

## Holocaust Impiety in Punk and Post-punk

### Invited Conference Paper: Imperial War Museum, March 2009

#### [PowerPoint 1: Johnny Rotten Title Page]

Reviewing *Schindler's List*, Bryan Cheyette argued that the only times the film fails is when it 'becomes a seductive and self-confident narrative at the cost of any real understanding of the difficulties inherent in representing the ineffable'.<sup>1</sup> In response, the philosopher Gillian Rose related Cheyette's comments to a 'wide-spread tradition of reflection on the Holocaust', running from Adorno and Holocaust theologians through to Habermas and Lyotard, that runs significant risks.<sup>2</sup> She wrote:

To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability', that is, non-representability, is *to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human.<sup>3</sup>

Rose dismissed the discourse of 'ineffability' as 'Holocaust piety'; now embedded in the critical vocabulary of Holocaust studies, the phrase is frequently used as a rebuff to those who, thinking about the Holocaust, advocate the kind of oblique approach to representation that makes thinking about the actual events that constituted the Holocaust almost impossible. However, while critics have challenged Holocaust films, literature, reviews and studies that possess an excess of piety, very little attention has been focussed on artworks that display the opposing qualities of representational excess and historical irreverence. These are characteristics that were widely displayed by punk and post-punk bands from the mid-1970s

onwards - bands that repeatedly referenced the Holocaust in a manner that seemed almost deliberately designed to cause offence. Punk's notoriety stems from social and linguistic transgressions such as The Sex Pistols's notorious swearing on Bill Grundy's *Today* programme in 1976: the word 'ineffable', however, was one of the few that *wasn't* in the punk vocabulary. Making extensive Nazi references through their clothing, songs and record cover artwork, punk's impious approach to the Holocaust should not be confused with Holocaust denial. These bands did not doubt that the Holocaust had happened, and the use of the Holocaust as a form of provocation presupposes that it did; only, to paraphrase one of Johnny Rotten's most iconic statements, they didn't care. Or at least they didn't appear to.

The absence of a voluble response to the noisy rise to prominence of the punk movement by those with an interest in Holocaust representation - especially those who feel that a film such as *Schindler's List* surpasses the boundaries of good taste - is surprising, not least because punk was an underground movement that rapidly took a hold on mainstream culture. In the 1970s, Nazism became a recurrent subject for popular works of fiction - at the time Danny Fields, a former manager of The Stooges and The Ramones, remarked that 'you can't put out a paperback book *without* a swastika on the cover'.<sup>4</sup> The pervasive Nazi references in punk music meant that the genocide became incorporated into another accessible art form that also reached a mass audience. In one of the few academic studies on the subject, an essay focussed specifically on the extensive Jewish involvement in the American punk and glam scenes by Jon Stratton, the author goes so far as to assert that 'punk marks *the* confrontation with the Judeocide in popular culture, and popular consciousness'.<sup>5</sup>

Nazism took a hold of punk from its very beginnings in New York and London in the mid to late 1970s. For a start, there was the clothing. The black leather trousers and jackets and

black marching boots favoured by the punks evoked a kind of Nazi fetish, and the swastika became almost like an unofficial membership badge for the movement.

### **[PowerPoint 2: Sid Vicious and Siouxsie Sioux]**

Anecdotes about British punks and their swastikas abound: for example, Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees, pictured here, regularly wore swastikas during live performances, and her song 'Love in a Void' originally featured the line 'too many Jews for my liking'. Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols wrote a notorious song entitled 'Belsen Was a Gas' that I will look at in detail later, and here he is shown walking through the Jewish district of Paris wearing a swastika t-shirt during the filming of The Sex Pistols's film *The Great Rock n Roll Swindle*. Before Vicious even joined the band to replace Glen Matlock, The Sex Pistols were into their swastikas. When they appeared on the TV programme *So It Goes* presented by Tony Wilson – this before the more well-known Bill Grundy broadcast - a fan called Jordan had been primed to introduce them. However, in an episode that the author David Nolan aptly describes as *Carry on Swastika*, a furore broke out in the studio when it transpired that Jordan was wearing a swastika armband that she planned to wear during the live transmission.<sup>6</sup> A debate about the armband is said to have gone on for three hours, prolonged by the fact that the Jewish head of Granada TV, Sydney Bernstein, was no big fan of the Germans, and wouldn't even let them use German microphones on the station.<sup>7</sup> In the end Jordan agreed to do the transmission with the swastika covered over with gaffer tape.

