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Embodying “Double Break” in Musical Structure: Punk Rock and the Waning of the Sense of Historical Time

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Musical structure does not always work in the same direction as the musician’s political attitude, way of life, lyrics or artworks, not to mention the reception of all these by listeners or their fans. This is because musical structure has its own logic and historical context. Sometimes it leans more towards conformity, sometimes it turns out to be rather progressive, despite the fact that music is never unrelated to all of those ‘extra-musical’ aspects. The problem is that the potential for expression of the structural aspects of music and sound themselves, that is quite different from, even goes beyond, the linguistic and semantic features around this music, might be ignored due to overlooking this: musical structures and sound materials have their own synchronic and diachronic context that leads to their own meaning and effect, sometimes regardless of the musician’s intention.

Usual expressions to describe punk rock, such as “back to basic”, “returning to rock’n’roll’s stripped-down essentials” (Meager 2022) or even “fundamentalism” (Reynolds 2006), expect punk rock to maintain a certain historical consciousness based on which it is supposed to point to a certain period of the well-established history of musical evolution.

Punk and new wave musicians also used the AABA form (or hinted at it) to subvert norms, reaching for an older form to express their opposition to the musical trends of the times. In fact, this occurred precisely as AABA became unequivocally passé (1976 was the first year in which no No. 1 hit on the billboard charts followed an AABA form). While the AABA form and the bridges that emerged from them were not used in Hard Rock, Progressive Rock, or Disco, they were perfectly suited for the self-consciously simple songs of the Ramones. (« Blitzkrieg Bop, » Dee Dee und Tommy Ramone 1976; « I Wanna Be Well, » Joey Ramone 1977), the Sex Pistols « God Save The Queen, » Cook/Jones/Matlock/Rotten 1977) or those Blondie songs that evoke the Girl Group era (« I’m Always Touched) By Your Presence Dear, » Valentine 1978; « Sunday Girl, » Stein 1979.

Von Appen and Frei-Hauenschild (2015: 74)

The same holds true when horizontal form of punk rock songs is discussed. Ralf von Appen and Markus Frei-Hauenschild rightly remarks the singularity of using AABA form in early punk rock songs such as “Blitzkrieg Bop” by The Ramones and “God Save The Queen” by The Sex Pistols. It would not be an exaggeration for them to regard this usage of AABA form in the era dominated by Verse-Chorus form as a “subversion of norms”. Here are two tables each demonstrating the linear song structure of “God Save The Queen” and “Blitzkrieg Bop” (table 1 and 2):

Table 1: God Save The Queen

	Sections	Power chords	#bars	Lyrics
0:00-0:06	Intro 1	(G#)A	4	
0:06-0:18	Intro 2	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#D A / D-C#D / (G#)A / (G#)A	8	
0:18-0:32	A1	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#D A / D-C#D / (G#)A / (G#)A	8	God save the queen // The fascist regime They made you a moron // Potential H-bomb
0:32-0:45	A2	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#D A / D-C#D / (G#)A / (G#)A	8	God save the queen // She ain't no human being There is no future // In England's dreaming
0:45-0:57	B	E-B / (D#)E / E-B / E E-B / (D#)E / E-B / E	8	Don't be told what you want // Don't be told [...] There's no future / no future / no future for you
0:57-1:10	A3	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#D / A / E / A / A	8	God save the queen // We mean it man We love our queen // God saves
1:10-1:23	A4	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#-D A / D-C#D / (G#)A / (G#)A	8	God save the queen // 'Cause tourists are money And our figurehead // Is not what she seems
1:23-1:36	A5	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#-D A / D-C#D / (G#)A / (G#)A	8	Oh God save history // God save your mad parade Oh Lord God have mercy // All crimes are paid
1:36-1:49	B	E-B / (D#)E / E-B / E E-B / (D#)E / E-B / E	8	When there's no future [...] // We're the [...] We're the poison [...] // We're the future [...]
1:49-2:02	A6	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#-D / A / E / A / A	8	God save the queen // We mean it man We love our queen // God saves
2:02-2:17	Interlude	F# / B / F# / B F# / B / F# / E / E	9	Guitar solo
2:17-2:30	A7	A / D-C#D / A / D-C#D / A / E / A / A	8	God save the queen // We mean it man And there is no future // In England's dreaming
2:30-3:06	Coda	D / C#-B / D / C#-B D / C#-B / A / A D / C#-B / D / C#-B D / C#-B / A / A D / C#-B / D / C#-B D / C#-B / A / A	24	No future, no future / No future for you No future, no future / No future for me No future, no future / No future for you No future, no future / No future for you No future, no future / No future for you No future, no future / No future for you
3:06-3:17	Outro			No future, no future for you...

