Reading Early Punk as Secularized Sacred Clowning

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I N HIS CLASSIC *SUBCULTURE: THE MEANING OF STYLE*, DICK HEBDIGE addresses the first wave of 1970s punk rock aesthetics in Britain, discussing the contours of a movement that was somewhere between a petty pop fad and a larger political crisis. By violating a set of social codes in their distinctive ways, says Hebdige, punks had the effect of "presenting themselves . . . as villainous clowns" (98). The response of observers vacillated between the possibility that such violations were malevolent or simply a lark: punks were "treated at different times as threats to public order (or) as harmless buffoons" (2).

Other contemporaneous observers expressed their perceptions in somewhat similar language. In one of her early dispatches on punk, the British rock journalist Caroline Coon describes Captain Sensible of The Damned as having "a front as benevolently mad as a village idiot's" (44) and the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten as "a disgraced Angel Gabriel" (49). Elsewhere, Tom Carson suggests that we view The Ramones in light of "the attractiveness of the comic loser," who is "the closest thing we have to the idea of the holy fool" (115).

These insights are certainly undeveloped, but they are not haphazard. They indicate brief, intuitive flashes by the authors that their subjects of concern bear a resemblance to what I will call the sacred clown—an umbrella term for a cast of cultural archetypes marked by marginalia, shame, and destitution, paradoxically expressing sanctification and profanity, stupidity and sagacity, and menace and mirth. But the basis for this resonance is a compelling enigma. What moved

these observers to suggest participants in a 1970s' youth culture were analogous to such mythohistorical personae?

My aim in this article is to explore how the clowning spirit manifested itself in the early years of the punk performance, from 1976 to 79.[1] By looking at the similarities in how punks and sacred clowns perform symbolic inversion, it is possible to make these connections explicit and, in doing so, defamiliarize them in their historical specificities. It extends the history of punk backward by suggesting how it emerged from primordial and enduring cultural practices and extends the history of clowning forward, so as to widen its sphere of relevance beyond the genres to which it has been narrowly consigned.

Clowning as Symbolic Inversion

My preference for *clown* as the term for a figure constituted by these paradoxes is not to deny the abundance of related terms[2] nor the ways in which any of these variants may be uniquely appropriate to a particular context. Nor should it suggest that there is unanimity among those who use the word "clown" on exactly what it means. Elusive as an all-encompassing definition may be, it is nevertheless true that the phenomena in question bear some underlying similarities best illuminated through description rather than rigorously denotative parameters. Charles suggests that the clown is marked by "earthiness, poverty, renegade irresponsibility, irreverence, and license of all sorts" (33). The figure may be permanently outside societal norms (the "natural" or "historical" fool) or just a temporary role (the "Stage Clown") (Welsford xii–xiii); either way, he or she "is an amphibian equally at home in the world of reality and the world of imagination" (Welsford xii). At times the performances are humorous, although it is a point of contention whether clowns are humorous by definition. Welsford and Charles are among those who emphasize the clown's ability to produce laughter and Hereniko uses "clown" to mean "an individual whose antics cause overt signs of mirth or laughter among spectators" (167). Makarius appears to dissent sharply, asserting that the clown represents the violation of taboo first and foremost and the comic effect is merely epiphenomenal. Even if this can be dismissed as an overstatement, it is an important one in that it restores an element of danger to the amusement. The clown's transgressions are reflexive: they comment on

the foibles of human nature and social organization and are potentially threatening to the sanctity of the cultural systems that produce them.[3] The effect may weave a crazy quilt of emotional responses, pulling observers in different directions as familiar feelings are combined and recombined in new, sometimes difficult ways. Makarius remarks that "this intermingling of hilarity and fear is, ethnologically speaking, a stereotype sufficient to betray the presence of a clown" (56). Clowning may be about the "good fun" that diverts and refreshes, but it is also about the "bad fun" that disturbs comfortable assumptions about the world and what is "natural."

