it can coexist with the beliefs that girls and women are allowed to express anger, and that beauty ideals are bad. Regardless, drugs and drinking culture were prominent, but often women seemingly participated less.

There were many punks that were hesitant to call themselves feminist (Whiteley, 2000, p. 108). Even though a lot of subcultures are framed as a collective of people having the same political opinions, that is not true. Subcultures are a lot more nuanced and have a tendency to originate within certain social classes and youths from the same economical background before becoming more popular and reaching a bigger audience (McRobbie, 1991, pp. 18-20). Famous subcultures have in many created a greater focus on “youth politics” and how young

people form their identity and political opinions (McRobbie, 1991, pp. 32-33). Although feminism and punk are considered to be closely tied together today, that was not the case in the 1970s. They are often associated partially because they both wanted to change the view of what femininity was and therefore took use of some of the same styles and fashions (McRobbie, 1991, p. 32).

Part of the reason why punk has its political reputation is because of the lyrics. Political or opinionated lyrics were not unique to punk, it had existed both in rock, folk, and jazz, just to mention a few. Previously the opinion was that women were controlled by their emotions, and could therefore not give rational opinions on politics. Whereas men were thought to be able to control their emotions and could therefore take a step outside of them to give their political opinion (Reddington, 2012, p. 115). If a woman wanted to be angry about politics she still had to sound nice, as illustrated in folk music. But in the punk genre women refused to comply with this standard, and instead of making music targeted at a gendered group, rock music with its target audience being men, and pop music with its target audience being women, they instead made music *from women* (Reddington, 2012, p. 118). Women were allowed, and even expected, to express themselves with anger in punk.

The media had a tendency to pit female performers up against each other, and would criticize a female instrumentalist or vocalist for not being good enough. Particularly if a band had a simple musical aesthetic with, for example, simple bass lines, the bass player would be criticized for being a bad musician by the press. If a woman played complicated lines or had a more aggressive style of playing she would be praised for how she had transcended her gender and played like a man. Additionally, if you were accused of being a bad musician you might be less criticized if the reviewer thought you were sexy to look at (Reddington, 2012, pp. 48-49). This naturally caused a lot of stress on female artists, both on their performance as musicians, and their looks. I will come back to this and present an example on how the press created tension between the two female performances in the original lineup to X-Ray Spex.

The 1990s brought a new wave of all female and female fronted bands that reached popularity, like Bikini Kill and Hole. With the creation of the fanzine Riot Grrrl there was suddenly an opposition to the popular trends of 1990s femininity, magazines and beauty ideals. Female bands started playing with aesthetics where they wore almost childish clothes in a more sexualized way. This included visible underwear, silk slip dresses, red lipstick and

writings of degrading words on their bodies. This was a way of protesting against pedophilia, beauty ideals, and sexual abuse (O'Brien, 2020, p. 129). Some 1970s punk women felt like these trends were a mockery of what they had fought for. Sheila Whiteley explains this view through the theory of Luce Irigaray: The female sexualizing herself by mimicking patriarchal definitions of femininity takes the risk of catering to a sexualized gaze and therefore might be drawn back into what she wishes to avoid. The viewer regards it as an invite to a sexual response (Whiteley, 2000, p. 16).

Subcultures normally get media attention when something extreme happens such as violence, murder, or something shocking. These incidents are more often tied more to men, which again makes subcultures get framed as consisting of masculine violent boys, and promiscuous girls (McRobbie, 1991, p. 4). Research done on punk tends to be on factors that earned the most media attention. Writings on women and girls in subculture has to be done deliberately because societal norms make women and girls act differently when interacting with subcultures. Famous cultural theorist and feminist Angela McRobbie collects a list of questions that could help when researching women in punk:

Are [girls] present but invisible? Where present and visible, are their roles the same, but more marginal than the boys, or are they quite different? Is the position of girls specific to the subcultural option, or do their role reflect the more general social subordination of women in mainstream culture? If subcultural options are not readily available to girls, what are the differences but complementary ways in which girls organize their cultural life? Are these, in their own terms, subcultural? (McRobbie, 1991, p. 3).

Punk Sound

Punk music has a distinct style that separates it noticeably from rock. In this part I will try to break down what separates the punk sound from its precursor. Ramones influenced a lot of British punk with their garage band sound. The term is used to describe a band that sounds like neighbor kids meeting up to have band practice in a garage. It indicates a rather rough sound played by amateur musicians. The Ramones had catchy melody lines inspired by pop music, played at a fast tempo, with short songs. With songs that were rarely more than two and a half minutes long there was room for a lot more repertoire on a 30 minute gig. Because of the opposition towards virtuous rock music, and the band's limited skills there were rarely

any guitar solos. Lyrics were often nihilistic with a dose of humor, criticizing authority and a middle class lifestyle. All of the band's members came from middle class backgrounds, but fronted themselves with a rough exterior. The Ramones played several gigs in England and were a big inspiration to Sex Pistols. The sound, length of songs, and thematic lyrics have become a staple for punk sound as we know it (Starr & Waterman, 2018, pp. 438-441). Ramones and Sex Pistols have become almost synonymous with the punk sound and aesthetic. However, Sabin notes that punk was a much broader category containing mutually exclusive tendencies, and that there was more inclusion happening while the genre developed than what we consider to be punk today. This goes for both clothing style and musical sound (Sabin, 1999, p. 22). As in rock the standard instrumentation was guitars, bass, drums and vocals. The Ramones album *Ramones* set the standard for what the punk sound was: the guitar acted as “white noise” or a wall of sound, while the drums created texture and broke it up (Savage, 2023). The vocals were less about singing and more about yelling out the lyrics with the most common technique being used was overdrive with distortion. It was often sung without the right support, causing straining on the voice (Sadolin, 2021, pp. 25-27). I will explore punk vocal techniques further in the analysis of Poly Styrene’s vocals.

Part of what made punk sound sound so unique was the anti-virtuous and anti-rock sentiment because it created a sound that had the potential to be unappealing for a rock audience. Radio stations were less likely to play punk songs both because of their lyrics and, for some bands, their public controversies. It might not be profitable in the long run, but the cultural impact has been huge. As Andy Medhurst says in one of the essays collected by Roger Sabin:

It still sounds like a hell of a racket - a fact which delights the old fan in me enormously while simultaneously ensuring that I’ll choose other sorts of sound to accompany daily domestic life. X-Ray Spex’s ‘Oh Bondage! Up Yours!’ was never designed to be background music, and it still refuses, with commendably, magnificent stropiness, to occupy that role. (Sabin, 1999, p. 225).