### **[PowerPoint 3: Jordan on *So It Goes*]**

British punk was not being particularly innovative on this score, and its penchant for swastikas can be directly traced to the early American punks, and in particular, I'd suggest, to Dee Dee Ramone, who grew up in postwar Germany and became fascinated by the Nazi paraphernalia such as gas masks, helmets and machine gun belts that still littered the former battle fields in the German countryside. When he and his family returned to America, Dee Dee's obsession with what he saw as the 'glamour' of Nazi symbols was passed on to other members of the fledgling New York punk scene. The hardcore punks The Dead Boys, for example, presented The Ramones with Nazi Mother's Crosses as gifts for helping them to settle into the city: this was the new band's way of showing The Ramones that they *belonged*.<sup>8</sup> And it didn't stop there. After one gig the lead singer of The Dead Boys, Stiv Bators, is said to have shaved a swastika into a fan's pubic hair with a razor, then led a naked rampage round the Chelsea Hotel, draped in a Nazi flag and carrying a whip while singing the song 'Springtime for Hitler' from the Broadway musical *The Producers*.<sup>9</sup>

As this incident highlights, punk was always, to some degree, about causing offence, especially to figures and institutions that represented authority, such as parents, the government and of course, famously, the Queen. Given the provocative nature of punk, the pervasive references to Nazis and the Holocaust might in one sense be understood as shock tactics, just like the tattoos, ripped clothing, safety pins and swearing. As the rock journalist Lester Bangs put it, 'a little of the old *epater* gob at authority, swastikas in punk are basically another way for kids to get a rise out of their parents and maybe the press, both of whom deserve the irritation'.<sup>10</sup> However, while this element of provocation is inarguable, what I want to do in this paper is to try and think beyond the 'shock value' of these gestures. Because despite the evidence offered to the contrary by the likes of Sid Vicious and Stiv Bators, punk produced some of the more eloquent and insightful cultural responses to the

Holocaust by later generations. As the music writer Paul Morley has pointed out, 'The image now tends to be of the punks on the King's Road with the spiky hair and the chains and the leather jackets but it was actually a really intellectual, literate movement.'<sup>11</sup>

In this light, I particularly want to consider the more complex relationship between the Nazi genocide and the nihilistic philosophy that is expressed in punk. While these bands might have had it in for their parents and the music press, it is quite clear that mainstream punks did not wear swastikas simply to cause offence to the victims of the Holocaust, not least because many punk musicians and managers were themselves Jewish. In his book *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (2006), Steven Lee Beeber even goes so far as to argue that 'Punk is Jewish'.<sup>12</sup> And he has a point. Famous Jews who were prominently involved in the punk scene include Tommy and Joey Ramone from The Ramones, Lou Reed, Richard Hell of Television, most of The Dictators, and the Sex Pistols's manager Malcolm McLaren, who sold Nazi uniforms in his London clothes shop and is widely credited with starting the swastika trend in British punk.

The pervasive Jewish involvement in punk suggests that punk's references to Nazism are not a straightforward abuse of the Holocaust, but rather a more complex *response* to the Holocaust by the generation that grew up in its aftermath. As Steven Lee Beeber writes:

While the various punk responses to the Holocaust range from the mocking to the shocking to the world-rocking, as in the impulse to identify with the oppressors, each is in its own way an attempt to deal with this tragedy that affected the punks' lives whether they liked to admit it or not. No Holocaust, no punk.<sup>13</sup>

As Beeber further notes, the self-abusing, anaemic, drug-pumped punks were hardly model Aryans, and their use of insignia such as the swastika therefore suggests that ‘Nazi imagery in punk is anything but disrespectful – that is, it’s anything but disrespectful to Jews because it is instead disrespectful to the Nazis’.<sup>14</sup> Some of this generation of punks had even lost family members in the genocide. These included Tommy Ramone, born Tommy Erdelyi, who said, ‘most of my family was murdered in the Holocaust. I am barely here.’<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps partly for this reason that Richard Hell, another Jewish punk, termed this generation the ‘blank generation’.