Clowning is an expression of the subjunctive mood that Victor Turner called liminality. Liminality is the condition of being "betwixt and between" (Turner, *Forest*) two socially recognized states, whether individual (e.g., puberty rites) or collective (e.g., New Year's celebrations). In these transitional zones, sociocultural norms are often suspended and practices of "symbolic inversion" proliferate. Symbolic inversion "may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior that inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or, in some fashion, presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" (Babcock, *Reversible* 14). The cultural context of such inversions varies: they may be criminal, they may be deviant, they may be related to social movements, they may be sacred, or they may be artistic. Inversion may also occur in the context of a story, where the transgression is that of a fictional or mythic character. Clowns merit the designation "sacred" when they play a role intended to prompt reflection on cultural postulates about ultimate reality and social organization. By breaking rules, clowns can produce "a sudden opening or dislocation in the universe" (Tedlock 115), providing a liminal space in which observers and ritual participants may fruitfully contemplate the vagaries of life.

The Decline of Clowning and the Origins of Punk

Sacred clowning is certainly related to the inversions of carnival and, indeed, historical accounts of these genres in the Western world are very similar: the "ideal types" for both carnival and clowning seem to hang on desperately for life as they are dragged kicking and screaming into successive stages of modernity, each of which compels

degenerations in the original. Bakhtin discusses the vivacity of carnival in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in order to contextualize the work of Rabelais and also provides intermittent asides on the decline and transformation of this archetypal form into a more nebulous "carnivalesque." As for clowning, Welsford is the preeminent overview of Western traditions, although Willeford and Zijderveld provide useful complements. All three grant a primacy to court fools, from which descend clowns in the theater and circus. The tenor of these histories is one of atrophy and although carnivals and clowns are not pronounced dead, their appearances after a certain prime are depicted as distortions and diminutions of an original.

However, whereas there has been a great deal of scholarship subsequent to Bakhtin on how the carnivalesque persists in contemporary popular culture (e.g., Docker, Fiske, Nehring), the same is not true for clowns. People interested in how carnival persists have found that it does—provided one treats carnival as a "mode of understanding" (Stallybrass and White 6), whose "underlying structural features . . . operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such" (Stallybrass and White 26). Certainly, the same can and should be said of the clown. Welsford and Willeford do recognize a clown-like component to farcical figures of the cinema, such as Chaplin, yet they seem to hesitate beyond that point, constrained, perhaps by the narrow meaning of "clown" in common usage. That is, acceding to the familiar usage of the word *clown* curbs inquiry into how the spirit of clowning has been ramified into forms that overflow the bounds of circus and parade.[4] Its ramified forms should include the ferocious billingsgate of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, the grotesqueries of political caricature, and the prankish dissent of the Yippies. Much of early punk can be added to these ranks, uniting them as a modern version of clowning that is less a stereotyped ensemble of costume and makeup than a simultaneous move toward the jocular and the jugular.

Punk has invariably been characterized in both academic and popular accounts as a series of practices consistent with symbolic inversion and of relatively recent varieties: punk as a musical, artistic, and/or political subculture. Academically, the subcultural framework dates to Hebdige, whose assessment of punk is part of a much larger body of work by scholars at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, examining how postwar youth subcultures

registered changes in England's economic structure. In the main, Hebdige read punk as his Birmingham colleagues typically read sub- culture overall—as lateral expressions of working-class pride and re- pudiations of socioeconomic inequality. But this was only one way of considering the phenomenon and it was not altogether satisfactory. As Grossberg has remarked, Hebdige's explanation is challenged by "(the) argument that (punk) emerged out of a largely art school and 'bohe- mian' context (and) also those situations in which punk functions in a largely middle-class context without any romanticisation of the work- ing class" (229). Such critiques do not argue against understanding punk as a subculture per se. Rather, they push theorists to acknowledge that subcultures may be based (separately and/or simultaneously) on things other than just class. The most concise and coherent exegesis of the relationship between punk and avant-garde art movements is pro- vided by Henry, who identifies among the shared characteristics:

> unusual fashions, the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects and behaviors, intentional provocation of the audience, use of untrained artists or transcendence of technical expertise, and drastic reorga- nization (or disorganization) of accepted performative styles and procedures. (30)

Marcus has a similar focus, although his examples are more specific and attempt (although circuitously) to establish a series of connections that lead from Dada to punk.

Other approaches have charted the histories of pertinent bands and hubs of activity (Savage; Gray; McNeil and McCain; Spitz and Mullen, to name just a few) to show how punk upended the prevailing stan- dards of pop music. Laing takes another approach, eschewing the his- torical narrative in favor of evaluating punk recordings in and of themselves. More methodically than anyone else, Laing points out how punk lyrics, composition, and recording styles differed from enter- tainment industry norms. Some have also acknowledged instances where punk became visible as overt political dissent. Dancis evaluates the prospects for punk within broader socialist politics and Savage ties punk to antiracist activism that accompanied the rise of the New Right in Britain.