Punk and Fashion

The image of punk is often presented as black clothing, leather jackets, safety pins and mohawks or other similarly unconventional hairstyles. But the traditional punk style is not an accurate representation of the fashion that you would see at concerts. If you went to a punk gig the audience was wearing all kinds of things, both popular styles and other forms of

unconventional fashion. Additionally the leather jackets, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood designs, and punk-style clothes were expensive, so some of those who wore them would be considered posers for spending so much money and subscribing to a consumerist lifestyle (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 47). The fashion of punk has been put in a wider consumerist framework throughout the years since subculture came into existence, and has as a consequence been reframed as a very specific style (Sabin, 1999, p. 225). The fashion store Sex, run by McLaren and Westwood, had a vulgar and shocking aesthetic inspired by the New York scene, kink, and the queer-community. With this specific style you were supposed to get looked at. It allowed women to explore gender, and dress unappealing to the consumerist eye. You did not have to be skinny, youthful or conventionally pretty to dress punk (O'Brien, 2020, pp. 106-107). Seeing as McLaren was heavily involved with the Sex Pistols, and Westwood became a big name in the fashion industry, it is not at all strange that their legacy has triumphed over the diversity punk fashion had.

Another important name in relation to punk fashion and image is James Reid. Sex Pistols is often the first band that comes to mind when you talk about punk, and James Reid created a lot of the visuals that are related to them. Through different designs and images he helped formulate punk's visual identity and reinforce the genre's critique of pop and capitalism (Sabin, 1999, p. 23). One of his, and punks, most controversial visuals was the use of the Swastika. Reid used it a lot in his work, and it is an unavoidable part of punk's visual history. It is a striking contrast to Rock Against Racism, which was big at the time. Many punk bands were heavily involved with RAR. The use of the Swastika has been criticized both now and then, and seen through today's eyes it is hard to understand how it could be used ironically. Reid has justified its use as a comment and an opposition on how rock was commercialized. He meant the contradictions of late-capitalism were clearly visible in the power relations between rock bands and its fans. At festivals audiences were expected to passively watch their idols and worship them as demi-Gods while they preached their hippy philosophy of freedom and liberation. Simultaneously the audience were being guarded and policed by security hired by the band. His idea was that if a band fronted themselves with the Swastika, or it was implemented into a poster design, it was impossible to sell to a broad market the same way rock was being sold (Sabin, 1999, p. 25). Sabin suggest that by doing this Reid and the Pistols managed to expose rock and its glorified authenticity. They created a breach with the view on culture as a commodity and forced the consumer to think about what they were buying. To Sabin this was the essence of the "Do It Yourself", because it forces a halt to mindless

consumption of culture. The breach did not last, and the slogan of “Doing It Yourself” was adopted by capitalism and changed its meaning to the illusion that you can work more or harder to get out of poverty (Sabin, 1999, p. 27).

What gets written about women?

Ideas from Neoliberalism have a strong hold in the music industry and present itself as something naturally given. In this part I will look at how ideas from neoliberalism presents itself in relation to female artists. The article from Ballade.no regarding Spellemann 2022 that was introduced in the introduction of this dissertation is a good start. As mentioned the category “song of the year” is thought of as synonymous with what song was the biggest commercial success, and this year it was only men that was nominated. The songs that become nominees are picked by a jury and are based on streaming numbers. The winner is then voted on by public vote. There is little insight in where the streaming numbers are collected from, and the Spellemann committee have been criticized because streaming numbers from big companies such as Spotify have been known to favor male artists. Spellemann has the option to implement regulations, but chooses not to with the arguments that are natural to neoliberalism such as the idea that an unregulated market is the best and only option (Tolstad & Hagen, 2023). This problem is not exclusive to the Norwegian Spellemann. The exact same problem occurred at the Brit Awards just months prior with no women nominated for Best Artist (Youngs, 2023). A conversation about whether award shows should regulate in regards to streaming giant and take agency back has been on and off for several years. In particular in relation to how women of color lose awards in favor of white artists.

There were similar public reactions when Harry Styles won album of the year over Beyonce in 2023 (Durney, 2023), and when Adele won instead of Beyonce in 2017 (Monroe, 2017).

Few punk bands competed for awards in the 1970s, and a lot of the cultural influence from punk has been because of its culturally historically impact. But in punk history there seems to be less female participants than there are male, both as artists, audience, and other influences. Being a young woman in a subculture makes you less likely to be the subject of research on said subculture because the default has been to look at young men. There are several reasons for this, among them that being seen as promiscuous or a rebel had more consequences for a young woman than for a man. Therefore a lot of young women participate in subcultures within the safety of their room and with trusted friends instead of hanging around outside in

the streets. More feminine subcultures equals more visible female participation, which is visible in 1960s mods and 1970s high-camp glitter rock. Although, they still have to limit how sexual they appear. In particular the mod style might have been more popular among girls because it was easier incorporated in everyday life without evoking too much reaction from society and parental figures (McRobbie, 1991, p. 9). McRobbie suggests that girls in post-war subcultures organized their social life and their participation in subculture with a greater risk (McRobbie, 1991, p. 7).

Misogyny might also affect writings on women in subculture. A study done on Teddy Boys only mentions the girls in the scene as hanging around wanting boys' attention. Their contribution to the subculture is invisible to the researcher and are only written about as wanting sexual attention from the boys. Additionally, their levels of attractiveness is mentioned in a condescending way; the ones that are less attractive can't tie any of the boys down long term (McRobbie, 1991, p. 1). This particular study that McRobbie refers to was done in the 1950s so gender roles from the time are prominent. In the punk scene in the 1970s and 1980s teenagers had more mobility and spending ability were affected less by their gender than in the 1950s (McRobbie, 1991, p. 5). This indicates that studies done on subcultures should be viewed critically particularly in relation to women's participation.

As mentioned in the punk chapter, punk came partially as a reaction to rock because it was the most defining genre of the 1960s. It stood as an unchallenged giant of the music scene. The genre was male dominated and the lyrics often sexualized women as objects to be desired. The introduction of punk in the 1970s challenged both the importance of rock and its views on gender. However, musicians such as Pattie Smith and Poly Styrene are not written about the same amount as Iggy Pop, Sid Vicious or Johnny Rotten (Whiteley, 2000, p. 14). In an article published by JSTOR Daily in 2022 the topic of who writes the popular music canon, and who gets written about, and why they are so similar gets explored. The article explores what music gets on nostalgia lists with titles such as “best of ‘60s/’70s/’80s” or “greatest of all time”. The study shows that musicians on the lists were mainly white male musicians from the USA or England, even though their music was not necessarily the most sold or had the highest purchase numbers. The research showed that these lists lacked diversity and people of color and women were often left out altogether (Jackson, 2022).

Regardless of how punk opened up for women in music the bands that were the most successful were the mixed gender ones. The lineup of a girl singing and three or four guys playing instruments behind her are hailed as progressive, when in reality it might still be seen as rather conservative (O'Brien, 2020, p. 136). Mix gender bands create a paradox where a woman is suddenly more free to be herself because the presence of the men around her on stage confirms that she can play her instrument to the men in the audience. When she does not have to start off by proving herself worthy of being on stage she can instead begin negotiation for being equal with the boys in the band (O'Brien, 2020, p. 137).

