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YOU'RE IN SUSPICION: PUNK AND THE SECRET PASSION PLAY OF WHITE NOISE

Andrew Herman

Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. 496 pages, illustrated.

Remembrance of Noise Past

In the fall of 1977 I took up residence in the U.K. as a university exchange student just at the time when the hype and hysteria concerning punk was approaching its zenith. Simply by being in the right place at the right time I found myself with the opportunity to witness either a revolution in popular music and culture, or the morbid symptoms of a welfare state in moral and aesthetic decay (it was only later that I realized that the two were not mutually exclusive). As a budding sociologist for whom rock music was the most energizing passion of everyday life, such an opportunity was not to be missed. So, in the spirit of cultural adventure and curiosity, in November of 1977 several friends of mine and I trepidatiously sauntered into the The 100 Club in London, one of the epicenters of the British Punk Explosion of 1976-1978, in order to experience the rituals and sonic milieu of punk first hand.

Nothing in my experience as a fan of rock nor my contact with mediated representations of punk prepared me for the scene into which I inserted myself that evening. Some ten years later, after punk as a musical

genre has been exhausted and after almost all the signs of its stylistic subversion have been recuperated by the dominant culture to take their place within the cornucopia of sartorial commodities, it is hard to convey just how disruptive and compelling the experience was. Upon entering the club I had a palpable feeling that I had crossed an unseen liminal boundary into a region of chaos where all the codes of musical experience, of performance, and of audience decorum were joyously and quite consciously being subverted. Almost immediately my companions and I were identified and marked, largely because we clearly did not fit into the sartorial regime of punk with our blue jeans and long hair, both as foreigners to the scene and as consumers looking for a new thrill on the cultural marketplace, which is exactly what we were. Various kinds of threatening words, epithets, and gestures were thrown our way, the most memorable of which was a snarled "Fucking tourist" accompanied by a well-aimed gob of spit at my Frye boots. But as there was safety in numbers, we pressed through the bodies that pogo-ed into the air, and into each other, to the front of the stage, the only possible place where amidst all that kinetic motion and aggressive posturing one could get a clear view of the performance.

This desire to see the performers unobstructed by the audience was an artifact of a regime of musical experience very different from punk. Within that regime, whether it operated in a multi-purpose indoor sports arena with 15,000 fans holding their lighters aloft or in a small club where the audience "intimately" sat around the stage, only the musicians were endowed with the capacity to act and speak. And whether you were one of those 15,000 giving thanks for the spectacle with your tiny flame or sat at a table in club silently letting the waves of artistic creativity lap around your ears, the subject position offered by the regime was one of passive spectatorship with the division between performer and audience firmly drawn. With the pleasure of fetishistic looking and listening being about the only one available within that regime, it is little wonder that the desire for an unobstructed view was overwhelming. I soon came to realize that such a desire was almost irrelevant in the punk milieu, for it was the scene in its entirety that was the performance and not simply the musicians on stage.

The first person to take the stage was a teenager by the name of Patrik Fitzgerald, whom the club D.J. introduced as "The Poet of Punk." This honorific apparently did not sit well with Patrik as he turned away from the mike, hurled his beer at the D.J. booth and screamed "I ain't no fucking poet," much to the delight of audience. Then he turned back to the audience, pointed an accusing finger and spat out "and you ain't no fucking punks either." The crowd erupted with shouts of "yes's", "no's", and "who the fuck do you think you are to tell us what we are!" and a hail of spit rained down upon Patrik from all quarters. Letting loose a laugh of transgressive delight, he strapped on a cheap acoustic guitar, with several strings missing, and launched into a song called "Get Your Punk

at Woolies [Woolworth's]." By his own admission Patrik was no poet, but he was clearly a prophet as he railed against the incipient commodification of punk, the selling of its surface appearances as a pale substitute for its spirit and substance. And what was that spirit?

"Nihilistic" was the first word that stuck in my mind as I stood amidst the noise, tumult, and shouting, and watched as a young woman thrust her fist in the air and slashed at her wrist with a razor until she was dragged away by the bouncers laughing and screaming that "it's just a fucking joke, it's all a joke." (What's a joke?, I thought-Her action? Her life? Punk? All of these and everything?) For Patrik that spirit entailed the opportunity to publicly speak of the terror and the boredom of his everyday life, which is exactly what he did in his second and final song called "I Hate My Room." As he spat out the words the waves of rejection spread out in concentric circles from his bed to the walls of his room to his parents downstairs to his neighborhood to his teachers at school to the London Transport to the BBC to the Labour Government and the T.U.C. to the Common Market and NATO to the United States, Japan, and South Africa and finally to God, all of which were implicated in the same bloody scheme to keep him in a world of many pre-determined choices with no creative options. Yet all the verbal rejection in the world could not beget a negation of these things soon enough for Patrik, nor seemingly for those who listened and shouted with or against him. So after his screed he tossed his guitar into the audience and said with a sneer, "Alright, then, you be fucking poets." After a tussle among a small knot of people near the stage, the guitar was thrown back towards the stage where it knocked over part of the drum kit for the next band. A cheer went up from the crowd and someone shouted "We already are poets," in response to which some guy leapt up on stage and shouted back, "For God's sake, let us hope so.'

As it turned out, that prayer was offered up by the lead singer and guitarist for the next band which called themselves Alternative T.V. The man's name was Mark Perry a/k/a Mark P. (which was his nom de plume). In addition to his musical duties, he was also creator and editor of Sniff'n Glue, one of the most influential fanzines of the early punk era. Before punk hit the British music scene in 1975, Mark Perry found his pleasure as a rabid rock fan, and his alienation as an office clerk. In punk, he saw the opportunity to make the magic leap from fan to performer and in his magazine he vigorously formulated and promulgated one of the central tenets of punk ideology: that everybody was, in fact, a poet and should strap on a guitar, become speaking (or screaming) subjects, and proclaim their experience to world. To this end, the back page of every issue of Sniff'n Glue was devoted to a diagram of three basic musical chords, beneath which was a caption which read "Here's one chord... Here's a second Here's a third . . Now form your own band!" But at the time I first saw him and his band, I knew none of these things. All I saw was a person who was brazen enough to stand before what I thought

to be an unruly mob and challenge them to become what they said they were.

