The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture

LAWRENCE GROSSBERG

INTRODUCTION

The rise and visibility of youth culture in the United States after the Second World War is marked, most prominently, by the emergence of rock and roll.¹ Some have argued that this reduction of art to commodity is merely the final stage in the production of the human subject as consumer: passive, acritical and unable to define political opposition. Others have argued that rock and roll, precisely as a form of leisure, has a cultural politics based on its representation of the psychological, cultural and political aspiration of youth. The alternative questions that I wish to pose concern the relations between the heterogenous uses and contexts of rock and roll on the one hand, and the specificity of rock and roll as a cultural form with its own evolving politics on the other. Rock and roll is not only characterized by its musical and stylistic differences; it apparently can be used in radically different ways by different fans. Contemporary cultural theory—from Williams to Foucault—agrees upon the need to locate any particular cultural text within a specific reconstruction of its historical context.² However, how does one describe such reconstructions and identify the functions or effects of rock and roll within them? Furthermore, despite the diversity of the locally produced effects of rock and roll, it seems to constantly reproduce itself as having a certain unified historical identity. How does one move beyond the set of reconstructed contexts to a reading of rock and roll as a cultural form?

My approach to these questions depends upon two assumptions. First, particular rock and roll texts only produce effects insofar as they are located within a larger “rock and roll apparatus” through which the music is inflected. This apparatus includes not only musical genres and practices, but styles of dress, behavior, dance, etc., as well as economic and political relations. Second, the power of rock and roll is located in its affectivity, that is, in its ability to produce and organize structures of desire. But the organization of desire is always the site of a struggle for power, of a resistance to the regimentation of affective relations.³ The cultural politics of any moment in the history of rock and roll is a function, then, of the affective relations existing between the music and other social, cultural, and institutional facts. I will use “affective alliance” to describe an organization of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms, and social experiences into a structure which partly determines (always in a struggle with ideological formations) the historical possibilities of desire. Thus, not only must the effects of the rock and roll apparatus be defined contextually but its effectivity is defined precisely by its production of the

Lawrence Grossberg teaches English at the University of Illinois, Champaign.
material context within which its fans use the music. The rock and roll apparatus organizes the disparate pieces of that context according to certain structures of affective investments rather than through semantic representations, experiential homologies or emotional evocations. Hence, such a description of the effects of rock and roll is neither phenomenological nor ideological. In fact, this view of the affective functioning of rock and roll allows us, not only to examine the concrete politics of particular moments of rock and roll but also, to move beyond such contextualism to describe the unity of rock and roll. We can identify the cultural form with the structures by which the rock and roll apparatus has consistently produced and positioned its fans within a limited set of affective alliances.

I will suggest five general characterizations of rock and roll framed within the problematic of power as the organization of affect. The first suggests that the dominant affective context of rock and roll is a temporal rather than a sociological one. While class, race, gender, nationality, subculture and even age may be partly determinative of specific affective alliances, the emergence of rock and roll should be located in the context of growing up (in the United States for my purposes) after the Second World War. The second hypothesis will propose the particular structure of opposition that constitutes one moment of the unity of rock and roll, its particular affective effectivity. This cannot be sufficiently described as the constitution of an identity or the production of a utopian fantasy. Rather, rock and roll inscribes and cathects a boundary within social reality marked only by its otherness, its existence outside of the affective possibilities of hegemonic alliances. In more traditional terms, rock and roll inscribes the particular mark of postwar alienation upon the surface of other social structures of difference. Nevertheless, this mark of difference—its production and effects—are not always the same. The third hypothesis suggests a way of describing the range of effective boundaries that rock and roll appears capable of defining. The fourth hypothesis discusses the notion of cooptation, i.e., the process by which rock and roll is appropriated into the contexts of the dominant organizations of affect so that it loses whatever oppositional force it may have had. Finally, the last hypothesis will describe the aesthetic-textual practice of rock and roll as a postmodernist one: a practice of “excorporation” located at the site of particular cultural contradictions within the hegemony. My conclusion is that rock and roll is a form of cultural rebellion and never of political revolution.

HYPOTHESIS I:
ROCK AND ROLL IN THE POST-WAR CONTEXT

Any reading of rock and roll must begin by identifying the context within which it is to be located and its relations identified. The dominant features are almost always identified as sociological variables (i.e., the sociological characteristics of the music's producers and consumers). These variables, while often locally significant, must constantly confront their own exceptions. Such sociological descriptions do not provide convincing accounts of the emergence and continued power of rock and roll; they must continually appeal to an a priori definition of the music embodied in a particular historical moment. For example, the adolescence of the rock and roll
audience is obviously an important determinant of the music itself as well as of its cultural politics. The frustrations, desires, fears and resentments of puberty provide much of the energy and many of the concerns of rock and roll. However, even this apparently simple determination is mediated by other emotions, experiences and events. And while the first audience of rock and roll was almost entirely teenagers, this is no longer the case. Another example is the place of class determination. While the class experience represented in rock and roll may function significantly in one context, it may not function similarly in all music or contexts. Attempts to generalize Hebdige's reading of punk as working-class music must confront, not only Frith's argument that it emerged out of a largely art school and "bohemian" context, but also those contexts in which punk functions in a largely middle-class context without any romanticization of the working class. The fact that particular forms of rock and roll have specific class roots or references does not necessarily determine its reception and social effects in particular contexts. On the other hand, this is not to deny that the fact of (class) origin may have specific mediated effects, particularly through local iconographies.

Alternatively, if we start with the assumption that rock and roll is related in some way to youth's often articulated experiences of alienation, powerlessness and boredom, can we locate the context within which these experiences emerge and rock and roll functions as a specific response constituting a "youth culture"? Consider the obvious fact that rock and roll emerged in a particular temporal context, variously characterized as late capitalism, post-modernity, etc. The dominant moments of this post-war context have been widely described: the effects of the war and the holocaust on the generation of parents; economic prosperity and optimism; the threat of instant and total annihilation (the atomic bomb); the cold war and McCarthyism with the resulting political apathy and repression; the rise of suburbia with its inherent valorization of repetition; the development of late capitalism (consumption society) with its increasingly sophisticated technology for the rationalization and control of everyday life; the proliferation of mass media and advertising techniques and the emergence of an aesthetic of images; the particular redistributions of social knowledge as a result of both television and increasing educational opportunities; the attempt and ultimate inability to deal with the fact of the baby boom; the continuation of an ideology of individuality, progress, and communication (the American Dream); and, to echo Sontag, an increasingly receding threshold of the shocking. The result was a generation of children that was not only bored (the American Dream turned out to be boring) and afraid, but lonely and isolated from each other and the adult world as well. The more the adult world emphasized their uniqueness and promised them paradise, the angrier, more frustrated, and more insecure they grew.

These cultural effects were themselves located within an even broader apparatus whose significance is only now being recognized: they operated in a world characterized by a steadily rising rate of change that did not allow any appeal to a stable and predictable teleology. There is in fact no sense of progress which can provide meaning or depth and a sense of inheritance. Both the future and the past appear increasingly irrelevant; history has collapsed into the present. The ramifications of
this fact are only now becoming visible as we confront a generation that no longer believes that their lives will be better than those of their parents, even though the "rhetoric of progress" is still present. Suddenly, "we are obliged to remake from scratch the foundation of our taste, as of our politics and our very lives. Old ways of judging linger (only as) unexamined habits, comforting defenses against the recognition of our common lostness." As history loses its sense, it can no longer be a source for the values by which one chooses and validates one's actions.10

This new sociohistorical context further reinforced youth's conviction of its own uniqueness; indeed it determined their dominant generational needs and perceptions in the fifties and since. If adolescence is a time when one seeks not only pleasure but also a viable adult identity, then the collapse of the deep structure of history undermined the traditional models. The significance of Holden Caulfield, James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the Beats as cultural heroes lies in their struggle to achieve some identity consistent with this new set of experiences. The Beats' turn to the model of the black hipster pointed the way for the rock and roll/youth culture.

