ART INTO POP

Simon Frith and Howard Horne

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I wasn't one of what we called the Popular Kids – the cheerleaders and the football players. I used to hang around with the ugly people in the art room.

Chrissie Hynde

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1
ART AND POP

We began this book with a commonplace observation and a simple hypothesis. The observation was that a significant number of British pop musicians from the 1960s to the present were educated and first started performing in art schools. The hypothesis was that its art school connections explain the extraordinary international impact of British music since the Beatles. In musicological terms the history of post-war pop remains a history of Afro-American sounds. What British musicians have added is style, image, self-consciousness – an *attitude* to what commercial music could and should be. This attitude has been influential even when a particular British genre (like punk) didn't actually sell records.

Our aim, then, was to examine how and why art schools got implicated in British pop music and to assess the effects of their art school experience on British pop musicians. But even in the early stages of this research it became clear that to approach pop this way was to challenge two of the fundamental assumptions of contemporary cultural analysis.

First, virtually all general sociological accounts of capitalist societies assume a clear distinction between 'high' and 'mass' culture, between the bourgeois world of fine arts, academic music,

serious literature, etc., on the one hand, and the popular world of TV, the tabloid press, Radio 1 music, etc., on the other. Art schools cross these divisions in terms of both class and ideology; art school graduates are petit-bourgeois professionals who, as pop musicians, apply 'high art' skills and identities to a mass cultural form. To follow through what this means is to raise general questions about the high/mass cultural divide.

Second, our questions can only be answered by putting musicians themselves at the centre of the pop process. Embedded in the high/mass cultural distinction is the assumption that while high art meaning is derived from the artists themselves – from their intentions, experience and genius – mass cultural meaning lies in its function (to make money/to reproduce the social order). Recent linguistically based cultural theories, which have challenged the authority of high artists, have only thus confirmed the unimportance of pop producers – all that matters is the text; all that's needed to understand it is a rigorous textual reading. Mass cultural forms – advertisements, TV shows, Hollywood films, Top Ten records – are all subject to the same kind of literary critical analysis. This approach links Leavisites to poststructuralists, makes Barthes as dismissive of mass culture as any Scrutineer, and even when critics try to disentangle the 'productive forces' that structure a film or record they still read back from the text to its meaning.

The populist version of structuralism – semiotics for people who like pop music and read Biff postcards – finds the positive meaning of mass culture not in its making but in its use. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture*, for example, reclaims mass culture for art via the concept of style. Creativity, self-expression, protest come back into the picture – at the moment of consumption. Hebdige provides a suggestive account of how this works (and breaks out of the simple-minded subculture/working class equation of his Birmingham colleagues) but he retains the traditional art/commerce categories, with the artist-consumer (romantically symbolized by Genet) allowed brief moments of expressive defiance in the market place before being absorbed, once more, by mass fashion.[1] Under what conditions such gestures are possible, how consumers and producers relate in the manufacture of style remains unclear.

In the pop world itself, of course, musicians are taken very

seriously. The star system works by making them publicly responsible for their own sounds; the sales apparatus of the music press, radio and television depends on the star interview, on the myth of individual production, which is why critical theorists have always dismissed the stars' significance.[2] The only sociological theory to investigate performers at all is the interactionist approach developed in the USA by Howard Becker. Becker's pioneering studies of jazz musicians in the 1950s have been applied to pop music by several of his students but the most important book for our purposes is his own *Art Worlds*. (H. Stith Bennett's *On Becoming A Rock Musician*, for example, describes an entrepreneurial career model that doesn't fit the British 'revolt into style'.) Our concern is how, in art schools, a particular tension between creativity and commerce is confronted and how pop music works as a solution. Becker addresses this tension in a variety of art settings and, in particular, shows how the notion of 'art' itself is constructed and maintained in social practice, under what circumstances mass culture becomes 'art', art becomes mass culture. It is certainly arguable that high culture is itself simply now a mass cultural myth, a category created by specific state and market forces, specific middle-brow mass media – museums and exhibitions, poster and 'classic' book publishers, TV shows and radio programmes. Becker reveals, illuminatingly, just how much work goes into ensuring art's 'autonomy'.[3]

Postmodernism

The term 'art rock' still carries the resonance of a particular form of late 1960s/early 1970s album music, but as John Rockwell makes clear in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, the claim that underlay art rockers' experiments was that their compositions 'paralleled, imitated, or were inspired by other forms of "higher", more "serious" music.'[4] 'Art' here referred to a distinction within *musical* practices (and art rock was a genre whose proponents were, indeed, more likely to have had music than art education) whereas our concern is with the interplay of pop and fine art ideas, much more evident now than in the art rock period. The new generation of pop culture magazines, *The Face* and *Blitz* and *i-D*, fill the shelves of the Arts Council Book Shop in Long Acre as well as the racks of

provincial W.H. Smiths; they are consumer guides to the latest sounds and styles and places written in the language of art history; they embody in themselves the condition they constantly invoke – postmodernism, the collapse of high culture/low culture distinctions.