To read punk as secularized sacred clowning reveals the constancy of contrary performance across time and provides the opportunity for an

examination of the genre in premodern and modern societies. That is, a touchstone of difference between premodern and modern is the process of secularization, which denotes institutional diversification and the establishment of religion as a distinct social authority among others. Comparing and contrasting forms of foolish transgression can illustrate the differences between a social order where ritual is a plenary event, at once religious and political, and one where rituals among voluntaristic, subsocietal groups are part of power relationships that classify religion and politics as separate spheres of action.

Using some of the characteristics of liminality as an organizing principle, it is possible to see the resemblances between early punk and sacred clowning.

Sacred Clowning, Punk, and Indices of Liminality

Prima Materia

Liminal subjects are "physically visible," yet "structurally 'invisible'" (Turner, *Forest* 98), occupying a classificatory limbo outside of the culture-specific categories that organize reality. They may be understood as having attributes from both or neither of the states between which they are suspended, a condition Turner describes as "a kind of human *prima materia*—as undifferentiated raw material" (*Forest* 98) that "is still social, (but) without or beneath all accepted forms of status" (Turner, *Ritual Process* 170). The liminal figure is either effaced or so radically protean that its precise characteristics can never be fixed.

Similar language has been used in the literature on clowning, as when the actions of certain Zuñi Koyemsi[5] are explained with reference to the "unformed character attributed to them in mythology" (Bunzel 951). Lame Deer, a Lakota clown or *heyoka*, says of the mythic thunderbirds, who give the *heyoka* their power: "When I try to describe (them) I can't really do it. A face without features, a shape without form, claws without feet, eyes that are not eyes" (Lame Deer 228).

Early punk, in many respects, constructed much of its aesthetic around a similar escape from definition. In doing so, it engaged in selective borrowing from certain forerunners and contemporaries, such as the otherworldly motifs of David Bowie (Hebdige 61). More immediately influential, although, was the emerging punk scene in New York, whose aesthetic of nervousness and negation was readily apparent

in the anti-anthem "Blank Generation," by Richard Hell and the Voidoids (Hell).[6] "Blank Generation" was Hell's commentary on the scene's position as the first wave of bohemia after the collapse of the '60s. Psychedelia and the radical left no longer seemed viable. Meanwhile, the affluent society that had (unwittingly) nurtured them seemed to be falling apart as well. What kind of counterculture were they? Nobody seemed to know, not even the participants, Hell among them, who intended the first word in the song's title to be a noun—an empty space waiting for a name, as in "fill in the blank." As such, Hell was merely calling attention to the movement's namelessness. Alternatively, however, it was possible to interpret the word as an adjective, such that the movement became characterized by a sense of absence and indistinction.

The latter interpretation took hold as the inspiration for the Sex Pistols' third single, "Pretty Vacant" (Savage 126; McNeil and McCain 199). The song is a strange mixture of confrontation and evasion: Johnny Rotten's singing style maintains a defiant sneer throughout, yet the overriding message is one of withdrawal. His sole intention is to inform the listener that he (Rotten) is untraceable: "Don't ask for an answer/you'll get no reply," opens the first verse, to which the second adds "Don't ask me to return/'cos I'm not all there" (Sex Pistols, "Pretty Vacant"). It is an active negation of identity according to any conventional standard, a self that defined its alien existence in terms of its own disinterest. Hebdige provides a compelling interpretation in suggesting that punk "gestured toward a 'nowhere' and actively sought to remain silent, illegible" (120). The quality of *prima materia*—being unformed, imprecise, unrecognizable—had become a stance of non-participation in a world seemingly without meaning.

Gender Instability

A primary expression of statusless *prima materia* is the disruption or negation of gender. One finds, says Turner, that liminaries "are sometimes treated or symbolically represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sex" (*Forest* 98). Hence, the copious accounts of clowning figures perform liminality through transvestism and gender role reversal (e.g., Bateson, Gluckman, Norbeck, and various articles in Mitchell).