Rock and roll emerges from and functions within the lives of those generations that have grown up in this postwar, postmodern context. It does not simply represent and respond to the experiences of teenagers, or to those of a particular class. It is not merely music of the generation gap. It draws a line through that context by marking one particular historical appearance of the generation gap as a permanent one. Similarly, class divisions are reinscribed and realigned as they are traversed by the boundary of postmodernity, of the desires of those generations who have known no other historical moment. Postmodernity is, I shall suggest, not merely an experience or a representation of experience; it is above all a form of practice by which affective alliances are produced, by which other practices and events are invested with affect.

HYPOTHESIS 2: THE EFFECTIVITY OF ROCK AND ROLL

If a cultural history of rock and roll involves a reconstruction of the various contexts and affective alliances within which it is located, it is still possible to describe its general effectivity because it is a part of rock and roll's operation to continuously reconstruct and reassert its own unity. I have argued that this unity is determined by the context of postmodernity. Unable to reject, control, or even conceptualize this reality, it becomes both the source of oppression and the object/context of celebration and fun. Repelled and angered by the boredom (repetitiveness) and meaninglessness of the contemporary world, youth celebrates these very conditions in its leisure (technology, noise, commodity status, repetition, fragmentation). Despondency and pleasure become mutually constitutive. Rock and roll seeks its place within and against the very postmodernity that is its condition of possibility.11 The fact, if true, that rock and roll may not be experienced in these terms is less a statement about rock and roll than about its changing relationship to the hegemony.12

At its most powerful, rock and roll is about survival. Dave Marsh, rock critic,
once said that "Rock and roll was never good time music. It was always about beating back bad times and hard luck, about rejecting despair. And when you do it right, you really can't lose." In a sense, rock and roll starts with despair: loneliness, anger, fear, and frustration. It is partially an individual experience, the result of bringing private obsessions and desires into a world we do not control. Obviously, desires may contradict each other or they may contradict reality; in either case, desire remains unfulfilled. But talking in such terms removes desire—both its production and organization—from the social world. If rock and roll is a response to an environment that is boring, repressive, and crazy, it suggests that these structures coincide within the regimentation of desire in the contemporary world. The sensuous (kinesthetic) and sensual nature of rock and roll experience provides youth with a material response. It is in this context that the penetrating, driving beat—often read as both sexual and violent—must be examined. As Pete Townshend of the Who has said, "Rock and roll won't get rid of your problems, but it will let you dance all over them."**

We might begin to understand how rock and roll works by affirming that it is above all fun—the production of pleasures (e.g., in the sheer energy of the music, the danceable beat, the sexual echoes) and of "formations of pleasure." Thus, rock and roll can never take itself too seriously. And yet, it is extremely self-conscious; it continuously reconstitutes and re-encapsulates itself (e.g., in its intertextuality, its self-references, its recreation of its history through the incorporation of "covers"). The result is that irony and contradiction are the dominant figures in rock and roll's textuality. Rock and roll, to be effective, must constantly deny its own importance or meaningfulness; it must focus the attention of its audiences on its surfaces. Its power lies not in what it says or means but in what it does within its culture. I am not suggesting a disjunction of lyrics and sounds but rather that rock and roll cannot be approached by some textual analysis of its message. It is not that rock and roll does not produce meaning but rather than meaning itself functions in rock and roll to organize desire. The question of what the lyrics (and other representational features of the music) contributes can only be addressed in particular instances. When David Susskind asked record producer Phil Spector what the meaning of the song "Da Doo Ron Ron" was, Spector responded, "It's not what I say it means. It's what it makes you feel! Can't you hear the sound of that record, can't you hear that?" What both Spector and his fans knew was that the answer to his question was no.

A boundary is drawn by the very existence of desires (or more accurately, the organization of affect) that is not available to some. Its oppositional power is not the result of its offering a particular desire that the dominant culture cannot accept, nor of its calling for the unlimited realization of desire. Rock and roll does not project an antinomy of freedom and constraint. Its history is rather the deconstruction of that antinomy; it plays with the relation of desire and the regimentation of desire by always limiting its own production of pleasure. Rock and roll's pleasure serves to mark a difference, to inscribe on the surface of social reality a boundary between us and them; it rearticulates and recathects a permanent rupture at the point of the intersection of youth and postmodernity. This mark of difference is not,
however, a simple boundary between inside and outside, hegemony and revolution. It is rather a stratification of social space. Rock and roll locates its fans as different even while they exist within the hegemony. The boundary is inscribed within the dominant culture. Rock and roll is an insider’s art which functions to position its fans as outsiders. This “encapsulation” defines an exteriority for itself inside the dominant culture through particular practices that constitute affective alliances. To use a psychoanalytic metaphor, rock and roll “incorporates” itself into the “belly of the beast.” It is “internalized but unintegrated,” included within the dominant culture but “alien to it, inaccessible; . . . enclosed, entombed, encysted inside.”

Finally, we must ask in what sense this boundary constitutes a political relationship between the rock and roll culture and the hegemony. The most common descriptions of rock and roll’s power of affirmation locate it within the attempt to reconstitute community in the face of industrial mass society. Thus, if rock and roll apparently begins with private desires, it creates common experiences out of them. Rock and roll transforms the despair of its context into an embracing of its possibilities as pleasure. But it cannot dismiss the despair. For what rock and roll is inescapably drawn to is the attempt to find meaning and value in the historical moment and in its own existence. The attempt is, of course, the refusal of the post-war context. And so rock and roll seeks new forms of identity, new values and meaning; yet it must always place these back into the context of a world which undermines all meaning and value. The politics of rock and roll is not the production of an identity but the constant struggle against such identities, even as it creates and politicizes them (e.g., the “teenager” constantly reappears in the history of rock and roll as a rebellion against older generations of rock and roll fans).

The politics of rock and roll must be understood within this tension, caught between the desire to celebrate the new and the desire to escape it, between despair and pleasure. The politics of rock and roll arises from its articulation of affective alliances as modes of survival within the postmodern world. It does not bemoan the death of older structures but seeks to find organizations of desire that do not contradict the reality in which it finds itself. Rock and roll, at its best, transforms old dreams into new realities. It rejects that which is outside of its self-encapsulation not on political grounds but because their organizations of affect are no longer appropriate in the postmodern world. It celebrates the life of the refugee, the immigrant with no roots except those that they can construct for themselves at the moment, constructions which will inevitably collapse around them. Rock and roll celebrates play—even despairing play—as the only possibility for survival (e.g., Elvis’ pink Cadillac, the Beatles’ antics, punk’s shock tactics and post-punk’s dissonance). It does not oppose its own ideological representations to those of the dominant culture; it locates itself within the gaps and cracks of the hegemony, the points at which meaning itself collapses into desire and affect.

HYPOTHESIS 3: THE POLITICS OF ROCK AND ROLL

At this point, two questions can be usefully raised together: the political possibilities of rock and roll’s cathexis of a boundary, and the desire for a descriptive
vocabulary for distinguishing “genres” within rock and roll. In fact, one of the important determinants of the significance of a particular form of rock and roll is its relationship to other forms of rock and roll. At any moment, there are a distinct number of genres of rock and roll existing within a historically evolving system of styles. Thus, a reading of rock and roll must find a way to talk about the system of internal differences which, operating both synchronically and diachronically, constitutes its possibilities as a unique cultural form.