The different views and societal factors in this chapter give rise to the question: What are the traceable effects of neoliberalism in the music industry? It came into existence around 1980 and got discredited in the late 2000s, but the model is still prominent in most industries. By looking at the gender distribution on headliners and in bands at festivals in the UK it can give us an idea of what progress might have been made. O'Brien mentioned the three main British summer festivals in 1993 and how out of 103 bands at Phoenix there were four female acts, at Reading there were six female acts out of a total of 60, and at Glastonbury there were ten female acts out of 80 acts in total. This was at the same time as there was a heated debate about gender in light of the Riot Grrrl-movement. There were less than ten percent of female artists at these three festivals in a time that considered itself progressive, and that came twenty years after 1970s punk (O'Brien, 2020, p. 135). If we look at the amount of female artists at festivals the numbers have remained considerably low. In 2021 only 21% of UK festival headliners were female (Ross, 2021), and in 2022 the number went down to 13%. (Krol, 2022; Mansfield, Lynch, & Woodhead, 2022). It is interesting to see the numbers from Norway as well, where about 25% of the artists at festivals were female in 2022 (Johansen, 2022). Even though the political economical ideology of neoliberalism no longer holds its naturalness in general politics it presents itself in award shows, statistics in the amount of female artists, and in how we write music history.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON POLY STYRENE

In this chapter I will further contextualize thoughts from the previous chapter by exploring Poly Styrene's history, her anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist lyrics, her identity as a woman of color from a working class family, and the sound of her vocals and her band in relation to what was standard for punk music in the 1970s. The inclusion of her private life story and

mental health troubles is to give a setting to the music she created, and can help us understand her lyrics in different ways.

My primary source for information about Poly Styrene has been the post-humorous biography created by her daughter Celeste Bell and writer Zoë Howe that came out in 2019. However, they both mention that Styrene had a tendency to joke and come up with fictional stories in different interviews, so there might be contradicting versions of different stories both online, and in more credential literature that mentions her (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 98).

Her History

Marianne Joan Elliott-Said was born in 1957 in Bromley to a British mom and Somali dad. Her mother was a secretary and her father was a dock-worker. Poly Styrene went by many different names throughout her life: born Marian, changed to Marion in her thirties, called Mari or Poly since her teenage years, changed to Maharani and further on Radharani when she joined the Hare Krishnas (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 20). For this assignment I have chosen to refer to her stage name Poly Styrene. Her mother raised her and her two younger siblings by herself (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 18-19). At fifteen she met Falcon Stuart, a thirty-one year old filmmaker and photographer, who she allegedly started a romantic relationship with and who later on became her coach and manager (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 31). She started her musical career by recording a reggae track in 1976, but it was not a commercial success (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 38). That same year she opened her own little stall in Beauford Market on the Kings Road in London where she would sell plastic accessories (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 45).

Poly Styrene attended a lot of punk concerts and hung around a lot of punk musicians at the time, and by the start of 1977 she had started forming X-Ray Spex. The story goes that she started X-Ray-Spex at 19 years old by placing an ad in a newspaper looking for someone interested in starting a punk band, and that she was influenced to do this after seeing the Sex Pistols live in concert in June in 1976 (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 42). The band lasted from 1977 to 1979 with their one album, *Germ Free Adolescence*, released in 1978. During this time Poly Styrene experienced several mental breakdowns and had to be hospitalized.

Simultaneously the band members had financial disagreements with their manager Falcon Stuart because they earned little to no money, and claimed he was pocketing it (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 143). After the split Poly Styrene released a solo album called *Translucence* in 1981.

It was more of a calm pop album with no fuzz, and it was a commercial flop (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 146-148). At the same time as she was working on her solo album she met her husband Adrian Bell in 1980, they got married the same year, and in 1981 they had a daughter (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 151-153).

Because of the bad reviews *Translucence* received, Poly Styrene was dropped from her label, and she, her husband, and their daughter had to move back home to her mother (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 155-157). This is when her mental health took a turn for the worse, and she produced a lot less music for an extended period of time. An important part of her story is that she joined the Hare Krishna movement. Her daughter and many of Styrene's friends appreciated her spirituality, but said that Hare Krishna was a cult that brainwashed her. She divorced her husband after five years of marriage, and lost custody of her daughter because of her mental illness. It was not until 1995 that she reformed X-Ray Spex with different band members for a gig at Brixton Academy, and released a new album called *Conscious Consumer*. They did not move on further with this project because of Poly Styrene's mental health, and there were no more X-Ray Spex projects until the 30 year anniversary concert of their first album (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 187-190). Her last musical project was the solo album *Generation Indigo* that came out in 2011 shortly before Styrene died of cancer at age 54.

Identity

According to Nealon the newfound neoliberal consumer society and individualism of the 20th Century centers around becoming yourself, separately from being your job or your relationships to others (Nealon, 2018, pp. 8-9). To understand how this is visible in Poly Styrene's music I will take a closer look at the most prominent factors that might have informed Styrene's identity as an individual. The first of the factors I have chosen to look closer into was that she was biracial which particularly influenced her in childhood. She was born in Bromley, but her mother moved away after a year partially because Poly Styrene was one of very few mixed-raced children and there was tension tied to it in the area (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 18). Poly's mother later moved to Brixton to find a more diverse and welcoming environment, but felt she experienced more racism there. Additionally she felt alienated by the black community because her child had a white mother. Her first two children, Poly Styrene and her brother David were both half Somali, whereas Hazel's father

was Jamaican. Being a single mom to three mixed-raced children caused a lot of slander, and it was common for people to call her a “black man’s whore” (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 19).

Both Styrene and her sibling struggled with their identity and felt like they had to choose between their black and white friend groups. Without a good relationship with her father Osman there were no adult role models from Somalia that could help Poly Styrene to understand her heritage better (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 25-26). She was asked a lot about her ethnicity in interviews as she grew older and gained traction with X-Ray Spex, and it sometimes prompted her to lie about her father being an aristocrat (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 17). Her multicultural identity affected her music, informed a large part of her experience, and made her spend most of her life questioning where she belonged (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 27). She fluctuated between feeling close to her mother and her father through her life, and was likely never really comfortable with identifying fully with just one parent, one nationality, and one ethnicity. The search for these things consumed her, and she was made to feel like she had to choose. Because being biracial in England was so uncommon at the time of her childhood and adolescence there was no one talking about being multicultural as an identity in itself.

A factor that affected Poly Styrene in her identity, music career, and her general life was her struggles with mental illness. This is not to say that she was her illness, nor that it was part of her identity as a person, but it had a large influence on her ability to work and create, and by extension affected how she was able to express herself to the public. Celeste Bell notes that Styrene started feeling the symptoms of bipolar disorder in her childhood, and that it caused her to not be able to pay attention in school (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 22). She also states, in a positive manner, that part of her illness was that she missed the self-preservation fear most people have. She wasn’t afraid of environments or people that would scare others (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 23). Styrene suffered from hallucinations and was convinced she was psychic (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 34). In 1978 X-Ray Spex went to New York to play at the CBGB. The overwhelming environment of the New York scene triggered a hallucination and a bipolar episode. She had to go to the hospital, meet many psychiatrists, tried a lot of different medications, and eventually spent a month in a health farm in 1979 (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 105-113). This became the beginning of the end for the band X-Ray Spex. She was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and went in and out of the hospital (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 123).