Steven Lee Beeber has described punk’s adoption of the swastika by way of Susan Sontag’s concept of Camp. Sontag – herself a New York Jew heavily involved with the punk scene and in particular with Richard Hell – defined Camp as ‘the sensibility of failed seriousness’ that ‘refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling’.<sup>16</sup> This suggests a psychological basis for these potentially offensive appropriations - one originating in self-protection – and an appreciation of this ‘ironic’ or ‘Camp’ approach helps us to understand the way that the early punk band The Dictators, for example, could write a song called ‘Master Race Rock’, in which they sang ‘we’re the members of the master race’, despite being mostly Jewish. Similarly, The Ramones’ eponymous first album opens with the shouty stomp ‘Blitzkrieg Bop’ and closes with ‘Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World’ in which the Jewish Joey Ramone sings about being ‘a shock trooper in a stupor’, while the child of a family of Holocaust victims plays drums.

Between the real human tragedy of the camps and the ‘sensibility of failed seriousness’ of Camp there seemed to exist a kind of creative tension that drove the artistic output of many

punk bands, and this is illustrated in the two songs by The Sex Pistols that I will look at in this paper. The first, 'Belsen Was a Gas', was written by Sid Vicious, and the second, 'Holidays in the Sun', was written by Johnny Rotten. Together they mark two key moments in punk's engagement with the Holocaust.

Sid Vicious wrote 'Belsen Was a Gas' in late 1976 before he joined The Sex Pistols, while playing in a band called The Flowers of Romance. Founded on a protracted pun, the cultural theorist Greil Marcus has described the song as 'a crude, cheesy, stupid number, thought up, it is said, by Sid Vicious, the crudest, cheesiest, stupidest member of the band'.<sup>17</sup> The title alone suggests that here the Holocaust is going to be used as a ready vehicle for a customary punk attack on the sensibilities of older generations. In this case, the attack seems particularly barbed, as the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was liberated by British and Canadian troops in 1945. The Pathe newsreel footage of skeletal bodies being bulldozed into mass graves at Belsen was shown widely in British cinemas at the time, and was for many the first indication of the true extent of Nazi atrocities.

#### **[PowerPoint 4: 'Belsen Was a Gas' lyrics]**

The song opens with the verse:

Belsen was a gas, I heard the other day,  
In the open graves where the Jews all lay.  
Life is fun and I wish you were here,  
They wrote on postcards to those held dear.  
Oh dear.

Along with the title, the sarcastic last line suggests that the singer is not too bothered by the events that he's describing. However, it should be noted that the first line of the song actually opens a critical distance separating the speaker from the sentiment expressed in the title, through the fact that the line 'Belsen was a Gas' is a reported statement. There is a distinction between the speaker of the song on the one hand, and its title and the person whose speech is being reported on the other. And much as the sentence 'Belsen was a gas' is something the speaker has heard from a third party, the equally ironic line 'life is fun and I wish you were here' explicitly refers to words written on the postcards sent by the Jews to their families, referencing the historical fact that for the purposes of Nazi propaganda, concentration camp prisoners *were* compelled to write letters that portrayed their conditions in an unfeasibly favourable light. The song seems to satirise the acceptance of these falsehoods by Jewish families who were only too ready to believe that conditions in the camp were not as bad as they had heard. It is unclear whether the speaker understands or condones the element of coercion; it is equally unclear whether it is the cruelty of the Nazis that the caustic humour of the song exposes to ridicule, or the victimhood of the Jews.