The most commonly observed division within rock and roll (and its fans) is between the punk (violent, sexual, and emotional) and the poet (critical, sensuous, and intellectual). These correspond roughly with the images of working- and middle-class life. In the popular rock press, the concern is often with musical styles and lines of influence. However, it is difficult to see how rock and roll can be circumscribed by any musical characteristics. The fragmentation of the music has to be complemented by an appreciation of the heterogeneity of listening practices: styles, contexts, and functions. For example, the same music can be used by different groups (e.g., new wave); different styles can be used for similar functions (e.g., dance or drug music); and different groups within a common style may yet have different audiences (e.g., Beatles, Ramones, REO Speedwagon and dB’s all use pop conventions while Heart, Styx, and AC/DC are all “heavy metal” bands). There is not “only one way to rock.”

The diversity of rock and roll can be described by specifying the ways in which it has cathected a boundary between Them and Us through its history. Once again, I am forced to abstract from its concrete history of organizing local effective alliances. I do not claim either that these forms of inscription belong exclusively to rock and roll or that they limit its future possibilities. I propose to construct a two-dimensional schema: the horizontal axis specifies the various structures by which rock and roll differentiates its culture from the other; the vertical axis describes the different affective statuses rock and roll has assigned to its own existence.

Rock and roll has produced three forms of boundaries: oppositional, alternative, and independent. (There is a fourth—coopted—which I will describe in the next section.) Oppositional rock and roll presents itself as a direct challenge or threat to the dominant culture, perhaps even confronting the power of the dominant culture with its own power: “we want the world and we want it now.” Alternative rock and roll mounts only an implicit attack on the dominant culture; the fact of its existence implies a potential substitution for the hegemonic organization of desire: “we want the world but on our own terms.” Independent rock and roll does not present itself as a challenge, either explicitly or implicitly, to the dominant culture although it may function as such. It apparently exists outside of its relation to the dominant culture; it does not want the world. It seeks to escape, to define a space which neither impinges upon nor is impinged upon by the hegemony: “we want our world.” Without recognizing these structures of difference, whatever affirmations rock and roll may produce are likely to be described independently of the particular historical context. While it is possible that some music may consistently produce the same positive affects across different contexts, the effects of the affirmation are bound to change as their particular relation to the dominant culture are differentially cathected.

What then is the nature of the affirmative affect of rock and roll? I have argued
against seeing it as the representation of identities; the subject-positions articulated by rock and roll are often multiple and contradictory. Rather, it defines particular affective statuses, those it assigns to its own structures of desire, for its own culture. By describing itself as a particular structuration of affect, rock and roll locates social subjects in a nonrepresentational space. One can identify three such self-cathexes: visionary, experiential, and critical.

Visionary rock and roll projects itself as a utopian practice. Its power derives from its claim to be a stable structure of desire. The particular rock and roll culture lives out the possibility of a moment of stability in the face of change and regimen- tation. Whether the real audience succeeds in actualizing its utopian possibility and the particular content of the vision is only secondary. It reifies its own affective alliance. Experiential rock and roll is more modest; it projects itself as a temporary respite, merely a viable possibility in the present context. It valorizes its own affirmation of change and movement. It celebrates the behaviors and images of its own youth cultures, equating its affective alliance with the rock and roll apparatus itself. Such an affirmation tends to be neither as optimistic and pretentious as the visionary, nor as pessimistic and self-destructive as the critical. Finally, a critical affirmation denies that it can produce even temporary spaces within which the audience might control and make sense of its life. By rejecting any possibility of stability and value—including the valorization of change itself—it merely affirms and valorizes only its own negativity. All that can be affirmed is the practice of critique, the deconstruction of all affective alliances, including that produced by its own inscription of the difference between Them and Us. The affective alliance of critical rock and roll is a self-reflective affirmation of difference, a decathexis of any affirmation.

The differences between these three affirmations may become clearer if we consider the way in which representations of love function in each of them. In visionary rock and roll, love functions generally as a universal and stable value constitutive of identity and community. In experiential rock and roll, it often serves the same constitutive function but it is love in its concrete sensuality, as real and often temporary relationships rather than any transcendental, abstract form. Finally, in critical rock and roll, love is a purely physical event with little valid emotional content and which, in the end, is merely another affective trap set by the hegemony.25 If one seeks examples of these three categories, I am tempted to assign most "acid rock" (e.g., Grateful Dead, the later Beatles) to the first, the bulk of mainstream rock and roll (e.g., Chuck Berry, the early Beatles, Bruce Springsteen) to the second, and punk and post-punk (e.g., Sex Pistols, Gang of Four, Pere Ubu) to the third.

The matrix of "stances" that these two dimensions generate [see diagram] describes the possibilities of an affective politics offered by rock and roll. It is not a description of musical styles nor of a group’s intentions. Further, no group or style can be stably located within a category; groups can play with a number of stances simultaneously (e.g., Clash). The affective stance of particular music is, as I have emphasized, locally produced. It may depend on a wide range of determinants including the image of the band and different degrees of knowledge of the lyrics (rock and roll fans often "float" in and out of the lyrics). Fans of different musics (e.g., punk and heavy metal) often place a great weight on what appears as minute musical
differences to outsiders. The ways in which one listens to music, as well as the music one listens to, is a product of already differing and often antagonistic affective alliances. Thus, while the emergence of folk-rock (e.g., the Beatle’s Rubber Soul) redefined the listening habits of particular audience fractions (one has to listen to the lyrics in new ways), it is doubtful that younger kids listening to AM radio found the music making the same demands on them.

What this matrix makes obvious is that different stances are available as resources at different times and that some of them may dominate or define the struggles both within the music itself and between the youth culture and the hegemony. The power of this approach, however, depends on what it allows one to say about particular examples. In the diagram, I have included within each category examples of groups whose music might be generally associated with that particular affective function. I have further specified a time frame and, were I to be more precise, I would have to include some definition of a particular fraction of the youth culture. Given the limitations of space, I will limit myself to making an observation about three examples.

First, consider the music of the Grateful Dead as it existed for the so-called counterculture in the second half of the sixties. Quite obviously, this music projected a vision of a utopian world which served as an alternative affective possibility to the dominant culture. The Dead were a “live” band for whom records were simply an ineffective medium. The experience of a Dead concert was precisely that of releasing one’s inhibitions in the context of a new structure of affective relations. One was never afraid of getting ripped off, and I have often heard women say that the Dead’s were the only concerts at which they felt comfortable dancing with strangers. Now consider the following dilemma which has been disputed recently: the Dead are still

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<td>Bruce Springsteen (mid-seventies)</td>
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around; they still have a fanatical following and most importantly, contemporary “Deadheads” still describe the context of a concert in the same basic visionary terms that were used over ten years ago. Yet many of the Dead’s older fans, and many fans with strong political commitments are quite critical of the Dead today. How does one make sense of this situation? I suggest that the solution lies in recognizing that the Dead still produce a visionary alliance but that it is no longer effective as an alternative boundary. Instead, it inscribes its difference as an independent one which presents no threat to the dominant culture and hence, serves only as a form of escape rather than as an effective political challenge. Indeed, with the Dead’s turn to country rock in the early seventies, their utopian representations have moved precariously close to liberal individualism.

