

**[book
reviews]**

Ambrosch Gerfried
[*The Poetry of Punk: The*
Meaning Behind Punk Rock
***and Hardcore Lyrics*]**
New York: Routledge, 2018

One is hard-pressed to think of a genre or field of study in which even the most straightforward and simple description of the content of a monograph can evoke feelings of aversion, foreboding, and even dread among a cross-section of the potential readership. *The Poetry of Punk: The Meaning behind Punk Rock and Hardcore Lyrics* by Gerfried Ambrosch does just this. First comes the consternation felt at the possibility of the volume having been written by an intrigued and well-meaning academic who has recently discovered the genre, and has chosen to explore this “unfamiliar” area. At the same time, one is confronted with the fear that it has been written by a “punk scholar” – perhaps even more dread-inducing, since no one can possibly understand punk as well as you do, and let’s face it, no one really understands it anyway. Right?

Ambrosch addresses these apprehensions, appropriately, at the very beginning. In the introduction he offers several key frames – punk’s non-monolithic, multi-faceted nature, the perennial balkanization of the punk community – and he cites Dunn’s (2009) analogy of a flag (evoking passion, lacking universal shared meanings) to lay the ground for explaining the nature of the topic’s subjectivity (1). The author’s argument is that song lyrics, having the formal properties of poetry, can be analyzed like poems, and the purpose of the book is to investigate the nature of (a selection of) lyrics by bands subscribing to punk and hardcore. The book goes far beyond this, exploring the “ideology” of punk and historical aspects of the emergence and development of punk and hardcore in “Anglophone” countries

(limited to the United Kingdom, the United States, and to a fleeting extent, Canada).

The International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), in their call for papers for the Punk Pedagogies Symposium held in July of 2019, noted rising numbers of educators coming from punk backgrounds in higher education. Others have noted punk’s emergence as a vital presence in academia, not only as a subject of study, but as a way of processing the world (Hsu 289). This volume reflects these observations, and in balancing between literature studies, popular culture and cultural studies, it serves as another contemporary contribution bringing important, alternative voices to the study of literature and culture. The author holds a doctorate in English and American studies from the University of Graz, and the short bio contained within the book suggests he is not currently affiliated with any institution. He notes in the introduction his involvement in the punk scene and suggests that it should be seen not as causing bias, but rather as an asset (3).

The book consists of five chapters plus an introduction and a foreword. In terms of methodological approach, the author undertook 17 interviews with musicians and other members of the punk community (e.g. Jon Active of Active Distribution). Lyrical meaning is examined non-systematically using a variety of basic approaches such as intent, structure, tropes, texture, intertextuality, levels of communication (the role of poetic voice), register, figures of repetition, and form-content relations. The book is divided thematically, with the first two chapters focusing on definitions and methodology. After in-depth discursive reviews of definitions of both punk and poetry, the second chapter examines the particular nature of punk lyrics, from their vocalization to anatomical aspects, and serves to highlight the aims, approaches and impact of lyrics in punk songs. The focus then progresses in the third chapter to attempts to pinpoint major

themes in punk lyrics, exploring anarchy, anti-capitalism and DIY, religion, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, vegetarianism and animal rights. The author uses a variety of examples ranging from early DIY bands such as Crass and Black Flag, to middle-ground indie punk bands with major label ties (Bad Religion, Propagandhi), to globally successful, major label affiliated bands (Sex Pistols, The Smiths). The final two chapters add contextual analysis, featuring histories of UK and American punk (with minor references to Canada), and various iconic lyrical highlights.

The most substantial contribution of the book arguably lies in the first two chapters, the first of which is dedicated to defining the two major aspects of the volume, punk and poetry. Whereas in many subjects operational definitions are more or less mechanical, and rightfully so, the subject of punk demands a much deeper and more sensitive discussion, and the author obliges. The result is a quite remarkable attempt at defining punk in the first half of chapter one, skillfully citing noted punk figures (e.g. Penny Rimbaud, Ian MacKaye), movements (Dadaism, The Situationist International, Camp Art), and authors (Sontag 1964, Marcus 1989, O'Hara 1999); the outcome is easily imaginable as a definitive, stand-alone essay. The complexities of defining punk, a phenomenon less than half a century old, and notorious for causing disagreement on even its most basic characteristics, make the task of defining poetry, the subject of countless discussions over centuries, somewhat pale in its shadow. Nevertheless, the initial chapter prepares the reader for one of the author's main arguments, namely that punk culture cannot be understood without an examination of its poetry: song lyrics (21). The second chapter, as the author effortlessly guides the non-expert reader through basic poetic structures, convincingly engages the reader with the application of theory to non-literary works.

