# World's End: Punk Films from London and New York, 1977–1984

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**Abstract**

This chapter discusses punk films set in London and New York from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Their chief characteristics are considered in relation to two areas of discussion. First, it addresses an idea of an endemic alienation that, unlike the alienation understood to determine previous periods of filmmaking about youthful rebels, may seem without the possibility of exit or alleviation. Punk versions of "no future" are contrasted with the optimism detected in films allied with disco. Second, it looks at an idea of liminal spaces, arising from uses and repurposings of semi-abandoned inner-city areas. An essential divergence in the possibilities of the punk lifestyle is identified and explored: that New York punk cinema more typically suggests the beginnings of a regeneration and cultural renaissance, while London punk cinema seems uniformly downbeat.

**Keywords**

punk, punk cinema, disco, Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Smithereens, Downtown 81, Times Square, Rude Boy, Jubilee

The film *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977) concludes with the protagonist, seemingly weary of the company of his friends (given over to gang violence and gang rape, and in the wake of the needless death of the youngest and most disorientated), finding a moment of peace in the apartment of his previously unenthused girlfriend. They have reconciled, a future together has begun, and "How Deep Is Your Love" by the Bee Gees—a major international chart hit of 1977—plays over the closing credits. The couple's connection was initially based

on shared disco-dancing abilities, and their get-togethers on the dance floor and in the dance studio have offered the opportunity of an escape for each. For Tony Manero (John Travolta), the escape is from his underpaid blue-collar job and suffocating family tensions—where his life at home, as a second-generation Italian immigrant, seems like stepping back into the old country for family meals, in sharp contrast to the grooming he devotes to his appearance, upstairs in his bedroom. Once outside, the very streets of New York seem to have been recast as a dance floor—via mobile shots of Travolta's feet, pacing with a cocksure swagger to the beat of the Bee Gees soundtrack. For Stephanie Mangano (Karen Lynn Gorney), the escape is from more obscure forms of patriarchal exploitation, enacted via her aspirations to a glamourous and independent life, which can be read as calibrated to an imagining of the nightclub Studio 54 (which opened in 1977), not least in her celebrity name-dropping and initial distaste for her uncultured suitor. The final shot of *Saturday Night Fever* frames the couple in her apartment: polished wooden floors, exposed brick walls, a healthy rubber plant, an acoustic guitar resting against a sofa, and a window ledge looking out across Manhattan—a much more desirable locale than the film's initial setting of Tony's Brooklyn (see Figure 1). In short, to return to "How Deep Is Your Love," the couple have realized that they were "living in a world of fools / breaking us down when they all should let us be / [since] we belong to you and me," and enshrine this shared sentiment in domestication. The New York of 1977 has tested them, and their success in meeting this test has allowed them to take a synchronized step forward, establishing themselves on an upwardly mobile trajectory.

**<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>**

An argument early in the film between Tony and his hardware store manager is telling in this respect. Tony's request for a pay advance to buy a new shirt he has spotted is declined, in part on the paternal grounds that he would spend his money before he had earned it. This prompts Tony to declare "fuck the future!," to which the manager counters, "No, Tony—you

can’t fuck the future: the future fucks you. It catches up with you and it fucks you if you ain’t planned for it.” But disco culture (and its competitions and glamour) has allowed Tony to dodge that which is suggested as his preordained fate—to step into this manager’s shoes—and so the shirt would have been deemed an enabling factor in this exit strategy.[1] And the imminent existential crisis of uncritically following paternal plans, or believing that a vocation is for life, is illustrated in the film’s subplot concerning Tony’s older brother. He suddenly returns home and, to the horror of his parents, announces that he has abandoned the priesthood. He is uncertain of his next move, is painfully uncomfortable when he visits a disco with Tony and, talking of a house shared with others also going through this transition, drives off in a battered station wagon (reminiscent of hippies setting out on trips of discovery in the late 1960s—the preferred solution of the generation prior to the disco generation), and then seems to vanish altogether. In choosing disco over hardware retail, Tony’s transition to a smarter part of town has begun. This is in stark contrast to the generally bleak position on working class aspirations in American cinema of the 1970s, across almost all New Hollywood (with Jack Nicholson in particular specializing in young characters more gifted than their allotted roles in life), and then into more populist films such as *Slap Shot* (Hill 1977) and *Stripes* (Reitman 1981). Such opportunity now seems a possibility, in *Saturday Night Fever*, for all such Tonys. And, crucially, this matter also seems to be New York’s opportunity too. That is, the interior decoration of Stephanie’s apartment is redolent of the domestication of New York—the semi-derelict lofts of the Lower East Side now remade into the kind of cramped but cozy city apartments that laid the foundations for the return to the inner cities of young professionals, and the reclamation and remaking of those formerly dangerous and squalid locations. And, with this repopulation, new patterns of life and work and socialization emerge. But this shift is one that is seen to be afforded to a white heterosexuality: the vibrancy of the multiculturalism and queerness of early disco scenes, as

recalled by Edmund White (1981) of these years, is erased in the film. From this vantage point, the television series *Friends* (1994–2004, set in Lower Manhattan) and *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012, set across Brooklyn and Manhattan) could be said to pick up where *Saturday Night Fever* ends, one generation beyond.