A second example worth discussion is Bruce Springsteen, a rock and roll musician who has a fanatical following among both critics and fans. For many of Springsteen’s fans, his music is both oppositional and experiential. Rather than a vision of utopian life, it offers us a sense of movement and energy which is embodied not only in the lyrics (with their dominant image of driving) but also in the music which often “drives” one forward as if in flight (especially through the use of the saxophone). There is an explicit attack on the dominant culture which leaves us no alternatives but to run. There was, however, a significant change in his music and audience with the release of Springsteen’s most successful album, The River. His popularity soared, the album topped the charts and even produced a hit single, and he sold out large concert venues around the country. Springsteen had become a “rock superstar.” But as his audience grew, it changed and fragmented. Many of the pre-River fans felt uncomfortable with the newer ones and sometimes resented them because they did not use and respond to Springsteen’s music in the same way. The River does, indeed, sound and feel different, and for his newer fans, the music was experiential and independent. It is a reaffirmation of their valorization of fun and excess as a form of escape. It provides a space within which they are in temporary control of their lives. While older fans tend to emphasize Springsteen’s lyrics, these seem less important to the newer (often younger) fans. In fact, there is a clear affective tension coded into the musical text of The River itself, which often defined the favorite songs of the various audiences. In the terms of my matrix, the music moves between a critical-oppositional stance and an experiential-independent one. This contradiction has been noted by some critics as a tension between optimism and pessimism; Springsteen himself has described it as realism and idealism. In this context, Springsteen’s latest album, Nebraska, functioned to reconcile these contradictory moments only by alienating itself from the optimism of The River and the musical codes of rock and roll.

The point is that rock and roll fans, like cultural critics, tend to expect that the same music will have the same function for the entire audience. We tend to forget that there is no stable and homogeneous rock and roll audience except that created by the economic sector of the dominant culture through its marketing practices. To expect different fractions of the youth culture to use the music in the same way, to expect the music to articulate only one affective possibility is to cooperate in the occlusion of the power of rock and roll. The best rock and roll always allows dif-
ferent audiences to locate it within their own affective alliances. The affective power of the music will vary with the context into which it is inscribed, potentially effecting specific reorganizations.

Finally, I want to address briefly the question of the current popularity of revivals of musical genres: for example, the revival of pop and the sound of the British invasion which began in the late seventies. It is true that rock and roll has a particular sense of its own historicity and that it often seems to return to that history to recapture a lost sense of affective power. But at its best, recuperation of its roots also involves a transformation. Thus, the Beatles in the early sixties recaptured the power of early rock and roll but did so by transforming it both musically and affectively (from an alternative to an independent boundary). This raises what is perhaps the most difficult question in rock criticism (especially within terms of my “affective” reading of rock and roll): how one articulates the difference between rock and roll with a real sense of energy and defiance and rock and roll that functions as a weak imitation, merely a commodity (e.g., compare 20/20 and the Knack).26 The ability to identify the effects of particular revivals depends upon the prior ability to make such discriminations. Similarly, when we consider the current revival of acid rock, we face the danger of glossing over the affective rupture which that music produced in its time. The music is being marketed, and often functions as a way of returning to some imaginary moment when rock and roll was devoid of despair and political implications, when it was merely fun. Such questions point to the more general issue of the “cooptation” of rock and roll.

**HYPOTHESIS 4: THE COOPTATION OF ROCK AND ROLL**

Discussions of cooptation usually focus on the techniques by which rock and roll has been exploited and transformed by the economic system and the various “ideological state apparatuses,” especially the mass media. By the end of the fifties, the youth market was recognized as an enormous source of consumer expenditure. The sheer numbers of the baby boom generation made them a potential economic and political threat which had to be incorporated into the dominant culture. According to most histories of rock and roll, this process of exploitation and incorporation has been going on since the early fifties when rock and roll apparently became a commodity which could be produced, marketed, and consumed. But it is also apparently true that each time this has happened, rock and roll breaks out of that coopted stance and reaffirms its affective power, creating new sounds and new political stances. Such histories of rock and roll see it as a cycle of cooptation and renaissance in which rock and roll constantly protests against its own cooptation.

This reading is reinforced by the view that the cooptation of new sounds, styles, and stances seems to take place at an increasingly rapid rate. We seem today to be caught in a situation in which the vast majority of the rock and roll audience is incapable of making the distinction any more:

Sitting around with my friends one night, I remember saying that instead of being the triumph of our lives, rock and roll might be the great tragedy. It had given us a sense of possibility so rich and radical that nothing could ever feel as intense—and then the
world went back to business as usual, leaving us stranded. . . . As mass-media folk culture, rock and roll was always an anomaly. Since the direction of mass culture is toward more control and less spontaneity, the record industry has worked ceaselessly to suborn rock back into the status quo of entertainment, and succeeded. Nearly every band that still thinks rock and roll was meant to change your life now labors under the contradiction of creating a popular culture that isn't popular any more. Yet they can't give up the dream of making as big a difference as Elvis or the Beatles, because their music doesn't make sense any other way. If such grand ambitions are meaningless to the mass audience, the attempt is tragic for them; insofar as we give credence to their ambition, it's tragic for us. 2

This rather pessimistic reading of the history of rock and roll assumes that it moves between folk and mass art. In order to challenge such views, we need to recognize that there are two meanings of rock and roll as product (or commodity): music and records. Although good rock and roll is often produced locally, even out of a local community with a set of shared experiences, its audience is always more inclusive. The notion of community (and hence of "folk art") is problematic when applied to youth culture for the so-called community of rock and roll cannot be defined geographically. But the notion of community is a spatial one: everyday face-to-face interaction has been assumed to be the dominant determinant of shared experience and the criterion for community. But if temporality has replaced spatiality in defining the rock and roll audience, then the music requires widespread dissemination to be shared among the members of its appropriate audience. The musical product must be reproduced as an object (e.g., a record or concert) if it is to be available to those whom it addresses. The music must voluntarily enter into various systems of economic practices and hence, accept its existence as apparently mass art.

This suggests a very different understanding of cooptation and a different reading of the history of rock and roll. The problem with the "folk"/"mass" art view of cooptation is that it defines it in purely economic terms, as if it were simply the result of strategies imposed on rock and roll from without. It assumes that rock and roll is coopted when the demands of the economic systems of production and distribution are allowed to define the production of the music as well as of the object. While such views are partially correct, they ignore a number of characteristics of cooptation in rock and roll. First, they ignore the fact that mass distribution is a real part of rock and roll. The appropriate audience for any particular music cannot always be defined ahead of time. Second, they ignore the fact that the question of cooptation is raised and answered at specific moments within the rock and roll culture. It is a distinction fans make.

In fact, the notion of cooptation allows us to see clearly the existence of rock and roll at the intersection of youth culture and the hegemony. Rather than assuming a homogeneity of either external strategies or of internal differentiations, we can begin with an analysis of the concrete forms cooptation has assumed at various points in the history of rock and roll. We can distinguish two major differences constituted within rock and roll: an affective and an ideological definition of cooptation. The first involves a differentiation between "authentic" and "coopted" rock and roll based upon the affective power of the music itself. The second differentiates
“authentic” and “coopted” rock and roll in the particular uses of the music based upon its ideological representations.

I have argued that there is a real sense of despair, anger, and frustration in rock and roll and that the rawness and driving power of this energy is inscribed into a boundary separating the rock and roll fan from others. Thus, rock and roll is not merely cathartic; it neither overcomes nor merely expresses these emotions. Rock and roll becomes coopted—“complacent”—when it loses that initial sense of its own struggle against something and thus, is no longer able to cathex a boundary encapsulating its fans. For example, the practice of covering songs (i.e., playing a song that has previously been recorded), albeit an essential part of rock and roll, has often but not always resulted in what can only be described as music deprived of its affective power.

On the other hand, there is some rock and roll that differentiates its audience from those outside its affectivity but which is, at the same time, essentially conservative. This occurs most commonly when the terms of its affirmation are defined by the ideology of the dominant culture. Let me describe these types of rock and roll that have been rejected as “inauthentic” by large segments of the audience at particular moments. Disco was seen as coopted utopian music that projects a community of artificially constituted identities where each individual becomes only a commodity.29 The form of heavy metal known as “cock rock” is often rejected because it constitutes a community of males by reaffirming and exaggerating male sexuality and violence.29 And older rock fans often reject so-called “teeny-bopper” rock (“high school rock,” “bubblegum music”) because it apparently reduces rock and roll to mere teenage fun. And since being a teenager is a normal stage in growing up, both the despair and the pleasure of rock and roll are something one will outgrow.