Postmodernism is a term that has been developed in a variety of different contexts – architecture, art history, literary criticism, French and German philosophies[5] – and refers, therefore, to a variety of practices and problems, but this sense of a breakdown between cultural categories is, as Jameson suggests, common to them all. The argument is that we live at a time when all cultural forms draw on the same resources, raid and make mock of each other's histories, are implicated in multi-media tie-ups (the pop video, the book of the film of the book, the image of the advertisement of the image). For most commentators the intermingling and confusion of forms means the final collapse of traditional (or, rather, in this context, modernist) cultural values, the reduction of art to the vacuous routines of mechanical production. Only among architects does there seem to be much cheerfulness about postmodernist irony and eclecticism, much confidence in the postmodern artefact.

Such a negative judgement (and we're dealing here with modernist critics of postmodern culture like Jameson rather than postmodern theorists as such, like Baudrillard) follows from the theorists' initial premise that postmodernist culture reflects a moment in the general development of capitalism rather than a progress within any particular cultural form (again architecture is a partial exception to this – postmodern buildings are explained by reference to the 'exhaustion' of modern styles). As Jameson puts it, postmodernism marks 'a new social and economic moment (or even system), which has variously been called media society, the "society of the spectacle" (Guy Debord), consumer society (or the "société de consommation"), the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Henri Lefebvre), or "postindustrial society" (Daniel Bell).'[6] Anderson is more specific:

> It was the Second World War . . . which cut off the vitality of modernism. After 1945, the old semi-aristocratic or agrarian order and its appurtenances was finished, in every country. Bourgeois democracy was finally universalised. With that, certain critical

> links with a pre-capitalist past were snapped. At the same time, Fordism arrived in force. Mass production and consumption transformed the West European economies along North American lines. There could no longer be the smallest doubt as to what kind of society this technology would consolidate: an oppressively stable, monolithically industrial, capitalist civilization was now in place.[7]

The historical moment of postmodernism is also the moment of the birth of rock culture, which is, like television (and unlike film), therefore implicated in many postmodern themes: the role of the multinational communications industry; the development of technologically based leisure activities; the integration of different media forms; the significance of imagery; the fusion of art theory and sales technique. Pop songs are the soundtrack of postmodern daily life, inescapable in lifts and airports, pubs and restaurants, streets and shopping centres and sports grounds. We can't, in turn, understand the post-war history of pop without reference to the impact of Jameson's 'new kind of society', described as 'new types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardisation; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture.'[8]

We'll return to this in chapter 3, but two general points follow. First, one purpose of this book is to show that critical approaches taken from fine art analysis (and resonant within postmodern theories) are more useful for making sense of popular culture than categories taken from literary criticism. The latter focus on the text when what we have to understand are the processes within which something becomes a text – processes of production and consumption.

Second, by focusing on a particular postmodern practice we want to criticize some of the assumptions of postmodern discourse itself. The recurring image used by critics is *flatness*. Dick Hebdige uses the metaphor particularly brilliantly in his tour-de-force analysis of *The Face*, 'a magazine which goes out of its way every month to blur the line between politics and parody and pastiche; the street, the stage,

the screen; between purity and danger; the mainstream and the "margins": to flatten out the world.' But this is a well established image. Anderson quotes Jameson's 1971 comment: 'Henceforth, in what we may call post-industrial capitalism, the products with which we are furnished are utterly without depth: their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy.' And Jameson has suggested, more recently, that:

> Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject; it can no longer look directly out of its real eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls.[9]

Even among the architectural writers postmodern style is defined by reference to its attention to surface details, and what's common to all these descriptions is a sense of value being ironed out. In aesthetic terms postmodern culture is essentially valueless, a fragmentary, immediate sensation which can have no grasp on experience. As Lyotard puts it:

> Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the 'taste' of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes', and the epoch is one of slackening. But this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it only remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield.[10]