A surely confounding question that arises when carrying out a study like this is what samples to choose. From the plethora of records related to punk and hardcore, the question is a daunting one – especially when the author is close to the subject, as the author of this title notes that he is. The declared criteria for sample selection are stated as being twofold; “relevance and representativeness” (1). This seems to be a rather thin framework to say the least, and it opens the door to the questioning of the author's choices. For example, are The Smiths and Morrissey relevant and representative of punk and hardcore to the extent that they deserve multiple pages of content dedicated to them? Is the statement “many punk bands name the iconic singer as an influence” (125) a sufficient criterion? The same goes for Catharsis, referred to regularly throughout the book, and the subject of an almost ten-page analysis in the final chapter. Is Catharsis truly that representative of almost five decades of punk and hardcore lyrics?

Taking ‘representation’ from another perspective, the final chapter is curiously entitled “A History of North American Punk Rock and Hardcore,” yet only one single reference is made to a Canadian-based band, and no cultural references related to Canada are discussed at all. It seems it would make much more sense to use a more fitting frame by dropping the “North American” niceties, and replacing Propagandhi with an influential American political hardcore band (MDC comes immediately to mind, among many others).

As the book progresses, it becomes increasingly heavy on punk history, with lyrical analysis becoming secondary. A number of the stories related are legends of the genre – Ian MacKaye accidentally creating a movement (straight edge), the emergence of punk with the Stooges, New York Dolls and Ramones in the USA, the Sex Pistols in the UK, Dial House and the emergence of anarcho-punk, the influence of Dead Kennedys, the Bad Brains and

homophobia... the list goes on. Although the point of the author seems to be to emphasize the lyrical value connected to historical moments in punk, one has to wonder if it is really necessary to tell these stories again, with them already being the subject of dozens of biographies, informal studies, documentaries, fanzines, films, etc. The question may again be who the book is intended for: if the book were about the lyrics of modern American country and western music, I personally would appreciate the context and legends, knowing little of the genre. However, in the context of what the author says at the outset, that the book should be of interest to anyone who “identifies with punk, or moves in punk circles” (2), it seems that for the intended audience the historically focused chapters would likely be mostly redundant. It begs the question of why the author chose such ‘famous’ moments and players, and not more under-the-radar, but arguably more essential players and ‘historical’ events.

The description of themes (or “ideology”) in punk presented in chapter three involves recognizable patterns, calling to mind, yet expanding upon, the often cited yet empirically lacking book *Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise* (O’Hara 1989). However, a different question seems to be begging to be answered here: why were (and are) such diverse people brought together under these “ideologies”? The highly educated, high school drop-outs, nerds, jocks, the abused: What is it in punk and hardcore lyrics that attracts such a diverse audience to these ideologies in particular? Perhaps this could be the subject of a further study.

In terms of style, the language and register is sovereign and convincing. However, the book is desperately missing a conclusion to tie the arguments together, a trend that follows on from chapters 3, 4 and 5. Summarizing the points made in chapters makes for more persuasive reading, particularly at the end.

Especially in light of the fact that the book is divided thematically, a concluding chapter tying the three directions together would have resulted in a much more convincing read.

When reading this book, two personal memories of punk and poetry came to mind. One was from a 12th-grade English class, and the disgust of a pair of classmates upon learning that I had scored a top grade on an extended poetic analysis paper: they had been discussing “real” poetry, I was examining “mere” punk lyrics. This repeated itself in a third-year Bachelor-level Sociolinguistics class. Earning an ‘A’ grade on a paper based on an analysis of Exploited, Crass and Subhumans lyrics turned out to be a pivotal moment in my education: the concerns that I had about society, many of which I had been introduced to by punk and hardcore lyrics, were recognized as important, serious and worthy of discussion by my professor. In light of these experiences, if *The Poetry of Punk: The Meaning Behind Punk Rock and Hardcore Lyrics* contributes in a similar way to opening doors to the discussion of alternative perspectives on society and culture for others, then Ambrosch’s contribution to the literature is an important one.

[Bibliography]

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