Table 2: *Blitzkrieg Bop*

	Sections	Power chords	N° bars	Lyrics
0:00-0:22	Intro 1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	16	
0:22-0:32	Intro 2	(no chords) A / A / A / A	8	Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go
0:32-0:43	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going [...] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
0:43-0:54	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating [...] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop.
0:54-1:05	B	D / D / A / DE D / D / B / DE	8	Hey ho, let's go / Shoot'em in the back now What they want, I don't know / They're all revved up [...]
1:05-1:16	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going [...] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:16-1:26	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating [...] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop.
1:26-1:37	B	D / D / A / DE D / D / B / DE	8	Hey ho, let's go / Shoot'em in the back now What they want, I don't know / They're all revved up [...]
1:37-1:48	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going [...] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:48-1:59	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating [...] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:59-2:11	Outro	(no chords) A / A / A / A	8	Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go

But again, like the previous examples, von Appen and Frei-Hauenschild seek to position punk rock on the established history of music and attempts to find meaning from it. It should be underlined, however, that the case of The Ramones goes further.

“Blitzkrieg Bop”, after the intro including the famous slogan (“Hey ho, let’s go”), follows indeed the classic AABA form. However, the third A1 section, which is identical to the first A1 even in terms of lyrics, is followed immediately by another A2 section, then goes again to the section B, which ends up making a single large “cyclic” form: A1 – A2 – B – A1 – A2 – B – A1 – A2 (the numbers here differentiate the lyrics). It is a totally cyclic form where each unit AAB with the same lyrics and instrumentation ends with the outro, which is also identical to the second and “slogan’ part of the intro.

As for “Beat on the Brat” (table 3), the 2nd track of the album, the scheme centered on the verse-chorus formula (intro (5) – verse (20) – instrumental link (4) – chorus (18), the numbers designating the number of bars) reappears in a literally identical way (even with the same words). A brief interlude between these two units and the outro are nothing more than subtle variations of the intro.

Repetition of lyrics in verses, cyclic and symmetrical form throughout the song, anti-narrative, so to speak, with a very short intro or without it at all, rarely employing basic and conventional devices such as change of lyrics, interludes, climax and extension in ending is not

an expression of the *will* to present something *new* through “subversion”, let alone an artistic experiment, and to create a new history that will blossom in the future, but rather an tendency of *indifference*, even sarcasm toward whatever artistic, artisanal effort.

Table 3: *Beat On The Brat*

	Sections	Power chords	#bars	Lyrics
0:00-0:08	Intro	C-F / C-F / CFCF / C / C	5	
0:08-0:14	Verse 1-1	C / C / C / C F / G / C / C	8	Beat on the brat / [...] / Beat on the brat with a baseball bat Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh.
0:14-0:39	Verse 1-2	C / C / C / C F / G / C / C F / G / C / C	12	Beat on the brat / [...] / Beat on the brat with a baseball bat Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh. Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh.
0:39-0:45	Link 1	Bb / G / Bb / G	4	
0:45-1:12	Chorus 1	C / F / C / F C / C / Bb / G C / F / C / F C / C / Bb / G / Bb / G	18	What can you do? / What can you do? With a brat like that always on your back / What can you do? What can you do? / What can you do? / With a brat like that always on your back / What can you do?
1:12-1:22	Interlude	C-F / C-F / CFCF / CFCF / C / C	6	
1:22-1:33	Verse 2-1	C / C / C / C F / G / C / C	8	Beat on the brat / [...] / Beat on the brat with a baseball bat Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh.
1:33-1:52	Verse 2-2	C / C / C / C F / G / C / C F / G / C / C	12	Beat on the brat / [...] / Beat on the brat with a baseball bat Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh. Oh yeah, oh yeah, uh-oh.
1:52-1:58	Link 2	Bb / G / Bb / G	4	
1:58-2:25	Chorus 2	C / F / C / F C / C / Bb / G C / F / C / F C / C / Bb / G / Bb / G	18	What can you do? / What can you do? With a brat like that always on your back / What can you do? What can you do? / What can you do? / With a brat like that always on your back / What can you do?
2:25-2:31	Outro	C-F / C-F / CFCF / CF	3 1/2	(abrupt ending)

In this regard, it is natural for this type of praxis to be ‘self-mocking’. “Judy Is a Punk”, the 3rd track of the same album, one of their two early songs which include the term “punk” in their titles, along with “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker” (1977), that we will examine later. Here again, the second verse-chorus formula is completely identical to the first.