Thus cooptation no longer appears only as an external action perpetrated upon rock and roll—a hegemonic strategy which is at best reflected in the judgments of rock and roll fans. It is rather one form by which rock and roll produces its own history. Rock and roll constantly marks differences within itself just as it marks the difference of its audience. Cooptation is the mode by which rock and roll produces itself anew, rejecting moments of its past and present in order to all the more potently inscribe its own boundary. Coopted rock and roll is no longer capable of inscribing its difference or that of its fans, but this is an affective charge made from one position within the rock and roll apparatus against another. It indicates an affective real- liance, a cathexis of one boundary and a de-encapsulation of one audience position. It is not necessarily an alteration of the aesthetic or ideological constitution of the text, but the production of new affective alliances within the rock and roll culture. This entails a very different reading of the history of rock and roll. Rather than a cycle of authentic and coopted music, rock and roll exists as a fractured unity within which differences of authenticity and cooptation are defined in the construction of affective alliances and networks of affiliation. These alliances are always multiple and contradictory. Thus the “cooptedness” of a particular form of rock and roll is a historically unstable judgment; it changes in response to developments within the changing musical and political possibilities of rock and roll as well as between different audience fractions.
But the problem of the commodity status of rock and roll still haunts the argument. If rock and roll is a commodity, how can it seriously differentiate itself from the dominant culture and from hegemonic cultural practices? The answer to these questions requires a discussion of the particular practice by which rock and roll appears as a commodity and, at the same time, as a cathexis of difference.30

HYPOTHESIS 5: THE PRACTICE OF ROCK AND ROLL

While many commentators have described rock and roll as watered down rhythm and blues (or more accurately, a synthesis of blues and white hillbilly music), I have argued that the fact of its production and reception by white youth involved a real transformation of its musical roots. It located them within a different, emergent historical formation, whose contours I have described in terms clearly meant to echo the aesthetic of postmodern practice: a denial of totality and a subsequent emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, and rupture; a denial of depth and a subsequent emphasis on the materiality of surfaces; a denial of teleology and a subsequent emphasis on change and chance so that history becomes both irrelevant and the very substance of our existence; a denial of freedom and innocent self-consciousness and a subsequent emphasis on context, determination, and the intertextuality of discursive codes.

The question is whether the postmodernist fragment, even when it accepts the inevitability of its existence as a commodity, is something other than a commodity. The commodity as such is determined by a representation of totality; it signifies a fragmentation only in the context of a totalizing impulse. But postmodern practice denies any such totalizing impulse. We might say that the object in late capitalism functions in two contexts: an ideological aesthetic and a structural aesthetic. The former describes the way the object is represented; postmodern fragments are appropriated into the context of the commodity by defining them in purely economic or aesthetic (avant-garde) terms. The “structural aesthetic” describes postmodern practice as a demystification of the commodity, its aesthetic reduction to a fragment sans context or significance, a signifier without a signified. The object within late capitalism then exists in the space of the contradiction between these two practices: an ideological mystification which turns it into a commodity and a structural demystification which returns it to the material context.31

I can now try to specify the particular form of postmodern practice that characterizes rock and roll as an appropriation of hegemonic practices into its own discourses. If the response of the hegemony to resistance is through practices of incorporation,32 then the power of rock and roll lies in its practice of “excorporation,” operating at and reproducing the boundary between youth culture and the dominant culture. Rock and roll removes signs, objects, sounds, styles, etc. from their apparently meaningful existence within the dominant culture and relocates them within an affective alliance of differentiation and resistance, producing a temporarily impassable boundary within the dominant culture. Rock and roll is a form of bricolage, a uniquely capitalist and postmodern practice. This practice is a form of resistance for
generations with no faith in revolution. Because its resistance remains within the political space of the dominant culture, its opposition is only a "simulacrum" of revolution. Rock and roll's resistance, its politics, is neither a direct rejection of the dominant culture nor a utopian negation (fantasy) of the structures of power. It plays with the very practice that the dominant culture uses to resist its resistances: incorporation and excorporation in a continuous dialectic that reproduces the very boundary of resistance.

There is another way in which rock and roll plays with contradictions: its use of musical and aesthetic sensibilities which it finds within the dominant culture. Rock and roll's development and continued articulation seem to depend upon its seeking out and exploiting the contradictions amongst residual sensibilities, and between these and postmodern practice. Rock and roll often works by fusing two musical traditions (e.g., blues and hillbilly in the fifties). Furthermore, at any point in its development, there are conflicts between alternative ways of integrating these two traditions: in the fifties, the conflict between rockabilly and northern street corner music; in the mid-sixties, the conflict between folk-rock and a harder, more violent drug rock in the music of, e.g., the Doors or the Velvet Underground; in the seventies, the conflict between west-coast mellow rock and midwest hard rock, etc. Thus, rock and roll's practice involves the way in which it locates itself (as excorporative, as celebrating and fleeing postmodernity) at the site of the contradictions between more traditional aesthetic sensibilities: naturalism, romanticism, and modernism. Thus, while rock and roll is determined by its postmodern practice, creating "an aesthetics of the fake," postmodernism has rarely defined its dominant surface sensibility. In order to explicate this idea, I want now to examine three moments in the history of rock and roll.

Many commentators have pointed to the romanticism of early rock and roll—in its populism, its search for community and its focus on sensation and emotion as opposed to reason and intellect. This romantic register is certainly an important sensibility in much rock and roll, but it does not sufficiently account for its history. Early rock 'n' roll was not simply romantic; it was located at the juncture of romanticism and naturalism. Like naturalism, it painted a supposedly representational picture of the world and like romanticism, it responded intuitively and emotionally. Like romanticism, it sought to constitute a new structure of social relationships while, like naturalism, the terms in which it sought such communities of feeling were taken from their immediate concrete environment without appeal to any transcending term.

In the mid-sixties, the very definition of rock and roll (both musically and ideologically) changed with the emergence of a folk music (and jazz) based acid rock. This music was made possible by starting with the basic sound/ideology of rock and roll and imposing on that a new secondary contradiction: acid rock is located at the juncture of romanticism and modernism. It is quite noticeable that a great deal of acid rock (especially if we exclude the more violent groups) sounds radically unlike anything that came before: it is often slower, quieter, more contemplative. It brought together a romantic folk culture (from the early sixties) and a self-conscious, experimental modernist sensibility. Just as the fifties conjunction was made possible by the coexistence of black and white cultures, romanticism and modernism intersected at
the moment of a convergence of an explicit sociopolitical critique and a drug culture emphasizing mysticism and sensuous consciousness. The counterculture’s (and its music’s) search for community, its concern for concrete events, its utopian optimism, its sensuousness, its focus on lifestyle and its almost transcendental mysticism certainly locate it within a romantic sensibility. Yet its concern for artistic experimentation and formal innovation (which eventually deteriorates into a concern for technical virtuosity), its sense of its very lifestyle as a constant experiment, its propensity for abstraction, its apocalyptic rhetoric, its pluralistic absence of any defining style and its rejection of traditional conventions, its surrealist and antirepresentational impulses (with the resulting formalisms), its desire to see beyond illusory surfaces to the deeper structure, its injunction to self-consciousness and its focus on subjectivity, mind, and consciousness were all decidedly modernist. Furthermore, it made aesthetics the determinant of reality. Like modernism, it was overwhelmed by the world; yet, it maintained a sense of its own power as art and lifestyle. It was art that was able to impose meaning and structure on the repressive world of chaos; it was art that was transcendent. Acid rock and its culture aestheticized reality and attempted to make lifestyle into politics. But the transcendence and power of art was itself determined by the counterculture’s mystical romanticism. The eruption of acid rock placed it between the romantic vision of its goal and a modernist perception of art and reality. But the acid culture, like all modernists, assumed that the message sent was the same as the message received; they failed to see that modernism renders communication a problematic phenomenon even though it is unable to articulate that problematic. By failing to negate the signified behind the surface of the signifiers, the counterculture was easily coopted through a variety of strategies which converted its aesthetic into a commodity of fashion.