As Alternative T.V. walked on stage and plugged themselves in they too were greeted by a hail of spit, which prompted me to ask someone standing by me why people were doing it. She looked at me somewhat incredulously and said, "We're gobbing, that's all." And as if that answer made all the sense in the world, I took a swig from my beer and added my saliva to the spray. "That's the spirit," my neighbor said, adding a new twist to the story. This group expectoration was not a gesture of hostility, but one of blessing and benediction that enveloped the band within the collective effervescence of the crowd. Within the spiritual matrix of punk, it was a gift that could not be refused without destroying the ethos of participation and solidarity that bound performer and audience together in opposition to the world outside. Having accepted the gift, the band returned it in spades, launching an arrow of noise that was aimed straight at the craven heart of a rock and roll that had become bloated, corrupt, and vacuous. The band kicked off their set by crashing into a barely recognizable cover of Frank Zappa and the Mother's of Invention's "Good Times," a classic send-up of let's boogie, get drunk, get fucked rock and roll. By the way that Mark Perry hurled the words at the audience it was clear that he did not think that these were the Good Times, and, to the extent that rock and roll operated as a good time soporific for hard times, then rock and roll needed to be destroyed.

So too did the myth of the rock musician as poet or artist who was singularly authorized to speak the dreams, desires, and experiences of an audience that had its tongue cut out by the spectacle that rock had become. For Alternative TV this meant smashing the idols by shattering the hagiography that constructed the rock star as artist-poet (and any poet as star). As the band cranked up the noise to ear-splitting levels, Mark Perry went off stage and brought out a bust of the self-proclaimed Dionysian poet of rock himself, Jim Morrison, and set it at the front of the stage. "Viva la Rock and Roll," Mark screamed:

Paris is the City of the Dead Hero
Jim Morrison died in a bath, July 3, 1971
After that, poor Jim wasn't good for a laugh
In 1970 he was a lot of fun
Viva la Rock and Roll
Paris is the City of Influence
Uncle Rimbaud spoke to me
Through New York's New Wave
Q'est-ce que c'est?
What people say
Paris is a wonderful city on forty francs a day¹

Behind the satirization of rock icons both old (Jim Morrison) and new (Patti Smith, Talking Heads) was a pointed critique of the valorization of dead heroes that Marx would have recognized (if he could only stand the

noise). As the famous passage in the "18th Brumaire" goes, "The tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare upon the minds of living."2 By borrowing the language and images of past struggles to shape and validate those of the present, by engaging in a "world-historical necromancy" by which the past is conjured up in order to pass judgement on the present and the future, the living could not find their own voice or vision. "Leave the dead to the dead," said Marx.3 In different words and with an entirely different tonality, Mark Perry was saying the same thing: Let's not waste our time touring around a city of dead heroes on a pilgrimage to Morrison's grave at Père La Chaise or to the cafés where Rimbaud held court. Our fascination with dead poets only diminishes our ability to make poetry in and out of our everyday lives. The present of the everyday: "Hic Rhodus! Hic Salta!; Here is the Rose! Dance Here!" (Marx). And we danced, sweeping the visage of Morrison off the stage and smashing it to pieces to the hyper-pulse of the band's anthem, "Action Time Vision": "Chords and notes don't mean a thing/Listen to the rhythm/Listen to us sing/We're in action and the four walls crack/On A.T.V.V.V.V.V.V."

Still, all this was simply satire, a play upon pre-existing codes and icons of rock music. While it was intended to be a subversion of rock and roll, that subversion was premised solely upon having an audience that could read the signs that were being circulated. Who's in action? Who's singing? Who's listening? We were listening to a different story, a different song, but that was all we were doing. The noise pushed at the boundaries of rock as a discursive formation and as a performance ritual, but it had yet to really break through them. The idols had been smashed but what about the temple? Would the four walls really crack? After all, A.T.V. was still a T.V.

As various members of the audience pogo-stomped the remaining pieces of Jim into a dusty soon-to-be-forgotten memory, the band settled back into a jagged punk dub while, from seemingly out of nowhere, a taped voice that was clipped from a trailer of an underground cinema club began to play: "In this space films have been seen by over 80,000 people. Films, that before this cinema, would have remained in their cans. Here also battles are fought, imaginations expressed, differences confronted. And it is also a space in which all kinds of movements can develop . . ." The voice was cut off and the statement was amended by Mark P. who stepped up to the mike and said "even rock and roll." Here was yet another element of the punk spirit: the creation of an aural space of difference within which there were differences that made a difference; a space where clashes of sonic texture, grains of voice, ideas, sentiments and desires not only drew a boundary between punk and the rest of the culture, but also gave succor and sustenance to those inside the boundary precisely because it was heterogeneous. This was quite a promise, but one that could not possibly be realized as long as those on stage remained indifferent to the differences that bubbled under the

surface of an audience that could hear but could not speak. And so, as the crowd churned and roiled in front of the stage, Mark Perry declared that the time had come for anyone who wanted to speak their mind to mount the stage, grab the microphone, and lead the performance to its next destination.

By this time I was swept up in the anarchy of the crowd, pushing and shoving, jumping and dancing, spitting and shouting. It was a feeling that was both exhilarating and frightening. Here was a place where few of the codes of accepted behavior held sway—seemingly everything was permitted. But where everything was permitted, things could get out of control. And when things get of control, nobody knows what possibly might happen. I felt an inchoate fear of possibilities that were unpredictable, of actions whose consequences were terribly uncertain. Someone might get hurt, maybe killed. Perhaps the dance of chaos where we gleefully smashed rock and roll icons would not be enough to satisfy desires for transgression that had been let loose. Perhaps we would destroy the club and then sweep up the stairs and onto the streets to destroy whatever we might find.