This song is high-risk, employing deliberate and potentially offensive ambiguities in the representation of charged subject matter; much therefore rests on the tone taken in performance. Numerous different versions of the song exist, but a studio version by the definitive Sex Pistols lineup, with Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious, was never recorded for commercial release. The retrospective compilation *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* includes a studio version with escaped train-robber Ronnie Biggs on vocals, recorded in Brazil during the brief, inglorious period when the band remained together following Rotten's departure.



I'll just play you an extract to give you a flavour of this version – the lyrics you'll hear are slightly different.

**[CD 1: 'Einmal Belsen War Wirflich Bortrefflich (Belsen Vos a Gassa)']**

In this version extra verses were added, including the clumsy quartet, 'Dentists searched their teeth for gold/ Frisk the Jews for banknotes fold/ When they found out what they got/ Line them up and shoot the lot'. Biggs's version has been serially re-titled on subsequent re-releases, 'Einmal Belsen War Wirflich Bortrefflich (Belsen Vos a Gassa)' being fairly representative of the way that each new title revelled in bad taste and bad German and tended to express sentiments along the lines of 'Once Belsen was Really Brilliant', just in case anyone had failed to understand the original pun. The Biggs version bears out Richard Hell's idea that the whole thrust of The Sex Pistols and British punk was 'to be as shocking and obnoxious and moronic as you possibly could'.<sup>18</sup> This impression is almost inadvertently exaggerated by Biggs's affected vocals, the risible cockney sing-along style of the 'oh dear' chorus that's more football chant than punk anthem, and a saxophone solo that is in itself quite offensive.

However, the Biggs version on *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* is preceded by this live version performed by the band at the Winterland venue in San Francisco in January 1978, in which Johnny Rotten's vocal suggests self-disgust rather than glib self-satisfaction.

**[CD 2: 'Belsen Was a Gas' – 2.10]**

In this live version, Rotten enunciates the words clearly; but as the song draws to an end he stops singing and gives a sarcastic, demonic laugh that transforms into a horrific choking sound, before launching into a manic riff on the phrases ‘be a man, kill someone, kill yourself’. Greil Marcus writes of the night at Winterland, ‘he seemed near to coming loose from his own skin’.<sup>19</sup> The song closes abruptly with a final repetition of the line ‘kill yourself’, which never appears in the Biggs version. Marcus notes that at this point ‘he seemed not to know what he was saying’; but the power of the final lines, at least to anyone listening to the recorded version of the live performance, lies in the very possibility that he does.<sup>20</sup> The final line might be directed at the Jews, in the same way that the earlier line ‘guess its dead, guess its glad’ conceives of death in the camps as a relief from suffering. But this latter line clearly expresses a Nazi point of view, through the objectification of a human being into an inhuman ‘it’, and Rotten’s ‘kill yourself’ line could be considered an attack on this casually self-exculpating Nazi point of view. Taking issue with the homicidal bravado of the Nazis, Rotten’s sentiment seems to be: if killing makes you such a man, then be a real man and kill yourself. It could even be read as a targeted swipe at the songwriter playing bass alongside him. And in a way this performance was a kind of band suicide, instigated by Rotten, who during the encore went on to announce that ‘this is no fun’, stopping at one point when his voice broke down and commenting, ‘Oh bollocks, why should I carry on?’<sup>21</sup> He clearly couldn’t find a satisfactory answer to this question and left the band shortly afterwards. The Sex Pistols wouldn’t play live again for nearly twenty years and the 14 January 1978 San Francisco Winterland concert was the last time the band performed with their iconic bassist and occasional lyricist Sid Vicious.

Perhaps as a result of exposure to the Pathe footage, the band had previously referred directly to Belsen in another song, ‘Holidays in the Sun’, whose lyrics were written this time by

Johnny Rotten. This was the opening track on the landmark album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols* (1977) and the band's last proper single.