The “new wave” of the late seventies articulated rock and roll as the very idea of a junctural contradiction, thus producing within its own discourse contradictions between naturalism, romanticism and modernism on the one hand, and postmodernism on the other. While new wave refers to a broad movement characterized by (1) a general rejection of the economic practices which had engulfed and reshaped rock and roll; (2) a simultaneous rejection and incorporation of mainstream rock and roll styles within its own discourses; and (3) a similarly ambiguous negation of the dominant culture, whereby “post-punk” refers to particular musical and affective alliances with it. As John Piccarella has written, “A vision underlies the elegance and outrageousness—the artists are horrified by the seduction of the flesh turned to image and identity determined by fetish even as they celebrate it.”

New wave began with the recognition that the possibilities of rock and roll had been apparently exhausted. It responded with a number of strategies for reclaiming both the musical styles and affective political stances of rock and roll. It continued to go back to its own traditions as rock and roll, but it treated them as ruins whose repetition reproduces them as different. Reproduction becomes a mode of material transformation just as Borge’s Pierre Menard rewrites Don Quixote by reproducing it word for word. New wave understood that if the context is determining, then the contextually determined effects must be different. The result has been a proliferation of revivals, genre exercises and attempts to revitalize the stylistic conventions of rock and roll.
What separated "post-punk" from the rest of the new wave was, not only its self-conscious post-modernism but its refusal of the category of rock and roll. It attempted to explode its history by deconstructing it, by decoding and disrupting its conventions and forms while new wave recoded them within a new context. The result was a self-conscious peripheralization of the music. Further, post-punk is characterized by an overwhelming sense of despair, futility, anger, and paranoia in the face of reality (modernism), a denial of anything apart from that concrete reality (naturalism), a rejection of the possibility of order and community (a rejection of romanticism), and finally, the recognition that even pleasure is suspect. The postmodern emphasis on the materiality of surfaces, on fragmentation and on reflexivity has produced a music of extremes: both rejecting and building absolutely upon a base of technology and virtuosity; a music built upon images of mechanism and chaos; a formally minimalist music whose apparent content is an almost random collection of discrete facts; a music that is almost entirely self-referential and yet, that negates itself as art in favor of its existence as material reality; a music that distrusts its own impulses; that valorizes the unconscious over either consciousness or experience; and finally, a music that refuses to confront repression in its totality (or assert that there are any solutions), choosing instead to detail moments of local power and desire.

If modernism attempts to make reality into art, postmodernism attempts to make rock and roll into everyday life. It reasserts the referentiality of naturalism because all of reality is or can be part of its discursive surface and that is all there is. Rather than being cryptic and intellectual, it is explicitly surreal and materialist. Rather than communicating an emotional inner response to outer phenomena, it describes the phenomena and leaves the interpretation unsaid because interpretation itself cannot be trusted. The result is a music that is oddly detached and yet furiously energetic and affective. While post-punk denies or at least distrusts emotion, its very attempt to produce a discourse which does not depend upon emotion is a powerful emotional statement (e.g., Talking Heads, Elvis Costello, and the droning vocals of Joy Division). And finally, post-punk has no faith in its powers as art; it is and must be suspicious of itself, and so it must constantly refuse to locate itself, to become an art or style which can be made into a commodity.

If modernism tried to substitute art for politics and reality, postmodernism makes politics and the reality of everyday life substitute for art. Up until recently, however, post-punk seems to have largely avoided a confrontation with the romantic search for a reconstructed community; it has been described as music which produces an ever increasing sense of alienation and isolation. But its attempt to articulate a restructured body inevitably led it to the question of postmodern alliances, and hence, to replace itself within the broader possibilities of "new wave." In a variety of musical styles and affective stances, in the Clash's politicized rock and roll, in Talking Heads' turn to African polyrhythms as a representation of new social relations, in the New York avant-garde's (e.g., Glenn Branca, Peter Gordon, and Laurie Anderson) fusion of romanticism and futility, and albeit problematically, in the "New Romantics," rock and roll has returned again to its original secondary contradiction: naturalism and romanticism have reemerged in the form of the reflexive materialism of a self-consciously postmodernist rock and roll.
CONCLUSION: THE 80s

I have argued that the affective politics of rock and roll depends upon its particular temporal context. Rock and roll describes "how a life lived in continual motion might ideally sound to someone half in love with and half oppressed by his state of affairs." It appears that the context within which rock and roll works for the new generations of youth is changing: the promise of a booming economy has been replaced by the threat of continuous recession; the dominance of the baby boom's attempt to deal with responsibility and "middle age"; rock and roll as a symbol of rebellion has been replaced with its status as nostalgia. Youth today confronts a generation of parents who were themselves weaned on rock and roll; it is no longer a stigma, a point of antagonism. The centrality of music in the affective life of youth seems to be giving way to a new medium and a new sound: video-computer technology. While they continue to listen to rock and roll, it has receded into the background of their affective lives. Rock and roll is no longer able to constitute a powerful affective boundary between its fans and those who remain outside of its culture. Youth today seems to have a more temporary and fluid experience of the generation gap. Perhaps history has taught them that one cannot live in celebration of postmodernity; they seek instead to celebrate moments of possible stability. Survival for this new youth seems to demand adaptation to and escape from the hegemony rather than a response to the historical context within which they find themselves.

These moves away from rock and roll have been reinforced by the emergence of punk and post-punk. Punk called into question the affective power of rock and roll and its ability to resist incorporation; post-punk made any affective investment suspect. If everything is up for grabs, then commitment itself, even to rock and roll, is only another style.

Rock and roll in the eighties is not merely fragmented; it is constituted by three vectors fighting against each other. First, commercial (MOR) music merely reproduces the surface structures of existing styles despite the fact that they have lost their affective power. Second, new wave rock seems to reaffirm pleasure as resistance but cannot escape its own desire for commercial success, and thus, its own complicity with the dominant culture. Third, post-punk seeks to articulate a pleasure and cathexis a boundary that no longer coincides with the rock and roll culture. These three directions in rock and roll have created a situation in which the affective alliances surrounding each, and thus their audiences, have little in common. There is no center around which they can exist, no point at which they can intersect.

The result of these developments both within and outside of the music is that, apparently, rock and roll no longer generally serves the affective functions I have described. For the younger generations, as well as for many of the baby boomers, it has become background music which, even as leisure, can provide no challenge to the dominant organizations of desire. The result is that new alliances are being formed and the cultural and political ramifications of this moment in the history of rock and roll may be as powerful and interesting as those which emerged with the "birth" of rock and roll in the fifties. Whether it is the "death" of rock and roll remains to be seen.
NOTES

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1. I use the term “rock and roll” to include post-war youth music. The use of “rock and roll,” “rock 'n' roll,” and “rock” to distinguish different musical styles or historical periods would only confuse the rhetoric of my argument. Further, it occasionally leads to fruitless if not paradoxical positions: e.g., Robert Palmer, “‘When Is It Rock and When Rock 'n’ Roll? A Critic Ventures an Answer,’” *New York Times*, August 6, 1978, Section 2.


