

**Punk and Postmodernism****The post-Punk revival: morality and style****Chris Cutrone**

I want to comment on the issue of the relationship between punk and postmodernism, beginning with reference to a decidedly post-punk and post-postmodernist phenomenon from popular culture, Sofia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, on the life of the last Queen of France before the Revolution of 1789, which has a striking, post-punk music soundtrack, (somewhat jarringly) making the music of the late-'70s and early '80s that of the twilight of the *ancien régime*. I have a soft spot for this film precisely because the aesthetic of its soundtrack is of my early adolescence — not surprisingly, since Coppola and I are about the same age.

If you would indulge me, I'd like to show a short clip [scene of Marie's seduction of Count Fersen at 1:33:47 - 1:34:36, accompanied by Adam Ant, "Kings of the Wild Frontier," 1980: "I feel beneath the white / There is a redskin suffering / From centuries of taming"]. — The lyrics from Adam Ant's song express anarchism's neo-primitivism, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and its image of the "noble savage," which, in another scene, Marie reads to her friends and toddler daughter at her *Petit Trianon* chateau.

Posing the depiction of the old order of traditional, pre-modern society, as the film does, in terms of the culture of rock stars, is a provocative gesture on Coppola's part,

but an ambiguous one. If there is an identification with the young Marie Antoinette's tragic ill-preparedness for the coming upheavals she will face as an adult, then it is a melancholic one. There is a playing at the rock star persona, while pointing to its inhuman character, something that the punk artists also enacted reflexively in their pantomime of the culture of popular music, attempting to negate it — but really only affirming and renewing it, in their own fashion.

Something that has struck me in recent years has been the popularity of (post) punk music among my students, who are nearly a full generation younger than me (meaning, I could plausibly be their parent's age, if I conformed to my own white trash — excuse me, *working class* — upbringing, and had a child at 18, like my parents did!). I myself am really a child of the mid-late '80s — I listened to New Order, and not really so much to Joy Division, though I admired them — and so punk was definitely something I associated with the scary, post-boomer Generation X-ers, who smoked pot under the bridge at the park, and I knew well enough to avoid, as an elementary school or junior high school kid at this time. — The fact that this era comes up for a nostalgic revival startles me.

Like the Punk movement that was its contemporary, the art-critical movement of postmodernism of the late 1970s - early '80s, with its institutional critique of the museum, was already “old” for me by the time I first encountered it, in college in the early '90s. Not having experienced it in its radical newness, I took it for granted. Its rebellion was not mine, but rather that of those already my elders, in which I was a little

of wary of participating. I didn't really think it was necessary to dress or act in certain ways to be very discontented and express my desire for profound change. In this sense, I was already post-Punk. I was somewhat nondescript — like New Order, who I was relieved to find dressed so casually and unpretentiously in their interviews and live performances — in my address to society. I went to the museum, to which I was grateful to find admittance, remained painfully aware of the stifling discipline of its confines, but communed nonetheless with the art there that spoke to me, which I wouldn't otherwise be able to see. My rage did not extend to the small pleasures life in this society still offers.

Perhaps this had something to do with the kind of critique of society to which I was eventually drawn, that of Marxism, the politics of the “squares” in the 1960s-'70s — I was so happy to see in old photos of the Spartacists (the group of which I was a member in college) from the 1960s, that they wore plain white shirts, conservative slacks and horn-rimmed glasses, and didn't look like wannabe hippies or Beatles! Nor was the black-turtleneck “Beatnik” look that survived unscathed through this era, from the 1950s-'80s, donned by the likes of Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp, principal writers for the postmodernist art journal *October*, much of an attraction to me. Neither hypertrophic preening nor grim asceticism captured adequately my response to the problem I felt I faced in the world around me.

Because I was somewhat cold to the punk aesthetic, especially as a manner of personal comportment, I felt freer, I think, to relate my discontents to those of the “normal” people, who were supposedly brainwashed or otherwise compromised by

“consumer culture.” I wanted to know how my radical discontents were part of normal everyday life and not apart from it. I did not want to pose my problem with society at a personal, ethical level, in the morality of style, but was honest enough with myself to consciously register the appeal of the popular styles for me, of that very same culture industry that otherwise seemed to abject my concerns. — But I did not want to be abject.

So, when I finally came to Adorno and his critique of the “culture industry,” I felt, instinctively, that I had found a sympathetic soul.

For Adorno’s critique was directed to the very audience of that culture industry whose negative effects he elucidated so well. Adorno’s critique was of the violence that one does to oneself in accepting the dominant culture uncritically. But Adorno understood that the real reason for people doing this was political, and could not be overcome in the realm of cultural consumption — or production! — but only through politics, the politics of actually trying to change society and not merely rebel against it.

This is because Adorno recognized that the “culture industry” itself as a socially-sanctioned form of rebellion, a form of anti-social behavior that was social in nature and helped to reinforce that very society from which it appeared to escape. Adorno was not a fan, to say the least, of rock and roll, nor of its roots in jazz and blues. In the gesture of rebellion Adorno found in such popular cultural forms, he recognized a conservative response and not an emancipatory one. While Adorno appreciated that the desire to burn

the opera house or the records — or the art museum! — had its emancipatory impulse and expressed profound discontent, he recognized that it left the more fundamental problem of capitalism untouched, and so — however unwittingly — actually helped to compound it.

In the fact that punk has degenerated from its original rebellion against style into becoming a style itself, we must consider its original and not only subsequent inadequacy, for helping us get beyond the source of our discontent.

In the violence — long since tamed and rendered acceptable — of the grimaces, dark clothes, dyed hair and mohawks, tattoos and piercings, originally reflecting the actual if hidden violence of the smiling, blond and pastel world around us, there was less a shocking exposure than a grudging participation in what all in our society are called upon to do to themselves. But, when the hair returns to its “natural” state, piercings come out, tattoos are covered, and work clothes are donned, and the music remains safely stored on our I-Pods for when we’re on break, is it because we are no longer so unhappy as we were in our youth, or because, despite everything, we’ve chosen to forget it, because we must try to forget most of all how we ever rebelled against it, torturously — but inadequately.