**[CD 3: 'Holidays in the Sun' – 3.20**

**PowerPoint 5: 'Holidays in the Sun' lyrics]**

The song begins with the sound of boots marching, the pounding of Paul Cook's bass drum and Rotten declaiming a Situationist slogan, 'a cheap holiday in other people's misery', that forms an aptly literate introduction to the song's critique of forms of historical and political engagement that constitute little more than tourism. The opening lines take up this theme:

I don't wanna holiday in the sun  
I wanna go to the new Belsen  
I wanna see some history  
'Cause now I got a reasonable economy.

Here The Sex Pistols pick up on the very contemporary concern with the exploitation of genocide through what has become known as the Holocaust industry, where renovated camps, museums, films and the media transform historical atrocity into a spectacle served up to affluent westerners as a form of entertainment.

**[PowerPoint 6: 'Holidays in the Sun' single artwork]**

The attack on the value systems and lifestyles of the British middle classes was also captured on the record sleeve for the single. The cover reproduces a travel club comic strip depicting

tourists on a Mediterranean beach and you can see the way that the lyrics are here expressed as a cartoon dialogue. In a similar vein, the back of the sleeve showed a domestic mealtime scene annotated with sarcastic captions – ‘nice furniture’, ‘nice food’, ‘nice young lady’. The opening lines implicitly insert Belsen into this domestic tableau, reducing history to a modern lifestyle choice.

### **[PowerPoint 5: ‘Holidays in the Sun’ lyrics]**

In ‘Holidays in the Sun’ the reference to Belsen does not seem glib, as it was in ‘Belsen Was a Gas’. The whole purpose of the reference to the ‘new Belsen’ is to underline the utter seriousness of the song’s anxiety over the Cold War conflict between East and West, which is described as a Third World War and is sited specifically in Berlin, where the song was written in 1977 at a point when the band was seeking an escape from the tabloid frenzy that had built up around them in the UK. The city was already becoming a second home for punk and glam musicians. Attracted by the idea of a decadent European capital and the kind of lifestyle described by Christopher Isherwood in *Berlin Stories*, Iggy Pop and David Bowie spent a notorious period living there from 1976 to 1977. In ‘Holidays in the Sun’, however, it is the political and historical significance of the city, its wall and its centrality to the major conflicts of the twentieth century, that obsess Rotten in a first person narrative that is extremely cartoonish (echoing the record sleeve artwork), with the singer trying to get under and over the Berlin Wall, which is at first referenced without any real context in the lyrics. After declaring ‘now I gotta reason, now I gotta reason to be waiting,’ the phrase ‘the Berlin Wall’ is presented in and of itself: a concrete, self-contained fact, appropriately stretched out by Rotten’s vocal. Yet the song’s initial coherence and self-assurance soon erodes, and the chorus’s confident refrain of ‘now I got a reason, now I got a reason’ (with a backing chant of

‘reason, reason’) is challenged by a situation that becomes increasingly bewildering. Rotten’s delivery becomes frantic and at times unintelligible as the song reaches a climax and the conviction that inspired the lyric disintegrates, ‘now I gotta reason, it’s no real reason’. What prompts what the song terms ‘too much paranoia’ is an obscure ‘communist call’ that does not relate so much to the Cold War clash of opposing political ideologies or even the nuclear threat, as to the prospect of armies directly facing each other off in a major European capital, the sound of marching boots and the spectre of concentration camps. This paranoia seems to grow out of a vision of the past, not the future.

With reference to this song, Greil Marcus has written:

There was a black hole at the heart of the Sex Pistols’ music, a willful [*sic*] lust for the destruction of values that no one could be comfortable with, and that was why, from the start, Johnny Rotten was perhaps the only truly terrifying singer rock ‘n’ roll has known. But the terror had a new cast at the end: certainly no one has yet seen all the way to the bottom of ‘Holidays in the Sun,’ and probably no one ever will.<sup>22</sup>

