

Eat French Bread - May 2007  
*Turning Rebellion Into Money*

Scrolling through my iPod I find the Sex Pistols after Serge Gainsbourg and before The Shins. I know I am listening to Johnny Rotten screaming "I am an anarchist" at a distance. I know I don't feel his energy the way I would have if I listened to it 30 years ago. It's not supposed to be heard by pushing a button, bored at the bus stop. It's supposed to be imposed on audiences, experienced live and loud. I don't appreciate how shocking and offensive it was to say fuck on TV or to pierce a ten-inch safety pin through the lower lip, because I was born in an age where shock is passé.

When the Sex Pistols were formed, punk wasn't a fashion statement; it was a radical style of refusal. But however startling the content, everything seeps into the mainstream. The subversive potential of punk was sanitized and it was rendered profitable merchandise. Punk fashion could be bought mail-order as early as the summer of 1977, and in September that year *Cosmopolitan* covered a new range that drew from the punk aesthetic, accompanied by an article ending with the aphorism 'to shock is chic'. It would never be the same again.

But punk itself could be said to be a more commercial and superficial manifestation of the Paris-based group of intellectuals and artists from the 1950's, the Situationists. Recuperation was the term used by the Situationists to describe the procedure by which mainstream society takes a radical idea and repackages it as a safe commodity. When Guy Debord wrote and ended the Situationist International, he was "hoping to destroy the revolutionary commodity it had become" and said "the more our theses become famous, we ourselves will become even more accessible, even more clandestine" (according to Greil Marcus in his book *Lipstick Traces*). But there was nothing Debord could do to stop the recuperation of Situationist language and ideology.

One example is Tony Wilson's legendary Manchester nightclub Hacienda (1982-1997), which was named by him in reference to the Situationist Ivan Chitchevlov's "Formulary for a New Urbanism". The Hacienda superclub was hugely commercially successful and was used in 1996 to stage a conference on the Situationists. Wilson's company Factory Records was one of the sponsors of a 1989 Situationist exhibition at the ICA Gallery in London (along with Beck's Beer). The exhibition presented original Situationist and pro-Situ works in a way that reinforced the prestige of the art establishment and encouraged passive public consumption. (It was a contrast to the presentation the Situationists gave at the same gallery a few decades earlier, which famously ended when an audience member asked the group "what is Situationism?" and Guy Debord responded "we are not here to answer cuntish questions" before marching off to the bar.)

Turning rebellion into money (as Joe Strummer phrased it in The Clash song *White Man In Hammersmith Palais*) is something that can be traced across cultural and historical contexts, but the system of recuperation has reached new heights in the twenty-first century. There is no longer a cohesive dominant system to express resistance to. Today an industry of highly paid 'cool hunters' roam the globe looking for new fringe activities and styles to commodify. The new generations have seen that any clear definitive style is too easily reduced to cartoon copies and appropriated by the mainstream, so they pastiche dead styles and ideas to create something that refuses meaning and categorisation. Hal Niedzviecki, in his book *Hello I'm Special*, has examined how rebellion itself has been recuperated and individuality has become what he calls the

'new conformity'. According to him we are "invited, urged and commanded to rebel against the system to gain access to the system." Everyone is fighting the system, which is how the system works.

But while it is usually assumed that counter-cultural groups rue the moment of recuperation, wider social recognition is not always a bad thing. A micro-group's radical ideas about change and society can only be implemented if they form a cohesive whole and are entered into public debate. Only once the Situationists had surfaced could they have any impact or legacy on our thinking. For this reason, entrepreneurial activity is not always counter-revolutionary. McLaren and Westwood (pictured above) are sometimes said to have undermined the purity of the collective creative impulse of punk by opening their King's Road boutique and making the style available for purchase over the counter. But without the likes of them the distinctive style and what it stood for would not have been unified and remembered.

Likewise, the media does not just sanitise and commercialise revolutionary ideas: it can be useful in lamenting a movement, providing a spectacle of the ideologies to a wider public and also to the group itself. Early photos of the Sex Pistols gigs show that there were no recognisable punks in the audience; there was no uniform because nobody knew what punk was. The band appeared live on Bill Grundy's television show in December 1976, causing uproar by slurring drunken profanities at him (see front page of the Daily Mirror, left). The incident is often cited as the start of the labelling of punk, when people began to think of themselves as punks and be noticed as a group angered and unsatisfied with the way things were.

A final note: in writing about these things do I not also contribute to the demise of the radical potential of rebellious groups, converting their ideas to nothingness, using a conceptual vocabulary too far removed from the original modes of thought? To get the point is, in a way, to miss the point - and I might have been better off pursuing no further after pressing play on Anarchy in the U.K. when I was passing boredom at the bus stop.

--Bob Gruen