In retrospect, the simulacrum of violence inside the club was nothing compared to the real violence that was enacted daily outside. Early in the year, the number of unemployed passed the one million mark, a number that just a year before British politicians and pundits had declared to be "inconceivable." Older urban centers such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Glasgow, Newcastle, Cardiff, and large sections of London reeled under the impact of deindustrialization and capital flight, as communities and their inhabitants were left to fester and decay. There was also the growing popularity of the neo-fascist National Front's racist appeals to "Britishness," and in August 1977 there had been street battles between supporters of the NF and anti-fascist demonstrators in the Lewisham section of London. As a result of this event and others, such as the antipolice riot by militant young blacks at the Notting Hill Festival a year earlier, the state increased its surveillance and harassment of groups marginal to an increasingly paranoid white, middle-class Britain. People were being violated in more ways than one and to some of the people inside the club, who had to contend with such violence in their own lives, perhaps the idea of perpetrating some violence of their own was not so frightening or foreign. Of course, the possibility that that might actually happen was remote. But to my white, middle class, American sensibility, the thought that such things might happen was enough to encourage me to psychically, and physically, circle the wagons. And so I drifted off to a corner of the club to watch from a safe distance.

Others, who had no need or desire for the safety of any kind of distance, charged the stage to accept Mark Perry's invitation. The noise, mainly emanating from the crowd, was deafening and even with the aid of the microphone it was hard to hear what the people standing on stage were saying. A woman seemingly catapulted out of the crowd, grabbed the

microphone, screamed "Defiance!" and leapt back into the maelstrom. She was followed by someone who blurted out that the crowd was boring and staid, a characterization to which the crowd vigorously protested by pouring forth a tidal wave of catcalls, whistles, and profanity that prohibited the man from pursuing whatever point he was trying to make. Another man pushed him aside and shouted above the roar that he was from "The Dead." Pale, pock-marked, incredibly thin, and with eyes laden with black mascara, he looked as though he was telling the truth. And indeed he was, as "The Dead" happened to be the punk band he was in. By some strange twist of fate that seemed to strengthen the band's claim upon their name, their lead singer had been killed (of all places) in France. But the man was not all interested in lionizing his dead compatriot; he couldn't even remember when the man was killed ("Our singer was killed three days...one month...no, two weeks ago...") He asked the audience if anyone was interested in taking the dead man's place in The Dead and hands shot up, indicating an intense eagerness among the listeners for a chance to stop listening and to start making some noise of their own. I had no doubt that one of them would get that chance, and perhaps appear on the stage of the 100 Club the very next week, resurrecting the dead with a vengeance.

The next person who gained possession of the microphone tried to turn the discussion, if one can call it that, in a political direction by asking the audience to think about what they would say if they had the chance to "talk to the people who are running this country." It was clear from the response that there was no interest in talking to such people since everyone understood that it would be a useless enterprise. "Fuck the Prime Minister!", "Go join the Labor Party", "Why bother? They're as thick as you are," were some of the retorts, but most people simply ignored the question because the whole idea was boring and stupid. If punk was political, it was not political on any terms that made sense within the spectacular discourse of liberal capitalist democracy. Frustrated, the wouldbe agitator threw up his hands and said, "Alright, what's your favorite fucking T.V. program, then?" This question provoked the most lively reaction yet as almost the entire audience erupted with about half the people shouting names of T.V. shows and the other half vociferously berating the other half for watching T.V. in the first place. Mark Perry took the opportunity to deliver a small speech on the perils of having punk bands appear on television. For some, he said, having the Sex Pistols on the BBC's Top of the Pops was a victory for punk in the battle for social acceptance. But this was no victory since the battle was not for social acceptance but for something else which Mark P. couldn't quite articulate. A woman shouted "We know the problems, what's the answer?!" to which he replied after a long pause, "You know this is really depressing because I don't know the fucking answer."

In a way, the answer was right in front of all of us: it was in the effervescence of the crowd, in the possibility that such a public discussion

could happen, not only in the midst of such incredible noise but inextricably linked to and sustained by it; it was in the woman who once again bounded up on stage, screamed "Defiance!" into the microphone and disappeared into the crowd. But, then again, maybe that wasn't the answer either. So a man took advantage of Mark Perry's lack of an answer to provide his own: "If you want to change the world you don't sing songs and you don't make your point on stage. You do like the blacks in South Africa and go out and start a war. Words are a bunch of bullocks. They don't do anything. You're just a bunch of little boys and girls who don't know what they're doing." Before the crowd could respond to this clear challenge Mark Perry moved to close the debate by saying, "Alright. He wants chaos... well, chaos is finished" and signaled to the band to wrap up its dub in a crescendo of noise.

But chaos was not finished. For as Perry turned around to talk to the drummer a man grabbed the microphone and yelled "If there was a load of skinheads down here you'd all shit yourselves and you know it!!!" The violence that had hung in the air now became palpably real as the club exploded into bedlam. A score of punks rushed the stage to attack the offender, accompanied by a veritable mortar barrage of beer bottles and glasses. The skinhead provocateur was dragged off to an uncertain fate, while the bouncers sallied forth into the crowd to restore order. People scattered in all directions as the melee spread on to the stage and across the floor. Visibly shaken and infuriated by this willful self-destruction of the fragile space of difference, Mark Perry shouted above the *sturm und drang* "One of you people gets a chance to say something and there's a fight. Is that all you can do, struggle with one another? I love all you people, but I hate you when you act like stupid idiots CAUSE THAT'S HOW THEY GRIND YOU DOWN!!!" The show was over.

It is now 1990, nearly thirteen years after that fateful night. The obituary of punk was written long ago (by some as early as 19785) even though it is not uncommon to see teenagers congregating in Harvard Square, listening to hardcore, with "Punks Not Dead" painted on the back of their leather jackets. Within the walls of the 100 Club, if it still exists, I imagine that punk perdures only as a nostalgic echo, a vague memory of a desire for transgression that is stirred by bands who still do not care whether they can play chords at all. Mark Perry and Alternative TV still exist. Last summer they released their first album in seven years. But they no longer prowl the same musical terrain, having eschewed their assault on the premises and dead history of rock and roll for a nostalgic immersion in 60s psychedelia. As for the other members of the audience, I have no idea whether they exist or not. We all dispersed after the event, destined never to share the same space again. Outside of the boundaries of the collective performance space, we were left to our own devices, bereft of the evanescent power of the moment when the four walls appeared to fracture, even if only a little. Perhaps the best that we could hope for was that the fragmented memories of the rhythm-driven

cacophony of difference would somehow make the facts of everyday life seem less natural and stolid, more political and fluid, than they did before. As for me, I like to think that I definitely do exist, though my grasp on my place in the present keeps slipping as I listen to a recording of ATV's performance that evening, re-membering, re-configuring, re-writing that experience, and trying to make sense of it all in relation to Greil Marcus' Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century.