Even those writers who in some respects celebrate postmodernism retain this sense of contemporary life as a passing show. Marshall Berman, for example, criticizes the 'visionaries of cultural despair' for their treatment of modern life as 'uniformly hollow, sterile, flat, "one dimensional", empty of human possiblities,' but his reading of 'the signs in the street' has its own form of detachment, as if Berman were marvelling at the richness of city life precisely because it does

seem to be produced by magic. The great theorists of this Marxist *flâneur* approach, Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, were, significantly, influenced by surrealism, by the suggestion of an unconscious reason, a repressed narrative at work in the play of passing images (a landscape brilliantly realized in the film *Bladerunner*). We remain, however entertained, with an image of a world beyond human control, deprived of any guiding or artistic consciousness, and while the critical task remains, in Benjamin's terms, to interpret such a reality as an illusion (not to duplicate illusion as real) the difficulties of doing so made him a melancholic (Lefebvre's spirits were revived by the Situationist International's *direct* subversion of the Spectacle in the 1960s).[11]

Flatness, once a style of painting associated with High Modernism (Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko), describes, in the postmodern art world, the collapse of all imagery into the two-dimensional message of the street hoarding. Here's a typical New York gallery story from the 1980s: 'City Arts Workshop and Adopt-a-Building sent artists to Avenue C to decorate a block-long stretch of abandoned buildings – all but one belonged to the city. People living in the neighbourhood requested that the murals depict the lively little capitalist ventures they didn't have and still don't: fake newsstand, grocery, laundromat, record store.' The city invests not in street enterprise itself, but in the illusion of street enterprise; art is no longer a critique of reality but a substitute.[12]

Put this interpretation of everyday life back into the equation of postmodern culture with the final triumph of multinational capital and you get the full-scale pessimism of contemporary art critics, whether mainstream like Robert Hughes – 'We are crammed like battery hens with stimuli, and what seems significant is not the quality or the meaning of the messages, but their excess' – or Marxist like Peter Fuller:

> We are surrounded by more visual images than appeared in any previous society in history: they comprise a torrential megavisual tradition (of which the Fine Art traditions constitute only the tiniest component) of TV, cinema, newsphotography, colour supplements, reproductions of all kinds, but, more especially, the giant bill-boards and road posters of commercial advertising. This

> great stream belches down upon us everywhere we go, every minute of the day.
>
> Sadly, this voluminous megavisual tradition attests to the unnerving health of international monopoly capitalism.[13]

This is to assume what's being asserted – the co-option of art by commerce, the superficial response of audiences, the inability of anyone (save a few, privileged critics) to grasp what is going on. But if our lives are increasingly dominated by images, by signs, then, as John A. Walker points out 'artists – being, as it were, specialists in representation – are in a unique position to call attention to these matters.'[14] Postmodern culture makes possible postmodern politics; their very involvement in the pop process gives artists new opportunities for cultural intervention. Jamie Reid, artist/designer in residence to the Sex Pistols (a sample of his graphics were bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum for £1,000 in 1980), wasn't simply advertising Pistols products in order to make money:

> It was very much to create images for the street, for newspapers, for TV, which said something complicated quite simply. I mean, you could take an image like the safety-pin through the Queen or the Anarchy flag, which to me were expressing the experiences I'd had throughout the previous sixteen years. And I was coming out of the period of alternative politics, remember that.[15]

From the artist's point of view, from the pop star's, there is always a problem of audience. Who is being addressed? What for? And the answers are not irrelevant to how postmodern culture works.

Consumption and class

If one strand of postmodern culture is art-as-commodity – the aesthetic experience has changed, in Robert Hughes' words, from pseudo-religion to pseudo-possession – the other is commodity-as-art, the unfolding role in commercial production of design (a key component, as we'll see, of the history of British art education). Warren Susman notes that:

> In 1934 The Museum of Modern Art (founded in 1929 and in a sense a product of the questions raised of culture in an industrial

'An image for the streets'

era) held an important show it called 'Machine Art'. Common household and industrial objects – stoves, toasters, kitchenware, chairs, vacuum cleaners, cash registers, laboratory equipment – were displayed as *works of art*.[16]

What follows from this is the merger of the visual (and avant-garde) rhetoric of art and advertising. Richard Hamilton's painting *Soft Pink Landscape*, for example, was derived from a series of colour supplement ads for Andrex toilet tissue. Later Hamilton wrote:

I was having lunch with friends in New York recently, with Bridget Riley sitting at my side. She teased me about my habitual plagiarism – even of her work. The plagiarism is self-confessed,