Here again these traits are visible in a few punk antecedents, particularly the androgyny of Bowie and the cross-dressing of the New York Dolls. Punk did, at times, engage in such a direct transpositions at the visual level, as with the tendency of The Damned's Captain Sensible to perform in a tutu or female nurse's outfit.[7]

But punk also challenged gender stability through a somewhat campy combination of hyper- and hyposexuality. This was especially true of the Sex Pistols and their inner circle, known as the Bromley Contingent. The band, of course, had an absurdly phallic name and both band members and fans often adorned themselves with the bondage and sexual fetish wear Malcom McLaren sold in his King's Road boutique (which was, for a time, simply named "Sex"). Here, again, punk seemed to play—consciously or otherwise—on the implosion of the '60s, as utopian dreams became a bloated, decadent version of the poses they once conspired against. The counterculture had opened a space for sexual expression; punk managed to turn this space in on itself. Worn as everyday clothing, the punk use of bondage gear jammed the rhetoric of "peace and love," with an image that referred to sex but was not itself sexual, providing an almost clinical dissection of power relations that lay beneath the veneer of freedom.[8] If the '60s counterculture sought to counter a staid, repressed society with liberatory openness, punk suggested that the project had been recuperated in a new regime of domination all the more seductive because it was based on hedonism.

Associations with Birth and Death

Liminality marks, on the one hand, the departure from a previous social state and so its symbols "are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge, such as menstruation" (Turner, *Forest* 96). Yet, it is also true that liminality marks the arrival at a new social state and may therefore exhibit "symbols modeled on processes of gestation and parturition" (96). Thus,

> logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example, by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), by bear

symbolism (for the bear "dies" in autumn and is "reborn" in spring), by nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial), and by innumerable other symbolic formations and actions.

                                                                    (Turner, *Forest* 99)

Similar features exists in some versions of clowning. Titiev suggests that when certain Hopi contraries carry out their activities in a backwards fashion, it has a comedic effect that also associates them with the world of the dead, where all things are alleged to be opposite of the way they are on Earth. Mediating between life and death is evident in another recurring gag among Pueblo clowns, wherein the performers attempt to feed the sacred katsinas with ashes instead of cornmeal (Tedlock 109).

Much of what has been said about punk's "blankness" and gestures of alienation as *prima materia* could apply equally well to a reading of punk as "preborn" or "dead." Some band names were positioned on either end of the cradle/grave continuum (Suicide, The Boys, Siouxsie and the Banshees; The Dead Boys, meanwhile, incorporated both). Punk fashion could also be read as blurring this distinction: safety pins held together torn clothing, but also suggested a state of infancy through their association with diapers; the use of ghastly makeup completed the equation. Dave Vanian of The Damned also utilized various elements (white painted face, black cape) to create a stage identity that connoted vampirism or the undead.[9]

Perhaps more revealing, however, is an assessment of punk's complicated relationship with the larger world of rock-n-roll. Both Laing and Savage provide insightful commentary on how punk arose as a reaction to the conditions of pop music in the mid '70s. The industry had become too pretentious, too respectable, too dependent on blockbuster hits and arena performances for many people to feel it was relevant. Punk immediately positioned itself as contrary to the prevailing trends and announced an almost total break with its rock-n-roll heritage. Rotten was famous for wearing a Pink Floyd shirt he had personalized by writing "I hate" at the top (Coon 20); Joe Strummer of The Clash performed in a shirt bearing the stenciled message "Chuck Berry is Dead" (Coon 22). The new era was also announced through songs: The Clash declared there was "No Elvis, Beatles, or the Rolling Stones/In 1977" (The Clash "1977") and in "New York" the Sex Pistols

went so far as to mock the former members of the New York Dolls—
one of a handful of bands who could be identified as punk progenitors.

Yet this apparent scorched earth policy toward anything that existed
before 1975 and almost everything that existed after it was far from
total. Punk was, of course, rock-n-roll, not an alternative to it but an
extension or re-interpretation of it. Even as it sought to create a de-
finitive break with the past, punk still drew (if selectively and am-
bivalently) on established musical forms. The Ramones took their
name from a pseudonym adopted by a pre-Beatles Paul McCartney
(Savage 90); punk also provided the atmosphere in which an acerbic
singer-songwriter named Declan McManus could be rechristened as
"*Elvis* Costello." Or consider one observer's shock, the first time he saw
the Sex Pistols, to recognize their cover version of "Stepping Stone":
"In the next sixty seconds, hearing the Pistols violently murder and
then resurrect this simple pop classic, all was made clear as all was
destroyed. Only in hearing the old was the new revealed. I will destroy
the temple and in three minutes I will rebuild it, sayeth the Lord,
sayeth Johnny Rotten" (Wilson 24–5). Punk symbolically killed its
predecessors so that they could be brought back again.