White Punks on Theory

The principal reason why I have engaged in such a self-indulgent preface to this review is that I wanted to situate myself with regards to my subject matter in the same way that Marcus situates himself towards his. Although *Lipstick Traces* is by no means simply a book about punk, it is most assuredly a book that not only finds its animating spirit in punk, but also its motivating inspiration in the carnivalesque maelstrom of a punk performance. At this performance, which Marcus claims was "as close to the Judgement Day as a staged performance can be", he was fascinated by a screeching, abrasive voice that "denied all social facts, and in that denial affirmed that everything was possible" 6. The voice of the Avenging Angel was that of Johnny Rotten at the last Sex Pistols concert at the Wonderland Ballroom in San Francisco in January 1978. It was a voice that was so powerful and compelling from Marcus's perspective that it blew a hole through the fabric of everyday life and its ubiquitous tyranny:

[Rotten's] aim was to take all the rage, intelligence, and strength in his being and then fling them at the world: to make the world notice; to make the world doubt its most cherished and unexamined beliefs; to make the world pay for its crimes in the coin of nightmare, and then to end the world—symbolically, if no other way was open. At that, for a moment, he did.⁷

Much in the same way that I stumbled into the suddenly unreal world outside of the 100 Club, Marcus left the Wonderland Ballroom with the firm belief that nothing would ever quite look or feel the same again. And so Marcus leapt through the gaping hole that Johnny Rotten's voice opened up for him, spending the next ten years trying to make sense of that voice, its moment of refusal, and from whence it came.

Marcus is certainly not the first to be so moved by what might be called the "passion play" of punk. Simon Frith has argued that punk has been the most theoretically scrutinized and analyzed musical genre and stylistic movement in the history of post-war popular culture. For many (myself included) punk not only changed the way one listened to popular music but also provided the occasion for thinking about it in a different way. Indeed, more than a few rock critics and academics made their careers and reputations, Frith included, on the basis of interpreting the aural and

visual disruption that punk represented in the popular culture through an array of Marxist and post-structuralist theories of cultural practice that emerged (at least in the English-speaking world) in the 1970s. Prime examples include Dick Hebdige's early work on punk as a subculture engaged in cultural resistance through semiotic guerilla warfare; Dave Laing's analysis of punk as a contradictory matrix of economic, aesthetic, and ideological discourses drawn from mainstream rock, different youth sub-cultures, and the artistic avant-garde; Larry Grossberg's dense theorization of punk as an implosive "rock and roll apparatus" that implicitly undermined the conditions under which rock music operated as a site of pleasure and empowerment through its explicit celebration of its own artifice; and, most recently, Simon Frith's and Arthur Horne's interpretation of punk as the most compelling evidence to date of the collapse of "post-modern" popular culture where the commodification of aesthetics and the aestheticization of commodities go hand in hand.⁸

Although these and other analyses of punk in particular and rock music in general have pushed forward the frontiers of cultural analysis, I have often felt that their authors are more compelled by the music to theorize about it than to theorize with it or through it. When confronted with the often inchoate pleasures (and terrors) of music and noise, the "new wave" of pop music analysts tend to flee into a realm of elegant cultural theory whose cool analytic language often obscures the fluidity and multi-dimensionality of music as a distinctive medium, experience, and cultural practice. Standing at a critical distance from their subject matter they take careful aim with a sophisticated conceptual apparatus and frequently miss the mark. This, I believe, is largely because they attempt to impose an alien language upon the music rather than try to develop a language that is homologous to the tonality of the music itself. White punks on theory can surely philosophize, but rarely does their analysis vibrate and dance like the aspects of culture they endeavor to explain.

In this regard Lipstick Traces is a rare pleasure in that it is a book whose language and mode of analysis resonate with the spirit of its subject matter. Perhaps this is because, as a rock critic for publications as diverse as Rolling Stone and Art Forum rather than as an academic struggling for legitimacy and tenure, Marcus has fewer theoretical crosses to bear. Nonetheless, he is no stranger to cultural theory and for the past decade and a half he has been one of the more theoretically inclined and politically concerned rock critics in America. In fact, Lipstick Traces is anything but atheoretical, as Marcus brings to bear on his subject matter many theoretical heavy hitters such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, Georges Bataille, and, most centrally, Guy Debord and the Situationists. But one of the key virtues of the book is that Marcus deftly avoids the trap that so many of the aforementioned people fall into, which is letting the theory all but silence the sound they are trying to understand. In the context of Marcus's impassioned lyrical prose, Lefebvre's theory of everyday life and Debord's theory of the

spectacle focus and amplify the sounds and events that Marcus is concerned with rather than crushing them underneath their density. (Marcus's impassioned prose, the truth be told, sometimes results in ridiculous flights of hyperbolic fancy: e.g., the claim that events like Elvis being called a "nigger" by his guitarist after sensually crooning "Blue Moon in Kentucky" explain most of American Culture." Cultural practice and theory are used to evoke and invoke each other, and in the process our appreciation and understanding of both is enriched. Although there is nary a page in the book where this does not happen, one of the most compelling and interesting example of such moments comes when Marcus argues that Adorno, of all people, can be interpreted as the theoretical godfather of punk. It is worth quoting at length as an example of Marcus's unique style and mode of analysis:

[I]n a way, punk was most easily recognizable as a new version of the old Frankfurt School critique of mass culture... But now the premises of the old critique were exploding out of a spot that [Adorno] had never recognized: mass culture's pop culture heart. Stranger still: the old critique of mass culture paraded as mass culture, at least as protean would-be mass culture....

Probably no definition of punk can be stretched far enough to enclose Theodor Adorno. As a music lover he hated jazz, likely retched when he first heard of Elvis Presley, and no doubt would have understood the Sex Pistols as a return to Kristallnacht if he hadn't been lucky enough to die in 1969. But you can find punk between every other line of *Minima Moralia*: its miasmic loathing for what Western civilization had made of itself by the end of the Second World War, was, by 1977 the stuff of a hundred songs and slogans. . . . *Minima Moralia* was written as a series of epigraphs, of ephemeralities, each severed block of type marching relentlessly toward the destruction of whatever intimations of hope might appear within its boundaries, each paragraph headed by an impotent oath, a flat irony, each (chosen at random) a good title for a punk 45: "Unfair intimidation," "Blackmail," "Sacrificial Lamb," "They the People." After 1977 a spoken rant LP could have been made into into an album called *Big Ted Says No* and it would have made perfect punk sense. . .