4. See Lawrence Grossberg, “Teaching the Popular,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, forthcoming; and “If Rock and Roll Communicates, Why Is It So Noisy?” (paper delivered at the meeting of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Reggio Emilio, Italy, September 1983). In the present paper, I shall continue to use “rock and roll” to refer to the entire “rock and roll apparatus,” as well as to the music itself. The particular sense should be clear from the context.

5. I shall use the terms “hegemony” and “dominant culture” interchangeably to refer to the process by which complex relations of power are maintained and adjusted in response to historical pressures and the resistances of specific groups. It is an evolving set of practices by which reality is historically organized—invested with particular structures of meaning, value, and affect—which then constitute the limits of the “natural.” It is the ongoing production of the consent of the population to the representational and affective parameters on the possibilities of living that organize the existing structures of power. It is interesting to note that both rock and roll fans and critics seem to privilege it in a unique way: not only is it an inappropriate topic for academic investigation but the very act of such scholarship is taken as a real threat to the existence of rock and roll. This argument has been made to me recently by two of the leading American rock and roll critics.


8. Rock and roll is replete with “teenage anthems” that express these feelings. Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life” and “I’m Bored,” Lou Reed’s “Rock and Roll Music,” and Alice Cooper’s “Eighteen” and “Teenage Lament” are just a few of the more powerful ones.


10. The idea of the irrelevance of history is often presented in conjunction with the rejection of aging and the valorization of youth: “Hope I die before I get old” (The Who). It does occasionally get articulated straightforwardly: “Time is but a joke, change is all we understand” (Todd Rundgren), or more recently, “History’s Bunk” by the Gang of Four. John Lydon of Public Image Ltd., said in an interview (*Esquire*, September 1981, p. 83), “I’m tired of the past and even the future’s beginning to seem repetitive.”

11. At its most basic level, the volume (what some would call the noise—and in some contemporary rock and roll it does involve the use of “noise”) of rock and roll represents an act of rebellion against the repression of desire. As Barry Hannah observes, “They want to make war out of peace time” (*Ray* [New York: Knopf, 1980], p. 47). Rock and roll was always supposed to elicit reactions of disgust and hatred from parents and those outside its culture: “I picked up the guitar to blast away the clouds/ But somebody in the next room said ‘Turn that damn thing down’” (Alice Cooper).
12. "The times call for simple-mindedness and the simple question is this: does the music oppose or acquiesce? The British believe (and the evidence supports us—REO Speedwagon!) that the American rock audience has given up, lain down, lets the future—no future—dance all over it. When American rock isn’t actually cheering Reaganism on (booing the blacks, losers, women and gays off stage) it is in retreat, the volume up, the doors locked, a noise to block out the sound of what’s going down outside. White American popular music has never sounded so selfish, seemed so irrelevant, and this isn’t just my Marxist conceit" (Simon Frith, “Trash Across the Water,” New York Rocker, September 1981, p. 8). While it is true that rock and roll has served to socialize youth as consumers, this does not mitigate against the possibility of its embodying forms of political resistance. Many of the critics of rock and roll (and mass culture in general) write from a transcendentalist position which undermines the attempt to deal with popular music concretely. Adorno, for example, accepts the canonical definitions of art, culture and creativity while, at the same time, defining opposition as necessarily utopian.


14. This is adapted from an idea originally proposed by Jim Miller.

15. The Who in Their Own Words, compiled by Steve Clarke (London: Omnibus, 1979). This idea is common within the rock and roll culture: “Like all great rock ‘n’ roll they promise sex, truth, the future—and make you want it now! Their passion’s an aching affirmation, a defiant blast of love and anger in the teeth of reality” (Graham Locke, “Creature from the Noordzee,” New Musical Express, July 11, 1981).

16. As Simon Frith has argued, no fun is innocent and free of sociopolitical entanglements. See “Music for Pleasure,” Screen Education, 34 (Spring, 1980), pp. 50-61.

17. Rock and roll often consciously refers to other songs within its own tradition, making the problem of plagiarism particularly difficult: e.g., the music of Nick Lowe and Dave Edmunds, or Stiff Little Fingers’ “Barbed Wire.” There are many songs about rock and roll (e.g., “Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay,” “It’s Only Rock and Roll,” “Rock Is Dead”). The history of rock and roll has been marked by a continuous series of revivals. Further, a group is initially identified as much by the non-original songs it plays as by its own music. All of these give rock and roll a unique texture as a genre of popular music.


19. Dick Hebdige sees rock and roll as marking difference but he locates it within a different context (class culture) and sees it operating in a different space (representational), by creating identities.


21. “[I]t is hard for most rock critics to understand the central difference between subcultural politics here and [in England]: In Britain, you have a nation of conformists struggling to find any expression of individualism (and always doing it in gangs), while in America, you have a nation of individuals lurching toward community (and also always proceeding in single file).” Personal correspondence from Dave Marsh. Another difference between the two countries is that, if rock and roll is always a response to boredom and alienation, in the United States it is in the context of relative economic luxury while in England, it is in the context of relative economic deprivation.

22. The identity of the “teenager” was produced largely through economic and mass communication practices, as well as in rock and roll. For this generation was not the TV generation: it was not their medium, they did not control it, identify with it, or defend it as their own. Whether correctly or not, rock and roll was seen by youth as their own, while television, film, and advertising were more like foreign intrusions or found technologies that could be appropriated and transformed. Much of the music in the fifties dealt explicitly with what it felt like to be a teenager (“Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love?”) and often attempted to legitimate the feelings of teenagers (e.g., “Not Too Young to Get Married,” or the myriad songs about teenage love ending in death: e.g., “Leader of the Pack”). Compare the Who’s “My Generation” with Generation X’s “Your Generation” (“Your generation don’t mean a thing to me”) or the Deadbeats’ “Kill the Hippies.”

24. With the development of new wave and avant-garde rock, the “no-wave” groups (Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, DNA, etc.), the jazz-punk fusion of James Chance and the Contortions, James Blood Ulmer and Material, the dissonant jazz of the Lounge Lizards and the lilting sounds of the Durutti Column and the Love of Life Orchestra, the dissonance and discordance of Pere Ubu, Half-Japanese Band, Clock DVA, etc., and the experimentalism of Brian Eno, Fred Frith, Glenn Branca, etc., it is impossible to recognize any musical parameters. Even the most sacrosanct feature—the beat—can be violated. The response that these bands are no longer playing rock and roll is based on an ahistorical reading of rock and roll.

25. The Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love” is the classic example of the transcendental image of love in visionary rock. Bruce Springsteen’s songs provide numerous examples of a more concrete image of love in experiential rock: “The screen door slams/ Mary’s dress waves/ Like a vision she dances across the porch/ As the radio plays/ Roy Orbison singing for the lonely/ Hey that’s me and I want you only/ Don’t turn me home again/ I just can’t face myself alone again/ Don’t run back inside/ Darling you know just what I’m here for/ So you’re scared and you’re thinking/ That maybe we ain’t that young any more/ Show a little faith/ There’s magic in the night/ You ain’t a beauty, but hey you’re alright/ Oh and that’s alright with me” (“Thunder Road”). Examples of the rejection of love in critical rock abound in post-punk: “Love will get you like a case of anthrax” (Gang of Four); “Sometimes I think that love is just a tumor/ You’ve got to cut it out” (Elvis Costello); “We got no feeling/ We got no love/ We got nothing to say/ We’re the lovers of today” (The Only Ones); or Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart.” Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols went so far as to say “What is sex anyway. Just thirty seconds of squelching noises.”