Filth and Purification

Liminality may contain elements that are brazenly crude and gro-
tesque, but the aim of these exaggerated profanities is to reconnect
human beings to the material world as a whole.

Turner recounts a 1923 report by R.S. Rattray on the northern
Ashanti in Ghana, who celebrate an 8-day festival known as *Apo* im-
mediately preceding the new year. The festival, in true carnival fashion,
permits forms of frank, uninhibited speech that are otherwise con-
strained by custom. Rattray points out that *Apo* originates from the
verb meaning "to speak roughly or harshly to" and that the festival is
alternatively known by a term that seems related to the verb meaning
"to wash or cleanse" (quoted in Turner, *Ritual Process* 178).

A similar event—in function, if not form—is the Mayo Indian
Easter celebration, described by Crumrine. The celebration promi-
nently features the *Capakobam*—clownish[10] masked impersonators who
act out the role of Roman soldiers and are permitted to break various
Mayo taboos. The licentiousness they are allowed culminates on Good
Friday, with a symbolic crucifixion of Christ; the following day, all

those who impersonated *Capakobam* are baptized and re-assume their
usual social positions. While the misdeeds of the *Capakobam* are ex-
cused away on the grounds that within the ritual frame the imper-
sonators are no longer human, and thus not to be held accountable, it is
also true that observers consider their behavior "a confession on behalf
of both the individual and the community" (Crumrine 8). The Easter
ritual serves to renew Mayo society by purging them of their collective
transgressions and thus creating a proverbial "clean slate."

Some indigenous clowns in the American southwest are particularly
notorious for what appears to be a similar ethos in their consumption of
excrement and other "inedibles" (Stephen 328, Stevenson 430–7,
Bourke, Parsons 233–4, Tedlock 112–3).

Punk performance often strove to achieve comparable levels of vul-
garity, prompting many observers to deride it as altogether unwhole-
some. A member of the Greater London Council is reported as saying
that he "felt unclean for about forty-eight hours" (quoted in Hebdige
90) after seeing a Sex Pistols show; Laing provides an index of mass
media descriptions of punk that includes a category for "dirt" (i.e.,
"'filthy, spitting, shabby, rancid'") (100). But these insults from the
outside were perfectly in line with what were compliments on the
inside: the punk aesthetic actually idealized and reveled in a certain
degree of filthiness, joining in "a hallowed tradition whereby contact
with dirt signified the genuineness and dignity of the common people"
(Laing 101).[11]

Given its propensity to self-identify with illnesses and dysfunction,
it may at first seem odd to suggest that punk exhibited an underlying
concern with purification. Yet, at the same time, it is evident that "the
etiquette of punk" sought "A world healed, a world purged" (Sinker
124). The association of honesty and roughness in *Apo* parallels punk's
aesthetic of authenticity, in which anything clean and refined is sus-
pect, but dirtiness connotes a street-level engagement in the real world.
The Sex Pistols made much of being truthful and contrasted it ex-
plicitly with the standards of the leisure industry: when an interviewer
asked Johnny Rotten, "What are you providing as an alternative, for
people who maybe haven't seen you live?" Rotten responded, "I speak
honestly" (Sex Pistols, "The Complex World of Johnny Rotten").

But another, and probably more important, aspect of punk puri-
fication has to do with its apocalyptic rhetoric. Here, the reconciliation
of a death that gives life moves beyond individual and society to

encompass the entire world. Apocalypse is degradation on a global, absolutist scale, a vindicating, definitive, swallowing up of the old and springing forth of the new. The single most famous expression of this in punk terms is surely the opening line of "Anarchy in the UK," wherein Johnny Rotten announces in his own, inimitable way, "I am an anti-Christ" (Sex Pistols, "Anarchy")—as odd, really, as the declaration in the chorus that he wants to be anarchy, because he is distinctly not *the* anti-Christ but merely an anti-Christ and who ever knew there could be more than one? Savage provides an abundance of detail, however, that the punk ethic was drenched in more millennial angst than ever made it onto record and such a mood only sharpened the emphasis on honesty and openness, as the remarks of *Punk* magazine co-editor Legs McNeil attest:

> Compared to what was going on in the real world, decadence seemed kind of quaint. So punk wasn't about decay, punk was about the apocalypse. Punk was about annihilation. Nothing worked, so let's get right to Armageddon. You know, if you found out the missiles were on their way, you'd probably start saying what you always wanted to, you'd probably turn to your wife and say, "You know, I always thought you were a fat cow." And that's how we behaved.
> (McNeil and McCain 256).