In describing Rotten’s quasi-Nietzschean attack on all values, Marcus deploys the kind of vocabulary often associated with Holocaust piety. Much as the Holocaust is often described as an abyss whose true dimensions are unknown and unknowable, Marcus describes ‘Holidays in the Sun’ as possessing unfathomable depths. In particular, the ‘black hole’ that sits at the heart of the music recalls Primo Levi’s frequent use of that phrase to describe the death camps which were, in his words, ‘meant for men, women, and children guilty only of being Jewish, where one got off the trains only in order to enter the gas chambers, from which no one ever came out alive’.<sup>23</sup> This parallel phraseology perhaps suggests that to

understand the depths of ‘Holidays in the Sun’ one must first understand the depths of the Holocaust. However, the spiralling negations that bring the song to an end (‘I don’t understand it, I don’t understand this bit at all’) mean that any excavation of positive meaning is resisted. As Marcus writes, with reference to Rotten, ‘when he looked into the void of the century, he found the void looking back’.<sup>24</sup> A song that begins with the spectacle of a ‘new Belsen’ being visited by eager and affluent consumers who ‘wanna see some history’ thus ends with intellectual uncertainty and the suggestion of psychological breakdown.

I now want to fast-forward nearly 20 years to see how punk’s approach to Holocaust representation reached a kind of culmination in the work of the Welsh band, Manic Street Preachers. This means bypassing Joy Division and other interesting post-punk bands from the late 1970s and early 1980s who generally dealt with the Holocaust in a more oblique fashion. But the more direct, referential style of Manic Street Preachers sits closer to my theme of ‘Holocaust impiety’.

### **[PowerPoint 7: Manic Street Preachers]**

Wearing spray-painted shirts bearing culture-trashing slogans such as ‘CONDEMNED TO ROCK ‘N’ ROLL’, ‘GENERATION TERRORIST’ and ‘SPECTATORS OF SUICIDE’, Manic Street Preachers were originally dismissed by many music writers as a kind of punk parody, with an 80s stadium rock sound heavily influenced by Guns N’ Roses doing little to add to their credibility. By the time that their third album, *The Holy Bible*, was released in 1994, however, the band had established themselves as a serious and critically-revered musical force. Now wearing balaclavas, army jackets and war medals, the punk parodists had recorded an album bearing the influence of key post-punk bands such as Public Image Ltd

and Joy Division, as well as gothic bands such as The Cure and Cranes. The album was almost encyclopaedic in its references to the major human catastrophes of the twentieth-century, ranging from Hiroshima to the Kennedy assassination and the Moors murders. Informed by Richey James's and Nicky Wire's extensive reading and the band's visits to Belsen and Dachau in 1993, the album also offered one of the most sustained and challenging treatments of the Holocaust in twentieth-century popular music.

Unlike earlier punk bands, who had frequently shielded their intelligence behind a mask of total idiocy, Manic Street Preachers had never been afraid to celebrate their literariness. The album artwork for their first three records was littered with quotations from wide and varied literary sources, including Confucius, Nietzsche, George Orwell and William Burroughs. The chorus alone of the first single from *The Holy Bible*, 'Faster', referenced Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, Sylvia Plath and Harold Pinter. Indeed *The Holy Bible* was advertised in the music press with a double page centre page spread that consisted simply of a reprint of all the song lyrics. There can have been few marketing campaigns for pop records that focussed so concertedly on the strength of the writing.

**[PowerPoint 8: *The Holy Bible* sleevenotes]**

On this slide you can see the way that these lyrics are presented in the sleevenotes. The distinctive mise-en-page, along with the layout of the songs, arranged in vertical columns, seems to resist the idea that they can be read as poetry. Rather than being set out in stanzas, each line is separated from the next by a dot. It even feels wrong to call it a 'line'; what we have here is a kind of anti-poetry, with dots separating units of meaning and urging us to resist any temptation to read rhythmic or syntactic continuity between them. In addition, in

the sleeve notes the lyrics are accompanied by a related image or photograph; and so for the Holocaust song, 'Mausoleum', a reproduction of a concentration camp blueprint is included. And for the song that I'm going to play now, 'The Intense Humming of Evil' a photograph of the main gates at Dachau bearing the 'Arbeit Macht Frei' slogan is embedded in the text.