What Adorno's negation lacked was glee—a spirit the punk version of his world never failed to deliver. Walking the streets as pose and fashion, Adorno's prophecies were suffused with happiness, a thrill that made them simple and clear. More than trashbags or torn clothes, punks wore Adorno's morbid rash; they inked or stenciled it over themselves in regular patterns. As Adorno's prepared corpses, more consciously prepared then he could have imagined, they exploded with proofs of vitality—that is, they said what they meant.

In so doing they turned Adorno's vision of modern life back upon itself. Adorno had not imagined that his corpses knew what they meant to say. Punks were those who now understood themselves as people from whom the news of their not quite success-

ful decease had been withheld for reasons of population policy—as punk defined the no-future, society was going to need a lot of zombie counterpersons, shoppers, bureaucrats, welfare petitioners, a lot of people to stand in line and man them. The difference was that these people had heard the news. ¹⁰

The question that obsessed Marcus in this book is how the Sex Pistols. who were just as surely a commodity as any other pop culture product, somehow became part of a different structure of opportunity within the land of the spectacle; a structure of opportunity that enabled people, albeit temporarily, to choose to get off the spectacle's "Mobius strip of pure capitalism" and to see that for all the time spent traveling its recursive serpentine architecture, one wasn't really going anywhere at all. The answer is relatively simple: if most of mass culture emanated the harmonious sound of the engine of spectacular capitalism smoothly clicking on all cylinders, the Sex Pistols were a source of cultural dissonance that interrupted what was, according to Debord, the spectacle's never-ending discourse about itself. Like all simple answers concerning the complex and contradictory field of cultural politics, this answer begs many questions, some of which, as we shall see, diminish the power of Marcus's story. But the importance and the pleasure of Lipstick Traces reside in first, the process by which Marcus constructs this simple answer and, second, how much it is, in fact, able to illuminate.

Noises, Traces, Versions

Above all else, Lipstick Traces is a book about noise. Although Marcus does not explicitly refer to Jacques Attali's path-breaking work on the subject, both writers share a common ground with respect to the politics of sound. 11 Attali's project was to explore the intimate relation of sound to power, or aurality to the structuring of differences in society. For Attali, "music" is tamed noise. It is a code that sonically defines the hegemonic ordering of positions of power and difference. Noise, sound that falls outside of the musical code, also falls outside of that ordering of difference. If the sound of music is, broadly speaking, harmonious, the sound of noise is cacophonous as it throws into question differences that are assumed to be natural. For this reason, if a dominant sonic framing of power and difference is threatened by noise, that noise must be silenced, marginalized or incorporated. For this reason also, Attali's work is suggestive of a radical cultural politics that locates a seam of disruptive and fracturing possibilities within the spectacle sounded large at the interstices of music and noise, language and babble, coherence and utter-

Marcus has placed his ear at precisely these interstices. The sound that he hears is the coalescing of different currents of disruptive cultural static and interference into a shout of refusal and negation, a shout that voices

a "'no' so strong that it would create the will never to take it back." 12 It was "a voice of teeth ground down into points... a near absolute loathing of one's time and place, the note held into disgust turns into glee."13 And what was being refused and negated? Basically everything that made a prison out of everyday life: alienating work, colonized leisure, the hierarchically organized dispensation of a God that denied sanctity to free individuals who sought their own deification in pursuit of the pleasures of the material world, the regimented architectronics of space and time that divided lived experience into fragments that had no relation to one another, and so on. As Marcus is fond of reiterating time and again, this noisy shout of "no" implied an even noisier "yes", a yes that was "a demand to live not at as an object but as a subject of history-to live as if something actually depended upon one's actions-and that demand opens up unto a free street."14 It is this dialectic of no and yes, according to Marcus, that distinguishes the noise of nihilism from the noise of the negation. The former is solipsistic, seeking only to end the world for the one who screams in rage and refusal. What happens to others is inconsequential. The latter is political, seeking to end the world as it is so that it can be re-created as it is desired to be in conversation with others. What happens to others is a question that cannot be avoided without peril to one's own freedom.

This noise is the anarchist grail that Marcus pursues throughout all 450 pages of his book. Although he first heard it in punk, with his ear to the ground, he can hear distant echoes of it in the Dada of Zurich and Berlin, in medieval Gnostic heretics, such as the Cathars of Montaillou and the German Brethren of the Free Spirit, in the modern Gnostic heretic Michael Mourré who commandeered the altar at the Nôtre Dame Cathedral during an Easter High Mass to proclaim that God is dead, in Saint-Just, the Paris Commune, May 1968, in the Situationists and their precursors in the obscure group of Left-Bank Parisian avant-grade intellectuals, the Lettrists. For Marcus, each of these events, groups, or individuals signified a revolutionary desire to turn everyday life into a Festival, a dance of ecstatic liberation. But what attracts Marcus to these moments or people is essentially their failure, their ephemerality as revolutionary impulses (a point that we will return to shortly). They were movements that "led to no official revolutions" and "raised no monuments." 15 All they left were traces with no hint of their origins, like lipstick traces on a cigarette (and hence the title, taken from a song by Benny Spellman), nor of their impossible demands that the world be changed by the sound of their rebellion. Yet time and again, these demands resurface to be articulated in a new way by people who are motivated by the same rage and will to freedom, but who have no idea of either their ancestry or progeny. As Marcus reasons (probably correctly), "Johnny Rotten hadn't said the word 'dada' since he was two." Nonetheless, there he was in the Wonderland Ballroom, recalling nothing so much to Marcus as the dada sorcery of Hugo Ball or Richard Hulsenbeck, attempting to destroy first

art (or rock) and then the world of seemingly obdurate social facts through the language of noise.