*Saturday Night Fever* was made in parallel with the rise of another music-focused youth culture of the late 1970s: punk rock. Indeed, *Saturday Night Fever* can be glimpsed on a cinema marquee in *Blank Generation* (Lommel 1980) as the punk protagonist (played by Richard Hell) leaves plusher uptown environs to travel to the punk club CBGB. *Times Square* (Moyle 1980) opens with a similarly direct contrast: a young female punk playing guitar (riffs and feedback) outside a disco club. But *Saturday Night Fever*'s optimism could not be more different from the types of lifestyle, and modes of living, that the films that looked to punk, rather than disco (and, indeed, the roller disco subgenre), explored. Whereas Tony travels into the metropolis and finds the allure and promise of disco, the waifs, runaways, and dreamers of punk cinema seem to find little there other than dense urban ruins. There is no immediate sign of a postindustrial remaking of the city: the wreckage of buildings—home (or squat) to the distressed, the drug-addled and their dealers, criminals, pimps and prostitutes, and the forgotten elderly, and with an ethnic diversity not evident "uptown"—suggests end times rather than exit. Domestication seems an impossible or entirely irrelevant condition for these transitory figures, who are mostly downwardly mobile, with only a favor or two keeping them from street homelessness, and with a penchant for occasional low-level criminal activities when deemed necessary. Yet punk culture of this time is recalled as redeeming this unenviable situation with moments of collective freedom, arising from the gatherings of those outside any domestic trajectory, and their giddy embrace this marginalized status. Lydia Lunch recalls the Bowery, Times Square, and the cultural scene around CBGB:

> Yes, we were angry, ugly, snotty, and loud . . . [yet b]eneath the scowls of derision, the antagonism and acrimony, and the nearly unbearable shrillness that was our soundtrack, we were howling with delight, laughing like lunatics in the madhouse that was New York City, thrilled to be rubbing up against the freaks and other outcasts, who somehow, for some unknowable reason, had all decided to run to land's end and all at once scream their bloody heads off. (Quoted in Moore and Coley 2008, 4)

The "we" and "all" indicates the punk packs that formed around such cultures, as coming together for gigs—that which Dick Hebdige referred to (almost religiously) as punk's "communion of spittle and mutual abuse" ([1979] 1981, 110)—and so constituting a wider scene. And the wreckage of the inner cities is layered into the subcultures presented. That is, unlike the derelict, waiting-for-demolition New York tower blocks that make such distinctive backdrops to films such as *Bye Bye Monkey* (Ferreri 1978) or *Wolfen* (Wadleigh 1981), punk cinema seems to place this wreckage as central to the punk scene. The protagonists live on and in the wreckage, in a precarious and unsettled, liminal state, from which new lifestyles are seen to grow. In the case of *Downtown 81* (Bertoglio 2000), which follows the young black artist Jean (also called Jean-Michel, and played by Jean-Michel Basquiat, then part of the graffiti group with the tag SAMO©), this wreckage makes for a condition of "the studio of the street" (as per Basquiat et al. 2007).[2] For the documentary *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage* (Kowalski 1981), the setting of grim, wind- and rain-swept London council estates seems to prompt the filmmaker to locate and dissect a control group of hopeless wannabes, in following the formation of the punk group Terry and the Idiots. In both cities, the working-class and sub-working-class districts evidence governmental fiscal crises and the resultant civic paralysis, and so the failure to arrest or turn around postindustrial decline—leaving the inhabitants to endure deteriorating conditions. In the case of New York City, this was the

bankruptcy of 1975. In the case of London, this was the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978–1979. And the solutions to these crises were to be found in the coming to power of the New Right: Ronald Reagan in 1981 and Margaret Thatcher in 1979, respectively.