‘Judy Is A Punk’ – one of the first examples of the word “punk” in a song – was another similarly warped tale of interpersonal relationships, written about two crazed Ramones fans, local juvenile delinquents. With its finger-clicks and knowing repetition, ‘Judy’ is deconstructionist post-modernism in its purest, most unconscious form. “Second verse, same as the first,” the singer yells, in an inspired moment of knowing self-deprecation.

Everett (2002: 60)

Just before the second verse, the singer Joey Ramone inserts a cheeky announcement: “Second verse, same as the first”, which is originally from Herman’s Hermits’ 1965 US number one hit “I’m Henry The Eighth, I Am”. In this point again, The Ramones go a step further. Just before the third verse, where the lyrics change slightly, the singer goes: “Third verse, different

from the first”. This deliberate “self-deprecation”, as True Everett remarks, which is also related to an attitude of indifference towards any artistic sophistication, that, in my view, best characterizes punk rock, is embodied here in the very form of horizontal structure of a song.

Joey Ramone: “To me, ‘Sheena’ was the first surf/punk rock/teenage rebellion song. I combined Sheena, the Queen of the Jungle, with the primalness of punk rock. Then Sheena is brought into the modern day: ‘But she just couldn’t stay/She had to break away/Well, New York City really has it all.’” [the second half of the verse]

Everett (2002: 83)

When it comes to “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker”, released in 1977, it has only two verses with the same lyrics, likewise, portraying ‘Sheena’, the protagonist of the song, who embraces the life of a punk, like Judy and Jacky in the aforementioned song. Intro–verse–chorus–(and)–post-chorus structure is repeated in exactly the same form before the last part of the song offers again the chorus, without the slightest variation, to fadeout, as if being able to repeat *infinitely* (figure 1). Indeed, the refrain “Sheena Is a Punk Rocker” appears almost 20 times throughout the song, but also “Punk Rocker”, 4 times per post-chorus: so the words “Punk Rocker” appear nearly 30 times in the entire song.

Figure 1: Sheena Is A Punk Rocker

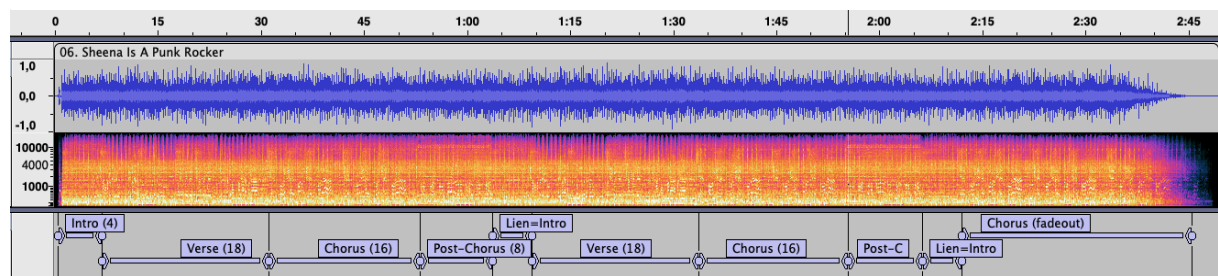


Figure 1 : Le refrain de Sheena Is A Punk Rocker (voix et guitare)

$\text{♩} = 176$

Voix

Shee-na is punk rock-er Shee - ee-na-ee-ya (punk rock-er)

Guitare

TAB

10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	12	12	12	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	12	12	12
10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	12	12	12	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	12	12	12
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	10	10	10	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	10	10	10

As you can see in the transcription of the chorus, the distortion guitar hits three power chords, namely the tonic (C) in the first bar, the subdominant (F) and dominant (G), covering the first and second half of the second bar, respectively. The last two power chords being played on the higher strings of the guitar, not only in terms of the pitch of the notes, their sound

highlights the higher register, which thus makes audible the partial tones corresponding to the thirds of F major and G major chord. One could argue that this allows to produce even more ‘magnetic’ power, so to speak, from dominant chord at the end of the phrase to the tonic at the beginning of the next phrase. Hence, you can’t help repeating this refrain!

Being hardly aware of what her life will be like after becoming a ‘punk rocker’, “Sheena” lets this phrase repeat endlessly, a repetition which is like a ritual, or a mantra, in which her way of life, her identity, are constantly legitimized. The strong logic between each of the repetitions gives the impression that only the *present* is repeated, imposes ‘cyclically’. In addition, the fade-out is therefore all the more useful, since the ‘ending’ is truly unknown: neither the ending of the song, nor the future of her life.