The song “Identity” which was released as a single in 1978 has become one of X-Ray Spex most memorable songs, and is also perhaps the song with the most straightforward lyrics in relation to the identity-crisis Poly Styrene encountered. She said she was inspired to write it after watching a girl cutting her wrists at the bathrooms at the stage The Roxy (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 62). So although the second verse is a reference to that encounter, the first verse could be read as a reflection of her own struggles with the lines “When you look in the mirror, do you see yourself? Do you see yourself on the tv screen? Do you see yourself in the magazine”. This could be interpreted as a comment on the fact that there was no such thing as being multicultural at the time, and the unique struggles to having parents with different ethnicities was not represented, nor understood anywhere.

I think the development from “what is my role in society?” to “who am I?” that Nealon refers to by talking about discipline and biopower is visible to trace both in punk and in Poly Styrene’s music. In the lyrics to her song “Identity” the struggle about not seeing yourself reflected in media and the world around you relies on factors that are intro-perspective and personal rather than factors that are functional to society. This shows that the change from discipline to biopower is traceable in music (Nealon, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Identity

Identity	Identity is the crisis, can't you see?
Identity is the crisis, can't you see?	Identity, identity
Identity, identity	When you look in the mirror, do you smash it quick?
When you look in the mirror, do you see yourself?	Do you take the glass and slash your wrists?
Do you see yourself on the tv screen?	Did you do it for fame, did you do it in a fit?
Do you see yourself in the magazine	Did you do it before you read about it?
When you see yourself, does it make you scream?	Identity is the crisis, can't you see?
Identity is the crisis, can't you see?	Identity, identity
Identity, identity	Yeah!
Yeah!	(X-Ray Spex 1978c)

Being A Woman in Punk

As mentioned in the literature review, being a woman in punk meant that the press would put a lot of pressure on your performance and your looks. X-Ray Spex originally started out with a female saxophone player: Susan Whitby who went by the artist name Lora Logic (O'Brien, 2020, p. 107). She wrote some of their most identifiable riffs on the saxophone that became somewhat of a trademark for X-Ray Spex, but she was kicked out of the band before they recorded their first album (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 92-93). Styrene got jealous when Laura Logic received positive attention that was pitted against her as a vocalist in a review of one of their concerts. The review highlighted her as the one who made the band (Reddington, 2012, p. 55). Logic also mentions in Poly Styrene's biography that Styrene made her cut her hair short when they started playing together, and she speculated that it was to avoid her getting more attention (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 63). But it might also have been because she wanted her band to have a certain image that reflected the content of their music and how a consumerist society paints new products in a colorful image for it to sell better. Poly Styrene got a lot of attention in the press for how she dressed. She had a quirky style, with shapeless colorful clothes, short hair, and braces. Therefore she did not consider herself a "pretty punkettes" nor "sexy". It was far from what we know today as traditional punk style with leather jackets and pin-needles. The press asked a lot of questions and both praised and criticized her for her looks. This, in addition to her worsening mental health, made her insecure about her appearance throughout her career. She did not wish to change to be more appealing to the beauty standard because she felt it would make her lyrics less effective (O'Brien, 2020, pp. 107-108). Her daughter states that her disinterest in dressing "sexy" might have come from when she ran away from home at 15 years old, and met many men that wanted to "help her out", but expected sexual favors in return (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 33).

Initially when I started writing about Poly Styrene I thought pregnancy and young motherhood had a big impact on her career, as it was the reason many female artists took prolonged breaks, or quit the music business entirely at the time (Reddington, 2012, p. 141). Teenage pregnancy and young mothers in the early 1980s started a kind of moral panic in Britain, and the fear that single, young mothers were leeching off the state funds started spreading in tabloids to such a degree that the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had to make a statement. Black mothers were especially targeted by this critique (McRobbie, 1991,

p. 220). As Styrene and her husband had their baby, Celeste, in the early 1980s, it might be presumed that they could have been affected. They were young, had a low income, and could not afford a house of their own. However, it seems that Styrene's mental health, and wish to explore different genres, has made more of an impact on her career than her choice to have a child. The fact that she had her baby the same year as she released her solo album and consequently was dropped by her label might have had a connection, but there is no way of knowing. Additionally, it was statistically a normal age for a working-class woman of color to have her first baby. It would be expected for her to have to work while being a mother and therefore it would make more sense to have a child while still young and still having a family that could help her raise her child (McRobbie, 1991, p. 230).

She said in interviews that she did not really consider herself a punk. She found the term offensive because it meant “low life” and that was not what she wanted to be (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 46). Although the term punk might have meant only one thing, punk music was not just one sound. The philosophy among bands that played at The Roxy, a club where a lot of now famous bands played some of their early concerts, was that punk music had a stronger connection to a sort of attitude to life rather than a sound (Bell & Howe, 2019, pp. 64-65). This could of course be debated. After all, genres are another ambiguous topic in music research. Regardless of the terminology, Styrene did not play into the gimmick of being punk by being nihilistic and wearing black clothes. She dreamt of expressing herself despite the odds being against her. She wanted to be famous, have fun, and be self-expressive. If punk sound gets defined by The Ramones and Sex Pistols, then she transcended punk by expressing herself in an honest way to herself instead of trying to be as stereotypical punk as possible (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 66).

X-Ray Spex released their first single in 1977 “Oh Bondage, Up Yours!”. It was banned by the BBC but became a cult hit. The theme of the song can be read as a protest against the objectification of women (O'Brien, 2020, p. 107).

Oh Bondage! Up Yours

Some people think little girls should
be seen and not heard
But I think "oh bondage, up yours!"

One-two-three-four!
Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall
I wanna be a slave to you all

Oh bondage, up yours	Oh bondage, no more
Oh bondage, no more	Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall
Oh bondage, up yours	I wanna be a slave to you all
Oh bondage, no more	Oh bondage, up yours
Chain-store chainsmoke, I consume you all	Oh bondage, no more
Chain-gang chainmail, I don't think at all	Oh bondage, up yours
Oh bondage, up yours	Oh bondage, no more
Oh bondage, no more	Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall
Oh bondage, up yours	I wanna be a slave to you all
Oh bondage, no more	Oh bondage, up yours
Oh bondage, up yours	Oh bondage, no more
Oh bondage, no more	Oh bondage, up yours
Thrash, me crush me, beat me till I fall	Oh bondage, no more
I wanna be a victim for you all	Oh bondage, up yours
Oh bondage, up yours	Oh bondage, no more!
Oh bondage, no more	
Oh bondage, up yours	(X-Ray Spex 2013)

In “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” Poly Styrene’s vocal style is loud and declamatory as she shouts the title at the start of the song. Her screeching vocals match the sound of the saxophone and demands attention to what is being proclaimed (Reddington, 2012, p. 116). By starting off the song with the spoken words “Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard.” and then defining these restrictions as bondage, and telling the subjects who holds these opinions “up yours!”, she demands attention. This continues on into the first verse with the lyrics “Bind me, tie me, chain me to the wall. I wanna be a slave to you all”. This could be read both in a literal way about BDSM, being a woman in a patriarchal society, or it could be about being caught in the system of capitalism that pushes the ideology of

consumerism. To be seen and treated as an object, which she experienced in her adolescence, and additionally her relationship with her much older manager, must in a way have affected Styrene and how she felt she was viewed by the world.