Punk, Clowning, and the Social Order

Punk discourse may be partially explained by reference to popular music, avant-garde bohemia, political protest, and subcultural style. But it also seems justified to position punk as one of the many successors to an ancient lineage of contrarian performance. This does not in any way imply that prime movers in the punk scene must have known about *heyoka*s or even harlequins. Rather, it suggests a need to think about the ways in which punk's underlying spirit is consistent with but not necessarily directly inspired by more timeless and persistent inversive practices.

Here, Turner is again helpful, for he was not only eminently concerned with ritual processes but also how these processes interfaced with social conflict. His later work in particular explored the ways in which the Western use of "art"—particularly drama—served an end similar to that of ritual. In societies with little institutional diversity,

rituals arise in response to some kind of crisis or paradox in the cultural system and seek to focus attention on the values most likely to produce a solution. The "performative" character of these rituals led Turner to conclude that they "are the raw stuff out of which theater comes to be created as societies develop in scale and complexity and out of which it is continually regenerated" Turner, "Liminality" (24). This led him to propose a distinction between liminal and liminoid, which is helpful in examining how the implications of symbolic inversion change according to context. Properly understood, liminality occurs in rituals that are the fixed and predictable outcome of particular circumstances (a marriage, a harvest, the birth of twins, etc.) and apply to all members of a society (all marriage partners, all royalty at a stage in the agricultural cycle, all parents of newborns, etc.). *Liminoid* refers to those situations when society has become so institutionally diverse and culturally pluralized that there exist multifarious microcommunities, each carrying out their own distinctive rituals in "the marketplace of ideas." Such rituals are no longer obligatory, unifying experiences for all members of society, and they are often, even usually, secular. Both liminal and liminoid phenomena may feature symbolic inversions, but whereas liminal rites "tend to have a common intellectual and emotional meaning for all the members of the widest effective community" (Turner, "Variations" 57), liminoid rites are "potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual and communal, either to criticize or to prop up dominant social-structural values" (55).

Furthermore, Turner's explication of the liminoid addresses the Birmingham school literature's abiding concern as to subcultures' oppositional efficacy. Turner makes it quite clear that liminal rites are intended to be institutionally integrative. Liminality may disrupt habitual thought and action, but it is nevertheless permeated by ideology and authority. Prompted by the appearance of a wrinkle in the cultural fabric, ritual is intended to smooth things out and remind people that "it is good and appropriate when things adhere to their proper place and when people do what is appropriate for them to do in their stage of life and status in society" (Turner, *Ritual Process* 27). This is accomplished, for instance, through the marshaling of potent ritual symbols that "unite the organic with the sociomoral order, proclaiming their ultimate religious unity, over and above conflicts between and within these orders" (52). As far as clowning in particular is concerned, numerous interpretations suggest that such transgressions serve a certain

"policing" function through what might be called "the lesson of the bad example." One tribe's burlesque of their tribal neighbors may elicit laughs and mocking various local persona may serve as gentle reminders about the need to uphold a particular way of life (see, e.g., Wright, Bock, Makarius, and Welsford).

But other inversive rituals do not seem so congruent with social stability. The carnival life Bakhtin describes in the European Middle Ages was widely practiced and "popular," but was suspected of being— and in some cases condemned as—profane and/or distasteful. Church, state, and secular intellectuals alike attempted to clean it up or eradicate it, which demonstrates that while still enjoyed by some (or even many), the applause was not unanimous. Amid such dissension, the rites do not enjoy unequivocal institutional endorsement because their link to sacredness has become severed or more ambiguous. There are also times when inversive practices are explicitly understood (by at least some observers and some participants) as hostile to the existing social order (or any social order at all). Some forms of transgression may be illegal, others simply violate informal taboos or break with established norms. The inversions, in this situation, are strategic: social categories are violated in order to promote a new program or just to protest the current one.[12] Such circumstances are likely to be marked by a degree of interinstitutional conflict between those who provide at least tacit endorsement and others who stand in outright opposition. This means that there will be differences of opinion across and among social forces such as politicians, the courts, the entertainment industry, law enforcement agencies, religious authorities, religious adherents, parents, adolescents, and so on. Such discord is likely to be evident at even the individual level, as one's social commitments (and the attending hierarchies to which one is subject) diversify and overlap.