## Punk and Alienation

In this context, *Saturday Night Fever*’s “fuck the future” seems a positively proactive choice—one could select this hedonistic option or alternatively remain financially prudent. The Sex Pistols’ famous outro to “God Save the Queen” bluntly restated, three times, the operative and alternative assumption of punks of 1977: that there is “no future / no future / no future for you.” And the post-apocalyptic feel of so many punk films at times suggested that the world had indeed ended and the future has been cancelled. The protagonist of *Smithereens* (Seidelman 1982) relates a dream along such lines, while struggling to keep warm under a blanket in a friend’s van, surrounded by prostitutes and nursing a bloodied nose—and a dream that lends the film its title: “The whole world had been blown up five years ago, and right to smithereens—and everyone is just floating around on parts [unintelligible] and they haven’t even realized what had happened yet.” Jean, in *Downtown 81*, says much the same thing, in voice-over, in introducing the setting of the film: “The Lower East Side looks like a war zone—like we dropped a bomb on ourselves.” Likewise, *Born in Flames* (Borden 1983) is set in a near-future dystopia, with militant feminist gangs waging a counterinsurgency. And the very title of Penelope Spheeris’s documentary on the LA punk scene at the turn of the decade, *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981), satirically suggests an Edward Gibbons–like *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This is more than a conceit for Spheeris; her documentary evidences as much, with a club owner’s concerns about audience moshing, pogoing, stage-invading, and flailing

violence, and characters in states of extreme anxiety (particularly Darby Crash of the Germs): an exploration of the terminal nature of a doomed youth culture or cult, fatally living up to its own mythology. For Bifo Berardi, this "no future" declaration was quite literal: 1977 is seen as "a turning point," where "the *utopian imagination* was slowly overturned, and has been replaced by the *dystopian imagination*" (Berardi 2011, 17; his italics), resulting in, as "[b]orn with punk, the slow cancellation of the future" (18). Critical theorists tend to characterize the onset of institutionalized neoliberalism, aligned to the ascendancy of the New Right, as the ending of a sense of future in the breaking with the postwar consensus of a meritocratic society offering opportunity for all—and they place popular culture, with punk as the year zero (where 0 = 1977), as the most sensitive barometer to this new era (see, for example, Fisher 2014, 2–29).

Punk film, then, could be said to be the attempted dramatization of the shift in imagination that Berardi identifies. Or, equally arrestingly, punk film can illustrate the failure or unwillingness to dramatize it.[3] Punk's do-it-yourself ethos, with no bars to the musically or artistically limited, combined with the way in which unregulated squats and lofts seem to have been remade as multimedia environments along the lines of Andy Warhol's Factory, suggest that any one of the figures on the make, drifting through these environments, could suddenly become the next big thing. In this way, a utopian aspiration or strain seems to take root in the dystopian imagination; a new future, in the beginnings of a cultural renaissance, is offered against the prospect of the world ending. So, for example, a film like *Blank Generation*, despite the artsy pretensions and presence of preeminent punk icon Richard Hell throughout, is tiresomely clichéd: a troubled romance between a diffident, zeitgeist-channeling musician at the heart of the New York punk scene and a model-like French television journalist enticed by his vulgar, proletarian vitality. The debris of the punk mise-en-scène—scuzzy backstage areas, messy crash-pad apartments—is rendered alluringly, via

pristine cinematography (see Figure 2). Similarly, *Times Square*, which follows two teenage girl runaways who form a punk band and amass a substantial following, could almost be a Disney film from the time (that is, from Disney's most disorientated period in terms of youth filmmaking), with its cross-class bonding, adventures in the big city, comedy parental confusion, and coming-of-age narrative.

**<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>**

Outward trappings of punk only carry an identification of "punk film" so far; many films have punk group performances in them, or actual or fictional punk figures in situ, or punk music featured on their soundtracks, but it would be limiting to uncritically assemble a canon of self-identifying punk cinema exclusively along these lines. A more satisfactory framing is via a stronger or deeper shared sensibility (or ethos or philosophy) between film and punk and post-punk music. Nicholas Rombes (2005, 3), in considering the influence of punk film on subsequent filmmaking, acknowledges such looseness of identification by opting for the term "tendency" in relation to a common aesthetic sensibility, rather than "movement." And "punk," at any rate, was a widely applied term: Tony and his friends are even referred to as "punks" (in the sense of disrespectful or disreputable youngsters) in *Saturday Night Fever*, and, more generally, the idea of the punk can be said to coalesce with the idea of the teenager in postwar American popular cinema. In its postmodern pastiche, *Rumble Fish* (Coppola 1983) seems to usher in rebel punks from a number of decades—with the Motorcycle Boy (Mickey Rourke), a detached, softly-spoken drifter given over to reading, seemingly the late 1970s representative, in contrast to the 1950s-style youth gangs given over to "rumbles" (fighting)—and so posits just such a continuum.