The Anti-consumerist Album

The album *Germ Free Adolescent* came out in 1978, and the entire album is about anti consumerism (X-Ray Spex 1978a). Styrene concerned herself a lot with anti-consumerism, and the entire band's image is derived from this. Even the artist name Poly Styrene's is a play on plastic, and how pop stars are seen as a plastic toy you can enjoy and then rid yourself off as soon as you grow sick of it (Clisby, 1979).

Mark Fisher's suggested that capitalism has a worsening effect on mental health (Fisher, 2009, pp. 35-37). This might be applied to Poly Styrene. She loved shopping, fashion and gadgets, but was greatly affected by seeing plastic and consumerism everywhere she went. As Nealon states, nobody has to convince you to consume, there is no other option (Nealon, 2018, p. 70). Poly did take an ironic distance to capitalism as a consumer and a creator, but she had to engage in capitalist exchange just as everybody else. By knowing that it was bad, but continuing to do it, and to watch everyone around her continue to do it, she experienced a contradiction in her beliefs that bothered her through her entire career. This internal conflict that came as a result of living as society developed into a capitalist reality resulted in the lyrics for the entire first album of X-Ray Spex. It is particularly inspired by the increasing use of plastic as a cheap manufacturing material, just as her artist name which is inspired by polystyrene which is a type of plastic. If we take a closer look at "The Day The World Turned Dayglo", which is the sixth, and last track of the B-side. This track contains several names of different cheap materials that are popular to use in mass production such as polystyrene, polypropylene, and acryl. The lyrics can be interpreted as telling a story about a world where everything is made of plastic or other synthetic material, seemingly in bright colors of orange, pink, green or yellow which is the definition of the word "day-glo" (Collins English Dictionary 2023). The word is used to describe these colors in a shade so bright they almost seem to glow. This imagining of the future is not uncommon in science fiction movies, and is sometimes a depiction of the failure of mankind to take care of the earth. Poly Styrene seems to express a concern that the entire world is turning into plastic in the future: our homes, food, nature, and air.

The Day The World Turned Dayglo

I clambered over mounds and mounds
of polystyrene foam

Then fell into a swimming pool

Filled with fairy snow

And watched the world turn day-glo

You know, you know

The world turned day-glo, you know

Uh-oh

I wrenched the nylon curtains back as
far as they would go

Then peered through perspex window
panes

At the acrylic road

And watched the world turn day-glo

You know, you know

The world turned day-glo, you know

Uh-oh

I drove my polypropylene

Car on wheels of sponge

Then pulled into a wimpy bar

To have a rubber bun

And watched the world turn day-glo

You know, you know

The world turned day-glo, you know

Uh-oh

The world turn day-glo

You know, you know

The world turned day-glo, you know

Uh-oh

The X-rays were penetrating through
the latex breeze

Synthetic fiber see-through leaves fell
from the rayon trees

The day the the world turned day-glo

You know, you know

The world turned day-glo, you know,
you know

The world turned day-glo, you know,
you know

The world turned day-glo, you know

Uh-oh

(X-Ray Spex 1978d)

Secondly, I want to look at the lyrics of the title track of the album, and the fourth track on the B-side: "Germfree Adolescent", written without the space between "germ" and "free" as opposed to the album title. The lyrics seem to describe a person with a phobia of germs. It reads as a critique of extreme cleanliness and sterilized life in the developing years of life. If it gets read in the setting of the album, with its fear of a plastic future, it could be interpreted as how a plastic world becomes sterile and unnatural. There is an association between

children and playing out in nature, getting dirty and being unhygienic. In a dystopian future where nature is obsolete and everything is made of plastic there are less germs, and perhaps also a stronger fear of them. The subjects in the song are so afraid of germs that they have become detached from normal human interaction, and have excluded themselves from society. This paints a grim future but uses a different narrative than punk as we know it. The critique and fear of what the future might hold is more subtextual.

Germfree Adolescents

I know you're antiseptic	If your gloves are sterilized
Your deodorant smells nice	Rinse your mouth with listerine
I'd like to get to know you	Blow disinfectant in her eyes
But you're deep frozen like the ice	Her phobia is infection
He's a germ free adolescent	She needs one to survive
Cleanliness is her obsession	It's her built-in protection
Cleans her teeth ten times a day	Without fear she'd give up and die
Scrub away scrub away scrub away	
The S.R. way...	(X-Ray Spex 1978b)
You may get to touch her	

Both of these texts are political, and could be read as a satirical and cynical view on consumer society. With the mention of eating a rubber bun in “The Day the World Turned Daylo” and the overall topic of germ free surroundings in “Germfree Adolescents” the lyrics hints at Nealon's theory of how a capitalist society forces the consumer to lose awareness of the line of production and by extension lose contact with the product (Nealon, 2018, p. 70). It is impossible to eat, breathe and live plastic, but when every product that is presented to consumers is made out of the cheapest material there is no other option. Everything you buy is to serve your individualistic needs, and the consequences are happening too far away for the consumers to be aware they exist.

Vocal Sound

In this part I will delve further into Poly Styrene's vocal style. To describe and discuss this I will refer to terminology from Complete Vocal Technique, shortened to CVT without periods because that is what they do on their website.

The general sound of punk, as mentioned in the previous part about punk sound, was loud and declamatory. To most vocalists this means using the technique called overdrive: the lower register at a loud volume. It's not uncommon to add a certain degree of distortion to this technique as well, which is considered an effect by CVT, not an entirely new technique (Sadolin, 2021, p. 27). Poly Styrene reflects this general vocal style of punk, particularly in their most famous song "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" (X-Ray Spex 2013). There she sings overdrive with a fuller density to get a louder volume (Sadolin, 2021, pp. 25-26). She does however not use distortion. The use of distortion in punk had become rather synonymous with the genre, but my experience so far is that it became more common in the 1990s revival simultaneously as grunge and metal came into existence rather than being the norm in the 1970s. In "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" Styrene also shifts from her chest voice to her head voice at the end of certain phrases creating a sort of intentional vocal break from overdrive into edge, which can be explained as a more shrill screaming (Sadolin, 2021, p. 27). This can be heard at the very beginning of the song (0:12), but it is easier to hear a clear example in the first chorus (0:42). The studio recorded version is a bit different from the live recording from *Live at the Roxy Club* from 1977 (X-Ray Spex 1991). The attempted vocal techniques are the same, but the failing to support and lack of placement makes it sound a lot more coarse and distorted, and the intentional vocal breaks are entirely dropped from this version. The latter is perhaps more in tune with how we would think of the punk sound from the 1970s.