This then is Marcus's grand project, to tell the story of the secret history of anarchist noise; secret because it is history adrift, a history without consciousness of lineage or precedent, particularly when it comes to the chapter contributed by punk. It is a history "secret to those who make it, especially those who make it. In the Sex Pistol's hands, and in the hands of those who turn up in their wake [there is] a blind groping towards a new story" as if it is being told for the very first time. ¹⁷ But Marcus is not at all interested in simply diachronically mapping all the connections and linkages between punk, situationism, dada and all the rest, which to Marcus is simply adding up the "arithmetic" of history. Rather, he has something more provocative in mind, which is to illuminate how the desire for freedom encoded in the noise of negation resurfaces at different moments in time by allowing the participants in its history to have a synchronous conversation with one another. As Marcus eloquently argues his prologue:

If one can stop looking at the past and start listening to it, one might hear echoes of a new conversation; then the task of the critic would be to lead speakers and listeners unaware of each other's existence to talk to one another. The job of the critic would be to maintain the ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that sense of surprise to other people, because a life suffused with surprise is better than a life that is not.¹⁸

Although the declension to this statement is indicative of Marcus's often overblown rhetoric (surprises are nice, but only if they do not include a knock on the door at 4 A.M., and for a Berkeley intellectual like Marcus, such surprises are not within the realm of probability, at least not yet), as a whole, it is suggestive of a methodology of cultural analysis and writing style that is far more suited to evoking the sensibility of anarchist noise than the linear narrative of traditional historical discourse. In a manner and tonality that is similar to, though not nearly as erudite or politically astute as, the recent writing of Dick Hebdige, Marcus employs what may be called the methodology of the 'version'. 19 Versioning has long been one of the key characteristics of reggae and other Afro-American and Caribbean musics and occurs when a particular piece of music is re-mixed and modified by different musicians or producers who give the original soundscape a slightly different architecture. Versioning is not so much an act of musical plagiarism as a gesture of respect and inspiration, where one uses the original source as a springboard for telling one's own story. The basic principle of this methodology is, as Marcus himself states, "that there are no truths only versions." 20 (205). Thus, in bringing his particular secret history to light, Marcus operates more as a record producer who delights in conjuring and mixing different versions of the same basic story than a writer who carefully

builds an argument point by point. In fact, I do not think that it is a misrepresentation to say that Marcus really does think of the main elements of his story less as persons, ideas, and events and more as different instruments and sounds that make up the history of anarchist noise: there is the Dada of Zurich and Berlin, led by the self-proclaimed "Dada Drummer" Richard Hulsenbeck, pounding out a rhythm that would crush art and language; there are the Lettrists on synthesizers, armed with Isidore Isou's particle physics of poetry, twisting and torturing electronic wave forms on a hell-bent mission to smash the wall of linguistic sound; there is the Situationist's anarcho-Marxist critique of spectacular capitalism and their will to radical subjectivity through which everyday life is turned into art, providing a searing lead on guitar; there is punk snarling away on lead vocals, declaring that it was consumer society's own worst nightmare come to life; and there are a host of ghostly samples thrown into the mix ranging from obscure early doowop singles (The Oriole's "Too Soon to Know") to even more obscure science fiction movies (Quartermass and the Pit) to murderer/folk heroes (Charley Starkweather) to a garden's variety of religious heretics (the Ranters, the Lollards, John of Leyden and the Brethren of the Free Spirit), all of which evoke the delirium of sliding down the razor's edge between nihilism and negation. In each chapter (or version), Marcus fashions a different sounding mix out of the confluence of all these elements, according to one of them a dominant place in the mix so as turn the story in a slightly different direction.

Much of the value and originality of Lipstick Traces lies in this application of the principles of versioning to cultural analysis. Many of the connections that Marcus makes, as he himself acknowledges, had been made before. It is a widely known part of punk lore that the Sex Pistols's manager, Malcolm McClaren, and his partner Jamie Reid, had been involved in the British branch of the Situationist International and, largely through them, many sitiuationist slogans from May 1968 found their way into punk discourse. 21 Moreover, most of the trails that Marcus follows on the road of his secret history, such as those to Dada, the Cathars, or to the Paris Commune, were already clearly marked out in the writings of the Situationists. But in the true spirit of versioning Marcus is not really plagiarising his sources. Rather, both respectful of and inspired by these ready-made connections, he tries to make events, ideas, and sounds talk to one another across great gaps of time. What makes his analysis all the more interesting is that the desire for such a conversation was not really a central part of the tradition by which he is fascinated. Tristan Tzara declared that he was not at all interested in whether or not anyone came before him. The Situationists, although more mindful of their lineage, took great pains to articulate just how avant-garde they were, ruthlessly criticizing both their predecessors (dada, surrealism, the non-Communist marxism of Lefebvre and Castoriadis) and those who would emulate them (whom they denigrated as infantile "pro-situs"). And punk, insist-

ing that is was the embodiment of "no future," denied that it had a past as well. In this subterranean tradition of negation *sui generis*, it seems that no one was interested in talking to anyone else. This, I suppose, is yet another sad manifestation of the hubris of white western culture, both center and margins, where the author's voice is the only one that ever really matters. It is thus ironic that Marcus must appropriate from a different "marginal" culture whose history has been denied and erased by white "civilization," the methodology to make the conversation happen. What is good about *Lipstick Traces* is that Marcus does indeed create a conversation where before there was none. What is sad about the book is that it revels in the spirit that prevented one from happening in the first place.

Dancing on the Offbeat of the World or the Problematic Politics of White Noise

There is an image in *Lipstick Traces* that opens and closes the book. It is a cartoon of two women regarding a vagrant stumbling down the street outside a soda fountain shop window. The vagrant is mumbling "I yam an anti-christ!" whilst the woman says with opprobrium and disgust "It's that shabby old man with the tin whistle!" The caption to the cartoon reads "It is seventeen long years since Monty was spotted outside Malcolm MacGregor's Sex 'N' Drugs shop. . . . "22 The denotation of the image is obvious: the shabby old man is Johnny Rotten, who was indeed marked as the perfect medium for a frontal assault by Malcolm McLaren on the rock and roll apparatus as Rotten prowled King's Road in London in front of McLaren's underground clothing and accessories shop named "Sex" in 1975. For Marcus, the connotation of image encompasses a number of different figures who appear in his story: Johnny Rotten, Richard Hulsenbeck, Guy Debord; all of whom, for a brief, shining moment, rendered transparent all of the nefarious constructions of power and who, because of their glimpse of this anarchistic void, were sentenced to spend the rest of their lives in futility trying to recapture the halcyon moment where everything seemed possible. According to Marcus they were "condemned to roll their greatest hit up the hill of the crowd for all eternity, carrying the curse of having been in the right place at the right time, a blessing that comes to no one more than once."23 In the penultimate paragraph of the book he suggests that because of the absolute demands of their desires "there is a certainty of failure: all those who glimpse possibility in a spectral moment become rich, and though they remain so, they are ever after more impoverished."24 They become shabby old men of Sisyphusian proportions, bleating out tunes of negation on tin whistles for an audience that no longer cares to listen.