26. Both 20/20 and the Knack are California groups that released debut albums in 1979; both attempted to recreate the pop sound and sensibility of the early sixties. 20/20 was greeted with critical accolades while the Knack was almost universally assaulted by the critics, and yet it was the Knack’s album that became a best-seller.


28. In comparison to the rejection of disco in the mid-seventies, the current diversity of funk styles and their acceptance by a broad audience is quite interesting: the street sounds of rap (Grandmaster Flash), the experimental fusions of George Clinton, dance music (Earth, Wind and Fire, Defunkt), the white synthesized funk of the Human League, Culture Club, and the Tom-Tom Club, the funk-jazz fusion of James White and the Blacks, and Material, and the punk-funk of the Bush Tetas. One might also point to the continued popularity of reggae and the recent interest in African music.

29. “Heavy metal” began in the seventies as part of a response to the acid rock of the counter-culture, and the singer-songwriter mellow ("wimpy") sound that followed it. It is hard-driving, loud, rhythmic music with long rambling guitar solos. Although the music started with groups like Led Zeppelin, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix, it quickly took on a particularly sexual and violent image—in its lyrics as well as the appearance and actions of the band members. The lyrics are generally about partying (drinking, fighting, and sex) and women are reduced to objects of lust and/or violence. Van Halen, Ted Nugent, and AC/DC are its leading representatives. An interesting development occurred in the mid-seventies with the appearance of more middle-of-the-road and “art” heavy metal groups (e.g., Rush, Queen, Journey, Styx and even some including women: Heart, Pat Benatar). More recently, REO Speedwagon has brought together heavy metal and pop conventions. I am uncertain whether this music is utopian or experiential for its various audiences. One must also account for the existence of female heavy metal fans, especially of that music which is played on AM radio. At one level, as many feminists have pointed out, the music communicates an obvious message of self-hatred. Yet on another level, the music organizes an affective alliance in which these female fans are located in a position of affective power over men. It is a contradiction which needs to be further explored.

30. These questions, and the discussion to follow, are the result of personal conversations with Fredric Jameson.

31. While postmodern fragments emphasize determination and chance, the commodity exists in the context of a supposed liberal society which emphasizes freedom and individuality. If both appear to deny history, the latter denies it in the form of a tradition which limits us while the former denies it as an eschatology which is able to give meaning to our actions and lives.

33. The term is Paolo Prato’s. For an interesting discussion of the similarities between contemporary rock and roll and the movements in German art earlier this century, see Greil Marcus, “The Shock of the Old,” New West, March 1981.

34. The most important document of this movement is the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. Its apocalyptic faith in the power of rock and roll and its utopianism of love and individuality/community reoccur together throughout the acid rock movement. The experimentalism of the sound was achieved by taking folk rock and making it into a self-conscious art form. Even the musical exceptions in the counterculture reemphasize this conjunctural structure. The Velvet Underground opposed themselves to both moments, rejecting romantic utopianism in favor of a violent often self-destructive subculture and rejecting art in favor of energy and emotion. The Doors on the other hand often refused the romanticism but retained much of the faith in art and experimentation. This contradiction is exemplified again in the acid rock revival of XTC, Joy Division, Teardrop Explodes, Echo and the Bunnymen, etc.

35. The relationship between punk, post-punk, and new wave is difficult to specify. It may be that the only relations between punk and new wave are their self-consciousness, their rejection of the rock mainstream, their opposition to the hegemony, and their common roots in glitter rock. While post-punk distrusts emotion, punk and new wave use it straightforwardly. While post-punk redefines politics, punk either accepted it (the Clash), transformed it into a question of survival (the Buzzcocks), or embraced nihilism (Richard Hell and the Voidoids), and new wave tends to avoid it entirely. While punk and new wave confirm their faith in rock and roll, post-punk problematizes it. While new wave and post-punk are self-conscious of their modes of production, punk tended to see itself as recapturing the simplicity, energy, and anger of rock and roll. If post-punk makes style (and aesthetics) into rebellion, punk and new wave unwittingly perhaps made rebellion into style. See Greil Marcus, “Wake Up!”, Rolling Stone, June 24, 1980, pp. 40-44; “Anarchy in the U.K.” in The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll, pp. 451-63.


38. Thus, when various new wave and post-punk musicians use various traditions (e.g., Joe Jackson’s use of “jive jazz,” Lounge Lizards’ use of swing, the Swinging Madisons’ cover of “Volare,” or the Cramps’ mining the tradition of B-grade horror movies), it is not nostalgia but a way to explode the category of rock. “I’ve been quoted a lot as saying ‘I like boring things.’ Well I said it and I meant it. But that doesn’t mean I’m not bored by them. Of course, what I think is boring must not be the same as what other people think is, since I could never stand to watch all the most popular action shows on TV, because they’re essentially the same plots and the same shots and the same cuts over and over again. Apparently, most people love watching the same basic thing, as long as the details are different. But I’m just the opposite: if I’m going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don’t want it to be essentially the same—I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel” (Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, Popism: The Warhol ’60s [New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980], p. 50).

39. By a “deconstruction” of rock and roll, I am referring to the attempt by “post-punk” to isolate and negate the various constitutive conventions and cliches of rock and roll. Such music tends to be confrontational, intentionally inaccessible, often dissonant and alienating. To varying degrees, the following are all involved in such a project: minimalists (in which the rhythm functions as pulse rather than backbeat: e.g., Throbbing Gristle, Kraftwerk, Robert Fripp); punk-jazz (e.g., DNA) and sound-noise experiments (e.g., Pere Ubu, The Residents, Half-Japanese Band). On the other hand, new wave tries to “reconstruct” rock and roll through a self-conscious reintegration of various conventional codes into the music. Reconstructed rock and roll tends to be more accessible and consonant, alienated and “post-confrontational.” It includes various styles: the “extended minimalism” of Talking Heads and Joy Division; new wave pop (e.g., XTC, Brains); funk jazz (e.g., Material, James Blood Ulmer); various self-conscious “posers” (e.g., Lounge Lizards, Swinging Madisons); and experiments self-consciously redefining the functions of rock and roll (e.g., Brian Eno’s ambient music). There are also groups which exist between the two: e.g., P.I.L., Gang of Four, Suicide, Raincoats.

40. The music of the Gang of Four, Au Pairs, Red Crayola, and Talking Heads could all serve as examples. The political critique is presented by a description of concrete circumstances rather than
through any global statement. Thus, in *Fear of Music*, Talking Heads detail but never state their paranoia. This repoliticization of rock and roll has extended outside of new wave itself: recent albums by David Bowie—*Scary Monsters*—and Peter Gabriel—*Peter Gabriel*—seem to politicize their vision only through detail. There are obvious exceptions to this and some groups do present general anthems of rebellion (e.g., Jam's "Going Underground") but even they tend to focus their political critique in more concrete terms. Other recent examples include the Specials' "Ghost Town," the Bush Tetras' "Too Many Creeps," and Bow Wow Wow's "W.O.R.K."

41. I am grateful to Sally Green for this point and for the comparison with early rock and roll on this issue. Talking Heads' "Life During Wartime" is an excellent example of this.

42. One of the modes of production of post-punk involves the use of polyvalent structures: e.g., "harmolodics" from Ornette Coleman, and polyrhythms from African and Arabian musical traditions. When combined with dissonance, randomness, and assymetry, it results in a dense, almost three-dimensional sense of form. For example, listen to the music of Public Image Ltd. Talking Heads' album, *Remain in Light*, uses these techniques combined with interlocking and overlapping vocals to create a musical and social response to a world characterized by "the gentle collapsing of every surface" ("The Overload"). Rather than retreating into paranoia, their music seeks to accept and exist in such a world: "I'm walking a line/ Divide and dissolve" ("Houses in Motion"), to "Find a little space so we can move in between" ("Born Under Punches").