**[CD 4: 'Intense Humming of Evil' – play for 3.10/6.00**

**PowerPoint 9: 'Intense Humming of Evil' lyrics]]**

Note: put up lyrics but starts with a sample from a film.

In an interview with *Melody Maker* the bassist Nicky Wire commented, 'Dachau is such an evil, quiet place. There's no grass, and you don't even see a worm, let alone any birds. All you can hear is this humming of nothing.'<sup>25</sup> In musical terms, 'The Intense Humming of Evil' has identifiable links to one of the band's key influences, Joy Division, through drum patterns that reference the song 'Atrocity Exhibition', a Spartan sonic landscape in which silence is a freighted counterpoint to sound, and also through its use of looped electronic hissing noises that are a genuinely chilling musical rendering of 'the humming of nothing'.

Opening with an excerpt from the 1947 Russian documentary *The Nuremberg Trials* playing over a discordant orchestral death march, the song is punctuated by bursts of industrial noise that recall the music writer Simon Price's description of *The Holy Bible* as 'compressed metal, the sound of tungsten under unendurable torque'.<sup>26</sup> This sample initially establishes a principled stance in support of the victims of historical injustice. It ends, 'Now the victims will judge the butchers. Today the tear of a child is the judge, the grief of a mother the prosecutor.' However, in the opening lines, the roaming second-person pronoun of the album, ever in search of a target for its next moralising invective, suddenly settles on these very



victims: ‘You were what you were clean cut, unbecoming · recreation for the masses· you always mistook fists for flowers’. If these lines are understood to imply a criticism of the naivety of the victims of Nazism, suggesting that the genocide was an event that not only the oppressors but also the *victims* should feel remorse about, then the chorus is a full-on assault on some of the central pieties of the Holocaust: namely, that suffering ennobled the victims, and that the historical memory of this suffering is inherently meaningful: ‘6 million screaming souls · maybe misery – maybe nothing at all· lives that wouldn’t have changed a thing · never counted – never mattered – never be’.

The caustic Holocaust impiety of these lines is to some degree tempered by elements of self-critique, especially in relation to the suggestion that Holocaust memory is worthless. Through the punning use of the phrase ‘never counted’ to describe individual lives which were reduced to numbers and which *were* counted on a daily basis during camp roll calls, and also through the insertion of the phrase ‘arbeit macht frei’ in the opening line of the second verse, the song warns against forgetting the deaths of six million people, suggesting that such an amnesia would be a Nazi trait. This dual perspective on the value of historical memory finds an analogue in the unfixed focalisation of the song. The narrator’s point of view shifts between that of the detached bystander (through the opening use of the pronoun ‘you’ to describe Holocaust victims), that of the Nazi (through ‘never counted – never mattered – never be · arbeit macht frei’) and also that of the victims themselves (with the pronoun shifting to the first person in the lines, ‘Hartheim castle breathes us in · in block 5 we worship malaria’).

If ‘The Intense Humming of Evil’ refuses to sanctify historical victimhood, it also refuses to sanctify itself or to elevate the significance of cultural representations of the genocide: the

central irony of the album is that there is nothing holy about *The Holy Bible*. The chorus, for example, can be read as an attack on the idea that the Holocaust can provide the foundation for aesthetic or artistic innovation, as it had done for punk, which found in the signs and symbols of Nazism a way of antagonising older generations and forging an identity which positioned the movement in opposition to the liberal niceties of the late 1960s and early 1970s. ‘The Intense Humming of Evil’, on the other hand, is an anti-lament, finding little value in traditional forms of artistic commemoration or even punk aggression, and it ends by focusing its spleen on itself, with its own refusal to sanction the usual Holocaust pieties being itself critiqued as a form of piety: ‘drink it away, every tear is false’. The self-abusive turn taken at the end of the song reflects a kind of battle emerging between events which destroyed lives and with them the possibility of meaning in life, and a creative process that is inherently generative of meaning. In this way, the song displays what Susan Gubar identifies in *Poetry after Auschwitz* as the ‘ironic friction between the lyric’s traditional investment in voicing subjectivity and a history that assaulted not only innumerable sovereign subjects but indeed the very idea of sovereign selfhoods’.<sup>27</sup>