These bookends of imagery are indicative of the problematic cultural

politics of *Lipstick Traces* and the white noise with which it is so fascinated. In essence, Marcus is seduced by the 'tragic' stories of white men who attempt to transcend the oppressive structures and relations of power in the 20th century simply on the strength of an aesthetic scream of refusal. In describing these shabby old men, Marcus waxes wistfully about their damaged character and doomed cultural insurgency. He writes:

There is a figure who appears in this book again and again. His instincts are basically cruel: his manner is intransigent. He trades in hysteria but is immune to it. He is beyond temptation, because despite his utopian rhetoric satisfaction is the last thing on his mind. He is unutterably seductive, yet he trails bitter comrades behind him like Hansel his bread crumbs, his only way home through a thicket of apologies he will never make. He is a moralist and a rationalist, but he presents himself as a sociopath; he leaves behind not documents of edification but of paradox. No matter how violent his mark on history, he is doomed to obscurity, which he cultivates as a sign of profundity (218). ²⁵

Despite the power of Marcus' prose, there are several things that are extremely disturbing about this kind of romantic sentimentality, a sentimentality that pervades Marcus' assessment of his anti-heroes. The most immediate and infuriating is the telling fact that the passage has more male-gendered pronouns than a passage from the Old Testament. While perhaps not intentional, it is all the more insidious for being so unacknowledged in a text concerned with tracing a history of cultural subversion. Aside from providing the seductive nostalgic markings to which the title of the book refers, women largely remain a secret in Marcus' secret history. Marcus would no doubt protest at such a characterization as women such as the Dadaist Emmy Hennings, Situationist Michelle Bernstein, and punk musicians Poly Styrene and Lora Logic do indeed make appearances in the story. But that is all they do, make appearances, while Rotten, Hulsenbeck, and Debord are placed at the center of Marcus' narrative. The problem here is not simply one of equal opportunity history but of the politics of noise as it is sounded out by Marcus. It is rather inexplicable that women are so marginal to Marcus's story since it is precisely the women who are in the story who, quite literally, produce the most radical noise. It was the Second Empire cabaret singer Thérésa who, by subverting the formal conventions of concert singing, provided a soundscape of aural resistance that helped fuel the explosion of the Paris Commune. It was Emmy Hemmings whose shricking voice was so disturbing and powerful that frightened reviewers likened it to an avalanche loud enough to wake the dead. It was a noise that was far more transgressive than the implosive sound poetry of Ball, Hulsenbeck, or Tzara. It was the Slits who took the punk ethos to the limit, not only mocking prevailing expectations of what women in rock sound like, but also breaking every rule concerning what rock itself should sound like.

Compared to the sonic anarchy produced whenever the Slits picked up their instruments, the Sex Pistols were just another rock and roll band. I am not really saying anything that Marcus doesn't know; all of these examples can be found in his book. But Marcus is not motivated to ask where the power of these female voices comes from, how and why it is different from the voices of their male compatriots, and most importantly how would the history look different from their stories. Theirs is a noise that is absent from Marcus's versioning, and it is an absence that makes the conversation that takes place somewhat suspect.

But questionable gender politics is not the only flaw in Marcus' analysis. As I mentioned before, his romantic sentimentality valorizes the failure of these moments of anarchist irruption to affect social change. For Marcus, this failure is endemic to projects of transcendence themselves: those who seek to turn everyday life into a festival of revolutionary poesis are making impossible demands upon the world and they know it. In order to support this hypothesis Marcus often invokes Debord's statement in the founding document of the Situationist International that, "This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be emphemeral, without a future; passageways."26 For Marcus this statement is powerful because it represents a tragic will to freedom that could begat nothing but failure. As Marcus says near the end of the book, "I was drawn to . . . [Debord's] frank and determined embrace of moments in which the world seems to change, moments that leave nothing behind but dissatisfaction, disappointment, rage, sorrow, isolation and vanity".27

This romanticization of failure is the only position that Marcus can take with respect to his subject because he fails to understand the difference between transcendence and transformation, and between the politics of performance and the politics of social change. I wonder if Marcus read and understood Debord's conclusion to the above statement in which he says "Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts."28 The desire for eternity, the desire to escape from the concrete materiality of space and time in a social formation in a search of self-realization, is a desire for transcendence and not a desire for transformation. The Situationists, who provide the theoretical basis for Marcus' interpretation of the cultural politics of anarchist noise, were most decidedly not interested in transcendence. Cognizant of the changes in the materiality of advanced capitalism that consumerism and the massmediated representation of "reality" had wrought, they sought a politics of transformation that was appropriate to this new spatial and temporal organization of everyday life. They were Marxists, not Romantics; and between the two is a yawning gap of difference.

This failure to understand the difference between transcendence and transformation is all the more perplexing as Marcus draws heavily upon the Situationist text where that difference is most explicitly drawn out: Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution in Everyday Life*. One starts down the

path to radical social transformation by learning to "dance on the off-beat of the official world" argued Vaneigem, and this meant sabotaging power by turning upside down the language and images by which it circulates. Such a dance was the hallmark of "active nihilists," of which Dada was the archetype.²⁹ But as Vaneigem clearly points out, in their nihilism the Dadaists sought transcendence by diving into the chaotic decay they saw all around them and, as such, their assault on art was only pre-revolutionary. Unless one moves from transcendence to transformation, from art to everyday life, from the performance space to the streets, all active nihilism can produce, as Vaneigem says, is "spurious opposition".