Liminoid rites may be designed to uphold or challenge the existing order.[13] As Turner observed, rituals that uphold dominant systems use symbols to make sociomoral vagaries seem organic and natural. But subculture seeks to reroute taken-for-granted objects and practices so as to produce a disturbing "double inflection." Hebdige reads this cognitive monkeywrenching as "a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to . . . ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style" (133). It is common for liminal symbols to sustain contradictory meanings (Turner, *Ritual Process* 25) and Babcock remarks that in ritually inversive practice, the "free play of signification

is created and expressed primarily by a surplus of signifiers—a sensory overload, a surfeit of signification which calls the meaning, the significance of everything into question and creates a realm of pure possibility" ("Too Many" 294). Savage's commentary on punk, and the Sex Pistols in particular, provides specifics that seem to vindicate Babcock's generalization. Punk created just such "a realm of pure possibility," which admitted a range of diverse and even conflicting interests, all of which found the "surfeit of signification" compatible with their respective agendas. Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren displayed a perspicacious understanding of this phenomenon and the Pistols' notoriety was at least partly related to what Savage calls "a ritual dance with the media" that meant "the impossibility of pinning them down to any concrete position, whether political, aesthetic or social" (387). Pistols' graphic designer Jamie Reid explained:

> We were most powerful up to six months after getting our product out, because people didn't know about our background. They didn't know which direction we were coming from. In the same week we would be accused, quite seriously, of being National Front, mad communists and anarchists. It's pertinent to English politics: they like to label you really fast, and anything that can't be labeled is a bit dangerous (qtd. in Savage 353–4).

For all its ambitions, though, the counternormative liminoid holds an ambiguous position in relation to the hegemonic "center." Even as it proclaims its difference, it is hardly independent and self-sufficient, whether ideologically or materially. Williams comments that "all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic" (114) and it is not difficult to identify a number of areas in which punk reproduced or proved complicit with the systems of domination it protested. Certainly, it cooperated with the need of capitalism to have a continuous parade of new trends. "Subcultural styles are created, adapted, and eventually superceded" (Hebdige 129), which means that their obsolesence is not quite "planned," but at least inevitable, and that they mimic, on some level, the cycles of fashion that are the engine of late capitalism, particularly in the era of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey).[14] Punk could also be as sexist as anyplace else in rock music or society in general (see Christgau in Dancis 75). Some strains either tolerated or promoted racism (Sabin) and it is

undoubtedly embarrassing that the only labor militancy an allegedly working class movement was able to spark consisted of a refusal by patriotic factory workers to press the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen" single (Savage 347).

Many of the most provocative ambiguities in early punk could not be sustained over the long term. This was particularly true of its mercurial sexuality, which soon eroded into heteronormativity and hackneyed rock-n-roll machismo (Savage 190). McRobbie's critique of Hebdige suggests that if "the style of a subculture is primarily that of its men" (34), then "the possibility of escaping oppressive aspects of adolescent heterosexuality within a youth culture or a gang . . . remains more or less unavailable to girls. For working class girls especially, the road to 'straight' sexuality still permits few deviations" (36). Such tendencies were manifest in the early '80s turn toward hardcore and thrash styles, which maintained a generally left or anarchist political stance but within somewhat codified parameters. "As a result of the ascendancy of hardcore," comments LeBlanc, "much of the variety and play apparent in the early punk style of dress was lost" (52).

Yet, as Welsford remarks, "It would seem then that there is no such thing as Clown, there are only clowns" (273) and the rigidification of punk style came under increasing pressure, not surprisingly (and in true Turnerian fashion), from the influences it had banished to its margins. The early '90s saw a veritable revolution within the subculture as queer and feminist punks unleashed a barrage of inversive practices directed at punk's definition as "straight" and "male."[15] This spirit of contrariness, at once joyful and confrontational, was evident at the punk gathering Ladyfest, in Olympia, WA, in the August of 2000. Among the festival's print media were an admission ticket designed to look like a playing card of a Queen, where a photo of the ticketholder was superimposed over the royal visage, and a drag show program guide that was heavily decorated with skeletal imagery. Among the drag show acts was an androgynous performer who costumed him or herself in balloons inflated and shaped to resemble greatly exaggerated anatomical features, including male and female genitalia. The performance consisted of popping the balloons one by one, negating the entire montage of sexual traits, and reducing the person to a primal, pregendered state (Del Real, Personal interview. 7 Aug. 2000).