A characteristic element of that shared sensibility, between punk and punk film, is found in a pervasive sense of alienation. The restless and outspoken proto-punk protagonists of postwar teen cinema, and then of early New Hollywood films, almost invariably seemed to

kick back against parental or societal expectations of them, so that these rebel figures can be read as ciphers for a progressive critique of that society. Their fight is against the danger of alienation that they see as repressed or sedated by the slightly ridiculous utopian imagination that underwrites these expectations—as dramatized in the glum, noncommunicative young protagonist as first encountered in Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1968). This moment of active critique seems to have passed at the point of punk cinema: the protagonists are presented as victims—the critique has been ignored, the battle has been lost, and psychological and physical damage has resulted. Now alienation is the condition that seems endemic to urban life, from which there is no clear way out. The punk is one who seems terminally engulfed by alienation rather than spurred on to exorcise it or take flight from it. This results in turns to violence, as in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), or hard drug use, as in *Out of the Blue* (Dennis Hopper, 1980) and *Christiane F.* (Edel 1981), or an escape into the hedonism of new sexual subcultures, as in *Querelle* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982) and *Cruising* (Friedkin 1980, but also in the scenes documented by the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe (1978) and Nan Goldin (1985), or seemingly lost in psychosis, as in *Eraserhead* (Lynch 1977), *Breaking Glass* (Gibson 1980) or *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (Parker 1982).[4] Or, in an amalgamation of many of these ills, the hysteria of John Waters's films of the 1970s.

A film noted as important to the inception of the London punk culture, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976) was one in which alienation reached such a pitch that the world was partially presented through the cat-like eyes of a literal alien, played by David Bowie. This film screened at a cinema on the King's Road in summer 1976 (see du Noyer 1996; Savage 2001, xvi), and then regularly at the Scala Cinema (sometimes programmed with punk and post-punk screenings and live performances; Giles 2018, 65). The alien even belatedly swerves through a pop music phase, recording and releasing an album while in an

alcoholic daze. Bowie's otherworldly presence at this time, particularly in respect to the glacial and dissonant albums of his Berlin period, and his appearance as a performer in *Christiane F* or a subject in the documentary *Cracked Actor* (Yentob 1975), seem built on the sense of the individual alienated to a deranged extent—and with the resultant music understood as resonant with or a *cri de cœur* of that alienation. This was music, then, that spoke of the modern and impossible condition: a contemporary "outsider art," paranoid and hopeless, locked in its moment, lacking in causes, and presented as if it is the only honest response to the times. The alien's androgyny, anorexic body, pallor, and unnatural hair color, not to mention cognitive and physical abilities seen to be degraded by alcohol use, anticipate the punk template of figures such as Richard Hell, Johnny Rotten, and, in particular, Sid Vicious, as well as, a couple of years later, John Foxx and the young Robert Smith, of the Cure.

## Punk Spaces

A sense of new modes of existence arises from the ways in which the use and repurposing of vacant spaces, particularly inner-city spaces abandoned after deindustrialization, occurred. Such found spaces were not constructed or organized around a separation of the activities of living and working, creating and resting. The consequent state of "in-betweenness," for that strata given over to rejecting societal norms, radically undermines givens of social organization: of family units and divisions of labor, of the allocations of hours in the day, of what is living and what is working. Consequently, and evidencing punk's gender balance, female protagonists and female filmmakers have not been difficult to locate in terms of scoping this period of film history. Sheila Whiteley, in her history of women and popular music, speculates that a space for women was opened up by and for punk's "'do-it-yourself'

spontaneity and established individualism, discovery, change and outrage [since these were] crucial ingredients in style and image" (Whiteley 2000, 97). To this observation one could add that women also later centrally determined the ways in which this cultural moment has been remembered and tapped—a crucial mitigation in terms of the rockist and male impulses behind canon-forming in popular music history.[5] This resultant liminal existence (in the sense of being between thresholds) nudges forward the crossing of further boundaries, between classes and ethnic groups, music genres and their particular cultures, and even sexual "norms." In this respect, alienation seems to be, paradoxically, a liberating force: protagonists cannot be expected to be themselves, since their sense of self has been eroded, and so are prone to act out of character, becoming different people.