These techniques are the same she uses for the other music examples used earlier in this dissertation, and seem to be her primordial way of singing songs with X-Ray Spex. There is an exception in the song "Germfree Adolescent" where she sings with less density at the beginning of the song (0:24-0:29) which makes it sound almost like neutral, which is what we most commonly think of as our regular singing voice when we sing at a normal volume (Sadolin, 2021, p. 20).

Most commonly in punk there is little emphasis on melody, and rather a strong focus on the lyrics, timbre and creating a certain feeling of chaos at punk-gigs. While both lyrics and a certain amount of chaos is prominent in X-Ray Spex's music, they have the addition of having a more melodic vocal line and a saxophone riff that cuts through the wall of sound created by drums, guitar, and bass. Interestingly the vocal lines of Poly Styrene often compliments or is complimented by the saxophone. This can be heard in "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" where Styrene starts off the song with spoken words that turn into yelling (0:00-0:11) before the drums introduce the rest of the band, and the saxophone plays the riff (0:19-0:25). When Styrene starts singing again the saxophone plays variations on a repetitive line at a slightly lower volume during the verse and chorus.

It is interesting to compare Styrene's vocals both to prior vocalists and to vocalists that have followed the tradition and development of punk. If you compare Styrene's vocals to Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" (Berns & Ragovoy, 1968) and Patti Smith's "Gloria:in Excelsis Deo" (Pattie Smith Group 1975) all three vocalists convey similar intensity in their expression. However, Joplin has a lot more distorted vocals and Smith has a smaller range and therefore a lot less melody in her vocal lines. Compared to the Sex Pistols "Anarchy in the UK" (Sex Pistols 1977) there is a clear difference in how the Pistols speak and yell their lyrics instead of singing them. This is what has become known as the staple sound of the punk vocal performance. If you move on even further to the 1990s Riot Grrrl-period and listen to bands such as Bikini Kill and their song "Rebel Girl" (Bikini Kill 1993) there is perhaps a mix of the vocal sound we hear by the Sex Pistols and X-Ray Spex. Their lyrics are yelled in overdrive, but there is bigger movement in the range of the yelling than the Pistols that sound more similar to X-Ray Spex lines.

Other political genres prior to punk have, regardless of their political message, been defined by male ideas about how girls and women should behave, look, and how sexuality should be performed. Punk allowed women to challenge the status quo and to be more aggressive in their vocal style. "The revolution in the sound of female vocals was to be short-lived, but the shock of the sound of these voices, even heard out of context today, shows how oppositional they were." (Reddington, 2012, p. 116). An example of prior genres with political lyrics were the 1960s is folk music. It had been as political as punk, but women were not allowed to sound angry the way punk gave them the opportunity to sound. Lyrics about being in love and admiring men had been what the public expected from female musicians, and a

consequence was the expectation for women to be soft spoken and gentle in their singing. But punk allowed them the freedom to express anger and sing about political injustice without packaging it as something “ladylike” (Reddington, 2012, p. 114).

...[M]usic with vocal performances like this could not survive long in the mainstream. With male gatekeepers in control, “unsexual” female vocalists were unengaging; male concerns were not being addressed and nurtured. (Reddington, 2012, p. 119)

The literature chapter on punk sound is largely informed by the book *Punk Rock: So What*, and in it Andy Medhurst mentions that punk refuses to become background music for everyday life (Sabin, 1999, p. 225). The specific example he uses is X-Ray Spex’s “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” because it is the type of punk that refuses to assimilate to consumerism. The visual style of traditional punk gets sold repeatedly in the cycle of fashion, but the “Do It Yourself” mindset of the 1970s is replaced by fast fashion and designer clothes selling you poor quality clothes with holes in them for the aesthetic. However, punk music is less likely to be heard on the radio or get used in the background of car commercials. The music still refuses to have capitalistic usefulness, as opposed to rock music with anti-capitalist sentiments that predates it (Nealon, 2018, p. 33). The music of X-Ray Spex will perhaps never be comfortably put into the background of a commercial space, and part of the reason why is Poly Styrene's vocal style.

Instrumentation

The standard lineup for punk were, as mentioned, guitar, bass, drums and vocals. X-Ray Spex stood out with their additional saxophone, played initially by Laura Logic, born Susan Whitby, and later on by Rudi Thomson (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 93). The rest of the band were called Jak Airport, real name being Jack Stafford, Paul Dean, Paul “B.P”. Herding.

The saxophone is used the same way as a lead guitar in a lot of their songs, and in “Identity” they switch between the saxophone and the lead guitar playing riffs. The bridge of the song (1:07-1:25) has the saxophone as its lead and is a good example of what makes X-Ray Spex stand out from other punk bands, while simultaneously giving an explanation on why they might not have considered themselves punk.

In “Germfree Adolescents” the use of saxophone is rather sparse. The song is a repeating groove where the guitar and drums creates a foundation, with the bass playing a lot of melodic lines in the deep register. The saxophone and the vocals switch between playing until the last chorus where they play together. This song is a good example of how the saxophone works the same way a lead guitar might have in a rock band, playing a catchy riff between sung lyrics.

In “The Day the World Turned Dayglo” the saxophone has the opening riff (0:06 - 0:12) setting the tone for the song. It also works as backup vocals in the chorus (0:25 - 0:32). Oftentimes in X-Ray Spex’s music the saxophone accentuates the vocal performance by making sounds similar to Styrene. Imitating screeches and helping create an unique sound for the band that is instantly recognizable. Additionally, in this song there is also a saxophone solo (1:41-1:53).

Poly Styrene’s vocals are the most noticeable feature of “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!”, but it would not be the same without the saxophone riffs. It's a staple of the song. While there are no guitar solos in the analyzed songs, which is typical of the punk sound, there are several saxophone solos. Their unusual lineup is what makes them stand out from several other punk bands from the same period.

Visuals



Figure 1. 1978, *Germfree Adolescents*, [Album]. EMI

Styrene had a colorful style that deviated from the McLaren and Westwood punk; she was very much into the idea of “Doing It Yourself”, which, as mentioned in the literature review about punk, is a cornerstone of what that punk embraced. When she had her own little shop in London she would sell a lot of repurposed plastic gadgets and redesigned handbags (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 46). Additionally she styled X-Ray Spex to her liking, making the band use colorful clothes that fit with the theme of their album. Oftentimes the colors would be neon, or dayglo. They opposed a lot of what we now consider traditional punk by not fronting themselves with leather, black clothes, and provocative symbolism.

Poly Styrene mentioned that she sometimes modeled her looks on Hollywood starlets because she felt like she could identify more with Hollywood glamor rather than being lower class in England. So her interest in fashion came partially from identity factors such as growing up in a working class family, and being biracial. Because these factors made her struggle to build a positive identity in bigoted society, clothes and fashion helped her form a self-image that was not based upon her social class (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 29). She stated herself that clothes are a fun way to experiment and express identity, which matches neoliberalism's idea of individuality and identity found through a product, although she adds that there is no real identity in clothes. This philosophy matches Nealon's in how identity is a verb, not a noun, and therefore we are constantly evolving shaped by our actions. Poly Styrene thought that clothes were never really you, but you could use them to create a facade (Bell & Howe, 2019, p. 46).