As a liminoid practice, punk has seen some of its tendencies remain oppositional at the expense of becoming ossified and routinized. Yet

the most recent wave of internal crownings and uncrownings demonstrates that its underlying spirit as an extension of archaic folly has not been entirely lost and may be expected to persist for some time.

Notes

1. I have chosen these historical parameters not only because of the relative abundance of documentation but also because the period appears to have been more capricious, improvised, and undefined—in other words, less formulaic and more generative—than the conglomerate of derivations (hardcore, indie, goth, etc.) that followed.
2. "He is Devil and Vice, as well as Demon, Goblin, and Knave. He merges often into a Churl, Boor, Rustic, Dupe, Dolt, Booby, Simpleton, Noodle, or Nut. He may function as a Fool, Jester, Buffoon, Comic; or Harlequin or Pierrot with a more romantic touch. He may be a Parasite, Scape-Goat, Old Man or Old Woman; or an animal; or he may be the 'Fool of Nature' . . . I see no reason for sharp lines of classification" (Charles 34).
3. "When a belief is shared unanimously by a people, to touch it—that is, to deny or question it—is forbidden . . . The prohibition against critique is a prohibition like any other and proves that one is face to face with a sacred thing" (Durkheim 215).
4. This is not to say that the contemporary clown stereotype is culturally irrelevant. See Dery for a sharp analysis of clowns in villainous roles in contemporary United States popular culture.
5. Wright says it is inaccurate to apply the word clown to the Koyemsi as a whole because there are some Koyemsi who do not perform in a comedic fashion.
6. As the first line of the song puts it, "I was saying let me out of here/before I was even born . . . " (Hell).
7. See, for instance, various photos that appear in Coon.
8. Because previous subcultures of its kind had made women marginal to a center of male enthusiasm and action, Gray suggests that "(t)he studied lack of interest built into punk" (291) may have leveled the proverbial playing field (i.e., the aesthetic prescribed a pose of detachment for men as well). On the other hand, "(i)t was quite possibly the strain of keeping hidden their true, confused feelings about sexual roles in punk that made for the sexism, chauvinism, sexual disgust, and misogyny that was so prevalent on the scene" (292).
9. See various photos in Coon and the back cover of the group's debut album (Damned).
10. Crumrine prefers not to call them clowns on the grounds that the spectators are not supposed to laugh.
11. Laing cites a Chartist anthem with the refrain, "We're low, we're low, we're so very, very low, we delve in the dirty clay" (101). Consider as well the final chorus of the Clash's "Garageland": "I don't wanna hear about/What the rich are doin'/I don't want to go to where/Where the rich are goin'/They think they're so clever/They think they're so right/But the truth is only known by guttersnipes" (The Clash, "Garageland").
12. In colonial and neocolonial situations, for instance, the sacred clown's lampooning of non-normative behavior readily extends into a critique of imperialism. A turn of the century report by Stevenson (1901–02) says that the Zuni *Newekwe* found the Catholic church and the US army officers especially ripe targets for ridicule (435, 437). A number of reports from Oceania (Counts and Counts; Hereniko; Macintyre) note similar activity there.

13. Zijderveld offers the analysis that foolishness is neither inherently radical nor conservative, but bears aspects of each. The conservative trajectory (which he calls regressive) is the censorious aspect of foolishness, the part that comments unfavorably on the deviant and redirects individual behavior back toward established norms. The radical trajectory (which he calls progressive) pokes fun at the authority figures that provide foolishness its institutional patronage. He suggests that while foolishness is never eradicated, modernity atomizes its institutional foundation and spreads it throughout society in general.

14. "Flexible production systems have permitted, and to some degree depended upon, an acceleration in the pace of product innovation together with the exploration of highly specialized and small-scale market niches" (Harvey 156).

15. For a reading of Riot Grrrl as a carnivalesque discourse, see Nehring.

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