But the question of how one moves from spurious opposition to revolutionary transformation is one that escapes Marcus because he frequently elides the difference between the politics of performance and the politics of social change. For Marcus, the politics of anarchist performance revolves around the idea that "in the constructed setting of a temporally enclosed space—in this case a nightclub—anything could be negated. It was the notion that, there, anything might happen, which meant finally in the world at large, transposed artistically, anything might happen there, too"30. This, I think, is a profound and insightful statement, equally applicable to both Dada and punk. The problem is that Marcus never really considers how and under what conditions such transposition can or cannot occur. His thinking about this key issue is rather schizophrenic. At one moment he inexcusably equates the symbolic violence of performance with physical violence of social revolution (comparing the last Sex Pistols concert with the Sparticist Uprising in Berlin, 1919) and at another he implies the gap between the two is unbridgeable (e.g. punk was "a nightclub act that asked for the world, for a moment got it, and then got another nightclub"31). In the end, Marcus can't decide whether the performance space is the "place where the spirit of negation is born or where it goes to die"32.

And thus we return to the 100 Club, where in one evening I saw and participated in a more dislocating and dramatic enactment of transgressive poesis than I have in a decade of countless rock shows and performance art events. Like Marcus and the last Sex Pistols concert, I was profoundly affected by the experience: the world never looked or sounded the same again. It was an exquisitely precious moment. But unlike Marcus, I think it is a political error to romanticize it and not to ask questions of its limitations as a site of subversion. Although I have continually returned to similar performance sites, similar sounds, hungry for the noise that would make a difference, I have realized that noise by itself cannot make the difference necessary for social transformation. In order to move beyond spurious opposition, beyond the boundaries of the performance space, there must be affective alliances between the noise of subversion and other sites and practices of resistance in work, family life, sexual relations, the community, in short, in everyday life. Punk, as Marcus quite correctly points out, opened up a breach in the discursive

economy of rock music so that the politics of everyday life became an explicit concern. But making or listening to a sonic discourse of subversion can only be a beginning.

Unfortunately, this beginning point of when and where noise is produced and circulated is also the end for Marcus. His ultimate stance in regards to the cultural politics of negation is basically that of a passive consumer rather than as engaged social critic or organic intellectual. He regards the events and personages of his secret history like he does the hundreds of recordings he probably receives each week for review: objects to be consumed, listened to, written about, and then filed away. How else can one make sense of the closing statement of the book as he looks back upon the tragic failures he has chronicled and says, "If all this seems like a lot for a pop song to contain, that is why this story is a story, if it is. And it is why any good punk song can sound like the greatest thing you ever heard, which it does. When it doesn't, that will mean the story has taken its next turn". 33 In the end, the same judgement may be applied to Lipstick Traces that Vaneigem applied to Dada and juvenile delinquency: "The same contempt for art and bourgeois values. The same refusal of ideology. The same will to live. The same ignorance of history. The same barbaric revolt. The same lack of tactics."34 I don't know about Marcus, but I would rather not wait for the story to turn. I'd rather work, in and through noise, to help shape the turns the story will take. The past may indeed be tragic, but the future can be very bright, but only if we actively make it so.

> Department of Sociology Boston College

Notes

- All song lyrics in this section are from Alternative TV, The Image Has Cracked: The First Alternative TV Album. Deptford Fun City Records (UK), 1978.
- Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in David Fernbach, ed. Karl Marx: Surveys From Exile, Political Writings Vol. 2. New York: Vintage, 1973, p. 146.
- 3. Ibid., p. 149.
- 4. Ibid., p. 150.
- 5. The prime example here is the scathing and scabrous indictment of punk's inevitable cooptation by the music industry by Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, two music journalists who loudly trumpeted the cause of punk as an assault on the conventions and complacency of rock music in the pages of New Musical Express in the late 1970's, in The Boy Looked at Johnny: The Obituary of Rock and Roll. London: Pluto Press, 1978.
- Griel Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 38, 2.
- 7. Ibid., 17.

- 8. Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style. New York: Methuen, 1979; Dave Laing, One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock. Philadelphia; Open University Press, 1985; Larry Grossberg, "Is There Rock After Punk?" Critical Studies in Mass Communication. Vol. 3 No. 1: 50-74; Simon Frith and Arthur Horne, Art into Pop. London: Methuen, 1988.
- 9. Ibid., 58.
- 10. Ibid., 70, 72-74.
- Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- 12. Ibid., 306-7.
- 13. Ibid., 195.
- 14. Ibid., 6.
- 15. Ibid., 148.
- 16. Ibid., 200.
- 17. Ibid., 181.
- 18. Ibid., 23.
- 19. See. in particular, Dick Hebdige, "Digging for Britain: An Excavation in Seven Parts" in David Joselit and Elizabeth Sussman, Eds. The British Edge. Boston, MA: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1987; Hiding in the Light, New York: Routledge, 1988; and Cut'N' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music. London: Comedia, 1987. The first chapter of the last book is devoted to an intriguing discussion of Hebdige's appropriation of the spirit of versioning for writing.
- 20. Marcus, Lipstick Traces, 205.
- 21. One band, Royal Family and the Poor, who recorded for the explicitly situationist inspired Factory Records, took to reading excerpts from key situationist texts against a wall of noise. See (or, rather, listen to)Royal Family and the Poor, "The Vaneigem Mix" on A Factory Quartet, Factory Records, U.K., 1981. For an analysis of the direct influence of situationism upon punk and post-punk see Simon Frith and Arthur Horne, op.cit.
- 22. Marcus, Lipstick Traces, 1,447.
- 23. Ibid., 202...
- 24. Ibid., 447.
- 25. Ibid., 218.
- Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions and Organization of Action" in Ken Knabb, ed., Situationist International Anthology. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, p. 25.
- 27. Marcus, Lipstick Traces, 446.

- 28. Debord, "Report. . . . " 25.
- Raoul Vancigem, The Revolution in Everyday Life. London: Left Bank Books and Rebel Press, (1967) 1983. p. 136.
- 30. Marcus, Lipstick Traces, 241.
- 31. Ibid. p. 442
- 32. Ibid., 125.
- 33. Ibid., 447.
- 34. Vaneigem, Revolution in Everyday Life, 138.