The cover for the album *Germ Free Adolescents* sees the band dressed in colorful clothes trapped inside closed test tubes (see Figure 1). The outfit Styrene is wearing is rather modest in comparison to a lot of punk fashion. The clothing store *Sex* sold fetish and bondage gear that became a staple part of the punk style we know today, but none of these elements can be seen in this album cover. Instead the band is dressed in pink, green, red, yellow and black clothes, and everyone has mismatched socks except for Poly Styrene. The colors are strong to the point of almost being neon, or glowing, in a sense. The fact that they are all individually trapped inside test tubes alongside the album title could indicate that they are in fact the germs. The use of the specific colors is also referencing “The Day the World Turned Dayglo”, and the visualization of a plastic dystopian future where everything is in bright colors.

The two things Poly Styrene might be said to be particularly noted for fashion-wise were her braces and how she wore her hair. The braces received many comments by the press and she was repeatedly told how brave she was for wearing them, hinting that it was seen as something unattractive. She wore her hair naturally in short hairdos most of her early career. Punks commonly had their hair in unnatural colors or hairstyles, while most regular teenage girls wore their hair long, so she stood out by her choice to keep it short yet natural. She dressed unconventionally. Not with the same shock tactics McLaren and Westwood styled the Sex Pistols, but her style shows one of many different styles that were allowed within the punk subculture that has not had the same commercial success as what we know as traditional punk clothes.

Poly Styrene tries to comment on capitalism with her fashion, just as James Reid tried to do when he styled the Sex Pistols with swastikas, but she does it differently. One of the differences is that while Reid tries to oppose capitalism and stop it from selling his product, Styrene wants her image to sell. Her vision seems to be to inform her fans to become conscious consumers and to create an awareness of what is going on. She fronts the “do it yourself” philosophy and helps us become aware of what it takes to create rather than buy. Additionally, she experienced racism herself so she is likely to have more awareness in relation to hate-symbols, and avoid using them as shock tactics. When she shaved her head, kept her hair short, wore clothes with a loose fit, or kept her braces, she made herself purposely less sellable and sexualized. To her what she wanted to sell was her music and the message of anti-consumerism.

Punk History Revised

In light of what we now know from the literature review and discourse analysis I will reexamine the popular retelling of punk to see if Styrene’s story can provide more nuance. When it comes to the musical canon Simon Frith asks: who has the authority to include or exclude artists and music from the canon? And who has the popular cultural capital to get that authority (Frith, 1998, p. 9). The goal of this dissertation is not to exert that kind of authority, nor to forcefully include Poly Styrene and X-Ray Spex in the canon. It is rather to look at what she did that has been left out of the popular canon. It is interesting to look at how she did not consider herself punk, but that in modern retellings of punk, in particular feminist retellings, she stands out as an important figure of the 1970s scene. It can tell us about how

the genre defined itself then versus now. We have broadened the definition of punk to contain a lot more of the music that came out in the 1970s, but also narrowed it down by saying that it died. Additionally, it shows us that what is considered authentic punk, even in the most purist definition of the word, has moving borders. Whenever punk is talked about in mainstream media the band that gets mentioned the most is the Sex Pistols.

Other topics that get discussed when punk is on the agenda are the fashion and assumed politics of young punks in the 1970s. I think that if we build upon theories of capitalism and neoliberalism that we write a lot of music history partially based upon commercial success, not just in the music industry but in general media, fashion, and entertainment. This is not to say that the Sex Pistols were the most commercially successful, but that their story became so known that it could easily be sold several times over. This would mean that what we remember from punk is the elements that still can be capitalized on. If we take into account Sabin's theory that 1970s punk music still refuses to become background music because of its noisy demeanor, and by extension use this as the reason for why a lot of punk music is not usually played in the background of car commercials, on tv-shows, and on the radio. This would explain why X-Ray Spex is not known by the public. To explain why the Sex Pistol is still known even if they played seemingly "impossible to commodify" punk, we might take a look at Nealon's theory that nobody stands a chance in a capitalist society to remain authentic and thereby true to the anti-capitalist ideal they once fronted (Nealon, 2018, pp. 50-53).

We have to look at what it is about the Sex Pistols that still sells today, if it is not their music. The answer might be that it is the turbulent story of the band, the death of Sid Vicious and possible murder of Nancy Spungen, that has solidified their commercial success. This story has been sold time and time again, in movies, tv-series, and books. Their controversy became what is remembered and what is fronted whenever we talk about them, because that is what continues to sell. Now, if X-Ray Spex's music is unsellable to a broader audience outside of the sociopolitical environment of the 1970s, is it still possible that the story of their career could have been sold, and by extension influence pop-culture enough to be included in the punk canon? Maybe. The theory presented in this passage is of course an oversimplification. The authority to change the canon is not just about money, nor is it all about cultural capital and authority. The reasons are multifarious and complex, as the issues discussed in this dissertation suggest.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have revised punk narratives and what the subculture was like in the 1970s. I have analyzed how the artist Poly Styrene fits into the popular retelling of punk and the ways in which she deviates or adheres to norms associated with the genre. Additionally, I have looked into how ideas from capitalism and neoliberalism provoked punk into existence and shaped the movement, the music, and how we write punk history. In this part of the dissertation I will present what the learning outcome has been, and what further research could be done.

Capitalism

The capitalistic system has an overarching effect on all the parts of this conclusion. What is interesting to see is how closely capitalism has been integrated into how we create and curate our personal identity. In a lot of subcultures what you like is what you are, and you signal this with your clothes, the music you listen to, and the shared political opinions of said subculture. Poly Styrene loved clothes and visual effects, and it helped create a large part of her persona as an artist, but she simultaneously criticized consumerism and the use of plastic.

There seem to be moments in history and in art that manages to take a step outside of the veil of capitalism. In punk some of those moments were created by using the Swastika to create zines and images that were unsellable. This comes with the obvious cost of right wingers feeling welcome in the community, the alienation of minorities, and loss of gigs and thereby income. Most punks took public distance from the symbol after being criticized and losing opportunities to earn money. Shock tactics seems to only work for so long in a capitalistic economy. Punk sound had some of the same affect, but without the use of hate symbols. You are unlikely to hear the Sex Pistols played as background music at a shopping center.

However, you can sell their story again and again as movies, books, and tv-series. A plausible theory is that because Poly Styrene and X-Ray Spex do not have a shocking story to sell, and their punk sound makes them less likely to continuously sell their music, they only achieve a cult following by those who enjoy the punk sound of the 1970s. The audience that enjoy 1970s punk are more likely to begin listening to more famous bands before they begin listening to X-Ray Spex.

When it comes to capitalisms effect on music history, if we are not willing to critically review it, we might end up with history that reflecting the attitudes of the time. By focusing

only on the most popular bands we might lose valuable information and get an inaccurate picture of the whole scene. An example from punk is the focus on how some popular punk bands participated in Rock Against Racism and therefore punk has been branded as anti-racist when the truth is more nuanced. Additionally, the gender balance in the subculture have not been accurately portrayed because only the most popular bands gets mentioned in anthologies of popular music history. This has resulted in a disproportionate amount of male artist being represented. This is closely related to the systemic exclusion of women and people of color in today's music industry. Streaming numbers becoming the determinant of success is a direct result of capitalism and the unregulated market that neoliberalism promotes. Stronger regulations on inclusion both in history and in the music industry could be a solution. But for that to happen the systemic exclusion must be known, understood, and acknowledged. Which has been part of the motivation for this dissertation.