Negation was the animating principle of punk, and so it makes a kind of sense that with Manic Street Preachers, we end up with the kind of negation that turns on itself and the negative forms of sense that negation creates: which is to say nihilism. Negation is defined by Greil Marcus as ‘the act that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems’.<sup>28</sup> Such an act clears the way for the production of new kinds of worldly meanings, even negative ones: for Marcus, The Sex Pistols in their early anarchistic period are the archetypal negationists. Nihilism, on the other hand, is more starkly, by Marcus’s definition, ‘the belief in nothing and the wish to become nothing: oblivion is its ruling passion’.<sup>29</sup> This is the point that The Sex Pistols arrived at with the Holocaust tracks that marked the end of the

band as both a live act and as recording artists: namely, the final live performance of 'Belsen Was a Gas' in San Francisco and the 'black hole' of the final single, 'Holidays in the Sun'. This impulse towards nihilistic oblivion also brought tragedy to the personal lives of the songwriters involved. Sid Vicious died of a heroin overdose a few months after The Sex Pistols recorded 'Belsen Was a Gas' and Richey Edwards went missing after Manic Street Preachers released *The Holy Bible* and is now presumed to have committed suicide.

In summary, punk was an historical phenomenon, and the impact of the Holocaust on punk was total: it influenced punk clothes, punk lyrics and punk band names. It was central to the punk world-view; but only in as much as it left these bands feeling like there was no positive meaning in the world - 'pretty vacant,' as The Sex Pistols put it. Delving deeper into punk's heart of darkness, the logical endpoint of this obsession with the Nazi genocide was the insurmountable nihilism of a song such as 'The Intense Humming of Evil' by Manic Street Preachers, in which the Holocaust stands as both the foundation and the negation of the kinds of meanings that punk had created. Divested of any redemptive or metaphysical significance, for punk, places like Auschwitz, Belsen and Dachau meant everything and nothing.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: the Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Stratton, 'Jews, punk and the Holocaust: from the Velvet Underground to the Ramones – the Jewish-American story', in *Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Volume 24/1, 2005), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> David Nolan, *I Swear I Was There: the Gig That Changed the World* (Church Stretton: Independent Music Press, 2006), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>8</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Please*, p. 296.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-98.

<sup>10</sup> Lester Bangs, 'The White Noise Supremacists' from the *Village Voice*, 1979, at <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/PoMoSeminar/Readings/BangsWhite.pdf> (accessed 10 April 2008).

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- <sup>11</sup> David Nolan, *I Swear I Was There: the Gig That Changed the World* (Church Stretton: Independent Music Press, 2006), p. 134.
- <sup>12</sup> Steven Lee Beeber, *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006), p. xi.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>15</sup> Beeber, *Heebie-Jeebies*, p. 106.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>17</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), p. 116.
- <sup>18</sup> McNeil and McCain, *Plese*, p. 361.
- <sup>19</sup> Marcus, *Lipstick*, p. 121.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>21</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 460.
- <sup>22</sup> Marcus, *Lipstick*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>23</sup> Primo Levi, 'The Dispute Among German Historians' in *The Mirror Maker* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 165.
- <sup>24</sup> Marcus, *Lipstick*, p. 17.
- <sup>25</sup> *Melody Maker*, 27 August 1994.
- <sup>26</sup> Simon Price, *Everything (A Book About Manic Street Preachers)* (London: Virgin Books, 1999), p. 143.
- <sup>27</sup> Susan Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 12.
- <sup>28</sup> Marcus, *Lipstick*, p. 9.
- <sup>29</sup> Marcus, *Lipstick.*, p. 9. As Stratton observes, 'From this point of view, the political engagement of the Sex Pistols was possible because of their distance from the meaninglessness of nihilism.' Stratton, 'Punk', pp. 128-29.