

DISTINGUISHED RESIDENCY IN MUSIC THEORY

Détournement and the Moving Image: The Politics of Representation in Early Punk Videos



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Free and open to the public.

BIO

Karen Fournier is an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan, where she teaches classes in music theory, analysis, popular music and gender. She is the author of *The Words and Music of Alanis Morissette*, in which she explores the “angry young woman” phenomenon of the early 1990s. She is also completing a book on the participation of women in British punk and post-punk.

ABSTRACT

Early punk scholars like Dick Hebdige (1979) and Greil Marcus (1989) locate a conceptual framework for the subculture’s visual and poetic imagery in a subversive, Dada-inspired politics known as “situationism.” With its origins in the post-war French avant-garde, situationism challenged what its adherents viewed as the “spectacle” of modern culture, in which mass-media control over, and commodification of, cultural objects resulted in the social alienation and disparities experienced in modern life (Debord, 1967). A central tenet of situationism, “*détournement*,” has been particularly fruitful as a conceptual framework for punk scholars. Marcus, for example, defines the term as “a politics of subversive quotation” and explains that it involves “cutting the vocal chords of every empowered

speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated words and pictures diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up” (179). Examples abound in punk’s still imagery: the appropriation of the Royal Stewart tartan by working-class British punks or the frayed and safety-pinned Union Jack are two of many possible examples, the former of which “yanks” a token of the Monarchy through the looking-glass of class while the latter “blows up” the patriotism associated with the British flag and replaces it with an image of an Empire whose power is fraying in a post-colonial world. For female participants in the early punk subculture, *détournement* offered unique ways to critique social conventions associated with beauty and to resist traditionally-gendered roles. Linder Sterling’s collages, for example, juxtapose pornography against cut-outs of everyday items of domestic life, while photographs of female punks document a kind of anti-beauty carefully constructed from torn, mismatched clothing, smeared makeup, and garishly-dyed hair.

While *détournement* has been key to interpretations of the visual art and still imagery that emerged from the early days of the punk subculture, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which the moving image might similarly be interpreted in the context of punk. Part of this scholarly oversight might have to do with the comparative lack of examples of music videos in a subculture that resisted the intrusion of a music industry that might have facilitated this kind of visual practice in the early days of the music video. Further, the DIY nature of punk, itself, has meant that punk videos, when they exist, often seek to capture live performances from the perspective of an audience member (complete with hand-held camera effects and poor audio) instead of pairing the music with a visual narrative. Despite their association with mainstream popular music, however, videos that twin visual narratives with music do exist in punk, albeit in small numbers. Using this type of video as its point of departure, this essay will examine how embodied aspects of the moving image (such as ways of moving, interactions between characters, relationships between characters and their environments, reactions to elements of the plot, and so on) are *détourned* by punk artists in general, and by female punks in particular, as they seek to use the visual medium as social critique.