Gender

One of the questions I asked in the introduction was if there was a lack of female role models. While I did not research the ratio between male and female punk musicians from the 1970s, there are several female musicians and bands that were popular. They do as mentioned only have cult following. There seems to be no lack of female musicians of great quality, but with less commercial appeal. The argument fails to take account for systematic exclusion in the music industry and should be reformed and redirected to why female musicians are not being pushed as role models the same way male musicians are. In regards to the argument of whether Poly Styrene is good enough to be a female role model, there is little difference between her and for an example Johnny Rotten when it comes to the technicalities of singing, regardless of the distinction of taste. Her vocal and lyrical abilities are not different to such a degree that one should be deemed worthy of being a musical role model while the other should be disregarded.

The story of female vocal sound is only a small part of this dissertation but opens up for further research on the topic. Styrene's vocals were influential because they were louder and contained more uncontrolled anger than what was the norm for female vocalists. The use of her kind of overdrive and expression of political opinions had priorly been reserved for male artists. Prior to the release of X-Ray Spex debut album there were only a handful of female vocalists, such as Pattie Smith, with a similar expression. She was a part of a wave of female vocalists that transcended social expectations of gender and what a female vocalist should

sound like. It begs further research into the question if the voice can transcend gender and the body that creates the sound.

Racism

As mentioned in the literature review on punk and racism, punk subculture was no more or less racist than the world around it. However, when history written about punk erases the subcultures political ambiguity by clinging to the view that punk was a far left genre, it becomes a problem. By not addressing the bigotry in the subculture, and how it has been embraced by far right movements, an uncertainty gets tied to the subculture. Seeing someone in the traditional punk style could potentially evoke fear and uncertainty to those punk were unsensitive towards. It could potentially be hard to trust a subculture that have been known to use hate symbols as shock tactic, avoided addressing it, and then have branded themselves as inclusive.

When writing about racism today the American definitions of racism specifically aimed towards people of color, mainly of African descent, is normally applied. Discrimination and violence towards South Asians, Eastern Europeans, islamophobia and antisemitism are highly relevant to Britain and Europe, and should therefore be applied during research on British and European artists. This is not to say that different forms of racisms, discrimination, and xenophobia should be about who suffers the most, or that the different forms exists exclusively in the US or Britain. Rather there should be painted a nuanced picture of the differences particularly when talking about popular music and Britain and the US, as their popular music scenes often gets compared. As mentioned in the literature review, violence towards South Asians in Britain were common in the 1970s, yet punks do not seem to have an outspoken opinion on this (Sabin, 1999, pp. 203-205). Racism affected Poly Styrene in her childhood, and it most likely continued to affect her in her music and adult life, although she was not outspoken about the troubles she might have faced. There is still a lot to look into on this particular topic as this dissertation have only looked at Poly Styrene's experience.

Mental Health

Poly Styrene bipolar disorder was, seen in light of Mark Fisher's theory about capitalism and mental health (Fisher, 2009, pp. 35-38), worsened by capitalism. It made her art suffer because she became unable to create and perform music. The stress of capitalism has negative effects on art, and restricts artists from developing their craft. This insinuates that art

becomes a privilege for those who have physical health, mental health, and money to create it. Problems that affect creative work are not unique to Poly Styrene, and the stories of addiction among famous punk artists are well known. Styrene's problems were stigmatized and not well understood at the time, and it was hard for her team and family to help her. Research on how addiction and mental health problems have been treated by record companies and managers, and what has been done to continue an artist career could be a theme of future research. In addition to this, it would be interesting to see if marginalized groups are more likely to be dropped by their team if they experience these types of problems.

Authenticity and Biopolitics

The theories of Nealon (2018), Fisher (2009) and Frith (1998) have a lot of interesting potential to further the conversation about authenticity and how the idea of it might further impose biopolitics, and continue the idea of neoliberalism as a good option. Further research should look closer into some of the theories Frith (1998) presents about how musicologist and music journalist might maintain ideas of good and bad music, and authentic music. It would be hard to discard them entirely, but they need to be understood in a way that stops them from being used as factual definitions in marketing, history, and the music industry. It would also be interesting to look into if the concept of authenticity has closer ties to genres that are considered masculine, and is so, look at it in relation to capitalism. As authenticity is often used when talking about punk in relation to the popular idea of punk as a political and anti-capitalist genre, when that is not the entire truth, it could be implied that authenticity has stronger ties to nostalgia and capitalism than to the reality of things. To take a closer look into how punk has been marketed towards individuals as a building piece for their personality and identity would be an interesting case for further research.

What does Poly Styrene add to Punk?

Although Styrene did not consider herself punk in the 1970s she is undoubtedly part of the subculture the way we define it today. During this dissertation I have look at what punk was, and analyzed what Poly Styrene did that complied or disagreed with our definition of punk. One of the most stand out differences is perhaps her sense of fashion and the way she styled the band. It stands both as a stark contrast, and entirely compliant to what we now think of as the punk uniform. The fashion of the subculture at the time was not as strict or uniform as we now know it, but it has been affected by McLaren and Westwood's success in the fashion

world. The way Styrene used style and colors to create an almost theatrical performance and image of X-Rays Spex that underlined the topic of their debut album mirrors the way McLaren managed and partially styled the Sex Pistols. The lesser use of shock tactics might have contributed to why Styrene's style has not had the same cultural impact on the subculture. Although this dissertation talks about how punk was not as political as later historians and music journalist have framed it to be, X-Ray Spex debut album fits neatly into the category of punk partially because of the political theme of their lyrics. The topic of *Germ Free Adolescents* were critiques of capitalism, and showed a political understanding of how a consumerist society is bad in a time where it was still solidifying as the norm. The way she sang, dressed, and wrote her lyrics were important and influential to punk and genres that came after it. Had Styrene had a more prominent role in how punk history is being told she could have been an important role model, and give us an understanding of punk that could be more diverse.

Further research

My study has opened up for new insights into gender politics in punk, and new lines of enquiry should be pursued in further studies, in particular when it comes to female musicians and musicians of color. Poly Styrene as a research subject still has a lot to offer, and several other female punk musicians from the 1970s should be included in popular music history, not just in feminist retellings of punk. The prior parts of this conclusion has already suggested several topics for further research, among them further investigation on capitalisms impact on the way we write music history, the embodiment of the voice and possibilities of voices transcending gender, punk and its erasure of its racist shock tactics, mental health and the competitive nature of the music industry, and the use of the word "authenticity" particularly in relation to genres that are considered more masculine. In addition to what I have already suggested, research into pregnancy and maternity leave could be interesting, in particular in relation to how it is handled by management and record companies.

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