Misreading Punk

*The Year’s Work in the Punk Bookshelf or, Lusty Scripts*, Brian James Schill
(382pp, $35.00, Indiana University Press, 2017)

Schill’s expensive new paperback book is blurbed as ‘the story of the books punks read and why they read them’. Unfortunately, this is not true: it’s actually a book about an imaginary world where punks read these books and give meaning to their world through them, a cultural studies book where Schill reads punk through the lens of a selection of hip and cult authors that a few articulate punks – such as the members of Sonic Youth and Patti Smith – have mentioned and referenced.

The authors that Schill discusses are, of course, pretty much the expected list: William Burroughs, Genet, Baudelaire, Henry Miller, Kafka, Artaud and Nietzsche with the interesting addition of Philip K Dick and Dostoevsky. *Really?* I hear you ask, *Dostoevsky?* Oh yes, sprawling moralistic novels were on every punk’s bookshelf next to their philosophy section – didn’t you know? Burroughs’ books were definitely around in the alternative bookshops in London, Manchester and other cities, and stacked with the zines in Rough Trade and other hip record shops (even Virgin Records) in the 70s. But if the excesses of the disturbed theatre theoretician and extreme poet Artaud or the Superman theories of Nietzsche were known it was usually secondhand via the drug-fuelled ramblings of stars such as Bowie, or pretentious asides by rock hacks posing as cultural critics. (Although I also note that the very wonderful Doll By Doll used a photo of Artaud on their promotional material and LPs. In fact, the poster is on my study wall as I type.)

Schill's idea of punk is broad and various, but often at odds with a British notion of what might be considered punk. Although Patti Smith and Television were associated with punk and CGBGs, they are just as much associated with Coltrane-inspired guitar workouts and poetry performance as punk, as much with Blondie and Talking Heads as with the Ramones. I struggle even more with the notion that punk somehow extends to Nirvana, decades later ­– surely they are grunge? More associated with Pearl Jam than 1970s punk, however interesting their music and personalities might be. And much as I love the music made by Pere Ubu and Suicide, I find it difficult to detach them from the genres of art-rock and mutant rockabilly and move them into punk. Cabaret Voltaire likewise, who have more to do with electronic, electro and mutant cut-up funk than the wilfully naive sub heavy-metal thrash that punk started out as. Maybe postpunk isn't a term in use in America? It's certainly where I'd put many of the bands mentioned in this book.

It’s a shame really, as Schill occasionally offers the reader informative and perceptive criticism of some of the musicians under consideration. But he casts his punk net far and wide, even to the point of namechecking Billy Childish as though he were popular or important, a peculiar cross-Atlantic misreading of UK music, one which consistently occurs throughout the book. Schill offers a bewildering and peculiarly American take on punk, linking music and lyrics back to cult authors throughout. This is far too easy an exercise; it is also disingenuous and bad academic practice.

Because someone’s lyrics are about, for example, violence and so is someone else’s story, novel or poem, doesn’t mean there is any direct link or influence. Occasionally, of course, there is – some musicians clearly read and are articulate about inspiration and appropriation, but it doesn’t mean their audience or fans will go and research that source material! Schill claims to write about ‘punk’s literary and intellectual interests’ but I suspect that for most, in the UK at least – myself included, these were the *NME* and *Sounds*, gig posters and the back of record covers, perhaps some Crass handouts or booklets. This book is pretentious academic twaddle, a theoretical misreading of an important music movement that should be discussed on its own terms, in relation to its own product and culture, using only appropriate contextual material.

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