This ‘anti-narrative circular structure’ *à la Ramones* continues to appear in later American punk and hardcore punk songs, with different lyrical themes.¹ However, I do not seek to repeat arguments such as how lyrics in punk rock are expressed through music. Rather, music, or, if you prefer, musical structure, sometimes reaches a point that transcends things like the musicians’ attitude, their political stance, lyrical content, etc. It can also lead to a certain philosophical implication that can hardly be derived from all those, so-called ‘extra-musical’ ‘facts’ or their reception.

To put in another way, on the one hand, the critical field of the music of Ramones is not to be formulated by being positioned at a specific moment in the established history that is all about the *progress*, otherwise *regression*, of musical materials and compositional methods, but ‘outside’ of this historical process. Or you can say ‘from inside’, because it is about the musical structure itself in the sense that this music undermines the very foundation of the existing musical structure, regardless of whether or not, and to what extent, the musicians intended to do this.

At this point, if we are to narrow down what can be extracted from horizontal structure of music itself, we can cite these two notions: presentism and nihilism.

Impending disaster has become an everyday concern, so commonplace and familiar that nobody any longer gives much thought to how disaster might be averted. People busy themselves instead with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good health and peace of mind. [...]

¹ A good example is Black Flag’s “Wasted” (1978/79), where the protagonist’s hedonistic yet desperate lifestyle comes to an abrupt end with the third repetition, with little clues to change. In another version of this song, recorded in late 1979, at the end of the third and last chorus (“I was so wasted”), as all other instruments fade away, Keith Morris, the vocal, murmurs two words that does not exist in the original version: “Still (I) am”. In other words, “Wasted” is not intended to be nostalgia or even a reflection tinged with regret on this life that has been “wasted”. Because nothing has changed after all. The present is the same as the past. Whether it’s alcohol or drugs, surfing or skateboarding, senseless fights, this wasted life has continued, and it will probably continue. In addition, this anti- or non-narrative circular structure can be seen in several songs on the first EP of D.R.I., band from Houston.

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement. [...] To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time—in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity—that distinguishes the spiritual crisis of the seventies from earlier outbreaks of millenarian religion, to which it bears a superficial resemblance.

Lasch (2018[1979]: 12-13)

First, when it comes to presentism, it was clearly diagnosed by the American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch in the late 1970s, while The Ramones used to play those songs—and long before it would be coined as such and theorized by the French historian François Hartog—, based on historical, social, political, and psychological context of American society. [PPT] The early music of The Ramones and 80's American hardcore punk, DIY and *auto-entrepreneurship* were based on this 'radical individualism', that Lasch describes here and Dewar MacLeod and Steven Blush reaffirm in the context of hardcore punk:

Punk in postsuburbia did not recreate the youth culture revolts of earlier generations, but reflected instead the fragmentation, isolation, and individualism of the 1970s. While earlier punks had wrestled with the leftover ideals of the sixties, hardcore punks rejected them outright. The transition from punk to hardcore, and from the sixties to the eighties, occurred when new punks no longer held out hope for revolution from within or without. The do-it-yourself ethos, for them, provided a retreat from larger social, political, and cultural issues.

Dewar Macleod (2010: 99)

Hardcore was more about reclaiming American values than undermining them. The scene's emphasis on anti-corporate rugged individualism inspired young entrepreneurs to book shows, start labels and publish zines.

Steven Blush (2010: 320)

It is not the traditional American individualism, which is characterized by promises or deferral of compensation, responsibility, patience, and prospects for the future, but a new type of individualism that has been deprived of the prospect of change in future, the sense of historical time or the consciousness of collectivity, or even the future itself, all these ideals that could still be found in the 1960s counterculture. I would like to call this state of mind by the term *double break*, that is, a break with the past but also with the future.

The self-made man, archetypal embodiment of the American dream, owed his advancement to habits of industry, sobriety, moderation, self-discipline, and avoidance of debt. He lived for the future, shunning self-indulgence in favor of patient, painstaking

accumulation. [...] In an age of diminishing expectations, the Protestant virtues no longer excite enthusiasm. Inflation erodes investments and savings. Advertising undermines the horror of indebtedness, exhorting the consumer to buy now and pay later. As the future becomes menacing and uncertain, only fools put off until tomorrow the fun they can have today.

Lasch (68-69)

In a similar vein, in the latest issue of *Punk & Post-Punk Journal*, Justus Grebe explores the presentism, referring to Hartog's theory, as well as the notion of No Future as the "central chronotype" of punk rock, and "negation of the future", which appears actually in another track of The Ramones' first album, "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue":

Presentism as a dominant regime of historicity emerged at the same historical moment and out of the same crises as punk and its chronotype 'no future'. [...] The first thing to note here is the absence of the future. The song does not express a plan to sniff glue, but an immediate – present – desire to do so. This immediacy, or 'tyranny of the instant', is firstly expressed through the use of the present tense 'wanna' and secondly through the repetition of 'now', the only adverbial of time in the lyrics. Furthermore, it is emphasized by the lack of an intro to the song. As a result, the only time present is the present.

Justus Grebe (2023: 181)

If the author cites as examples The Clash's "London Calling" and the German band's Slime's "Deutschland" as well as this song by the Ramones, the lyrical theme and its semantic features in these songs seem more likely than in other aspects to reflect those notions. In other words, in order to find a starting point to talk about presentism in punk rock, he relies primarily on detailed analysis of lyrics, as if he did for some literary works. Even though he does not neglect structural analysis of music, it is still problematic to seek to find preliminary motifs for interpretation of music, from the lyrics. Music, on the other hand, can work without lyrics or without fully understanding of the lyrics. Needless to say, the meaning of lyrics in sound-driven rock music must be treated at a different level from that in literary analysis. Besides, lyrics are often understood in connection with the songwriters' own history or what seems to be their attitude toward life in general, but the actual musical process relies more on the synchronic and diachronic context of musical materials and structural devices themselves.

Punk rock as music is connected to postmodernism and closely related to 20th century nihilism in that it began by recognizing as vain, *irreversibly* vain all the ideals, values, goals and meanings that decorated the earlier history of rock music, such as 'big stories', cosmic, philosophical exploration, virtuosity, complexity, sophisticated recording technology and sound innovation, modernism, or simply put 'something new'.

However, there is a different form of loss of meaning than nihilism. Not the state in which there was a strong meaning and it was reduced to nothing (or actively annihilated), but the state in which it has been difficult to discover the original strong meaning itself—I would like to call this ‘melancholy’, distinguishing it from ‘nihilism’. Nihilism always needs a meaning to be annihilated, but if even the meaning to be annihilated cannot be found, we are experiencing the ‘inertness of desire’ (= melancholy) rather than the ‘frustration of desire’ (= nihilism) [...]The postmodern generation, who witnessed the collapse of the ‘big story’, lived in the ‘age of nihilism’, but those born in the world after the ‘big story’ collapsed lived in the ‘age of melancholy’.

Iwauchi (2019: 24)

As an introduction to the so-called “existential turn” in modern philosophy as an attempt to put an end to postmodern thought and recover the lost “height” (transcendence) and “width” (universality), the emerging Japanese philosopher Shotaro Iwauchi calls our era “the era of the melancholists”. To put it simply, nihilism is ‘the experience of loss of meaning.’ However, there is a different form of loss of meaning than nihilism. In nihilism, there was a ‘strong’ meaning but it turns meaningless, or is annihilated, whereas in melancholy even the meaning to be annihilated is *not found*, hence the “inertness of desire” (melancholy) rather than the “frustration of desire” (nihilism).

Iwauchi states, “Nihilists have ‘aggressiveness’ towards traditional authority and suffer from ‘a sense of emptiness’ that everything may be meaningless, but for melancholists, the problem is ‘boredom’ and ‘fatigue’ resulting from the depression of desire; it is a ‘premonition of disillusionment’ that the meaning that is currently at hand may soon disappear. In short, the melancholist is living a strange desire: ‘I do not want to do something, but I do not want to not do anything, either.’” Iwauchi (25). So nihilism and melancholy are not totally separate, and I would argue, punk rock was, and is, positioned on a certain point between these two.

This anti- or non-narrative circular structure, relying on *insisting* on repetition of certain number of structural units, in which you have nevertheless verse and chorus with a simple but decent melody and a firmly established, quite unique, even physically challenging, guitar sound (like that of Johnny Ramone), not ever trying however to create a long, complex horizontal narrative as every other musician was doing, isn’t this propensity echoing to this expression? : “I do not want to do something, but I do not want to not do anything, either.” However, the irony of punk rock lies in the fact that this stubbornness sometimes leads to something special, meaningful, and even something ‘new’. To put it another way, the infinite repetition of the current events, the endlessly imposing present, that is, the punk rock *à la Ramones*, might be a suggestion, embodied by its musical structure, that just through the repetition of, and the insistence on, the present, could be created something meaningful in the future, paradoxically

enough, something that was barely conceived in advance by the composer, something in life that is barely conceived, designed, planned in advance by every individual.

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