*Cruising* fills such freed spaces (semi-communal apartment blocks, nightclubs, public parks after dark) with a teeming sexual subculture, features punk music and leathers, and seems to suggest the social price of unpoliced liminal states, with serial killings apparently enabled in such "free for all" cultures and seemingly arising from the resultant promiscuous sexual practices. In *Jubilee* (Jarman 1978), the formation of new groups of militant and sexually unusual cells occurs in such liminal spaces. *Liquid Sky* (Tsukerman 1982) seems entirely preoccupied with exploring gender ambiguities and free sexual experimentation in those parts of New York (lofts, roofs, clubs) that seem invisible to that other teeming mass, the grey flows of commuters and businessmen (seen in sporadic cutaway shots): "Homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual . . ." observes one character, "whether or not I like someone doesn't depend on what kind of genitals they have." With such expanded horizons of possibility, and the precarity of existence in liminal zones, the punk film was not one geared up to happy (as with *Saturday Night Fever*) or even particularly neat endings, or even an ending per se. Outcomes cover the entire spectrum: the victims' corpses in *Cruising*, the fame and stardom and its downsides in *Breaking Glass* and *Desperate Teenage Lovedolls*

(Markey 1984), the protagonist of *Smithereens* seemingly winding up walking the streets as a prostitute, and Jean in *Downtown 81* finding his fortune. And while *D.O.A.* follows the most commented-upon group of that moment, the Sex Pistols, a "compare and contrast" element is added via no-hope pre-nascent punk group Terry and the Idiots, setting those who will tour North America and initiate a cultural watershed against those who will never leave their council estates. In just such liminal terms, there seems to be a fine balance between a dead-end existence with drifters in squatted lofts, as in *Permanent Vacation* (Jarmusch 1981), *Suburbia* (Spheeris 1984) or *Downtown 81*, and edgy loft parties overrun with models, generating the next wave of fashion, as in *Liquid Sky*, *Times Square*, or *Blank Generation*. This chapter will now turn to examples that struck such balances, examining the kinds of films that resulted, along with their differing readings and imaginings of the New York and London punk and post-punk scenes and cultures.

## New York Punk Films

The narrative of *Smithereens* (Seidelman 1982) is founded on liminality. The punky/New Wave protagonist Wren (Susan Berman) seems to know with certainty what she does not want from life—which is glimpsed in the scenes in which she visits her older sister (hair in curlers, husband demanding food). But the alternative of a New York bohemian life, once she has positioned herself according to this aspiration, seems perilously close to homelessness. And her plans of becoming a scenester and angling for a groupie role by hanging out at the Peppermint Lounge come to nothing. Wren is locked out of her shared apartment, with months of back rent owing, and so is ejected into the city at night. She conspires to sleep in Eric's (Richard Hell) squatted commune/studio, in which unannounced interlopers suggest that these bare rooms might also function as a drug den. But mostly Wren walks the streets at

night, lugging shopping bags of her clothes, or sleeps on the subway, or in the back of the van of a young man she has encountered, whose road trip (or fleeing from home) seems to have stalled. She engages in petty crime and, evidencing a growing mastery of the city and its spaces (and egged on by Eric), pretends to pick up an eager "client" in a bar only to successfully shake him down in a taxi journey afterward. But this mastery, by the end of the film, also seals her fate—as she seems to street-walk for actual clients. In this way, no one location seems able to function as a home for Wren, and plans that determine her actions come unstuck, or hopes fade, and are replaced by her working to mitigate unwelcome contingencies.

**<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE>**

The dream that fails in *Smithereens* is that of Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame, supposedly allotted to everyone in the media age. For Wren, these fifteen minutes simply do not arrive, despite a vigorous self-mounted media campaign around the dissemination of her image: self-shot Polaroids, graffiti, photocopies of photos of herself with the slogan "who is this?," coupled with being seen in the right clubs and at the right concerts, and constantly striking a pose (accessorized with stolen sunglasses), as if she is the next Edie Sedgwick, only waiting to be talent-spotted and contracted into a life of hip glamour (see Figure 3). It is as if, in freely throwing images of herself around the city, some will eventually stick—as strategically mixed into, and so validated by, semi-official punk media (for example, a gig by Gina Harlow and the Cutthroats, at Max's Kansas City, is seen as advertised with straight graffiti). A similar campaign proves entirely successful for the sixteen-year-old girls of *Times Square*. One is middle class, and the daughter of the mayor's crusading commissioner to "clean up Times Square," and the other a punk, described as "angry" and a "delinquent," and seemingly from a dysfunctional background. They meet in the hospital to which they have been sent for observation, form an unlikely friendship, and abscond together. But feminism,

rather than a stand-offish individualism, here seems to be the fillip to fame and notoriety—along with the help of a Svengali-like (and, tellingly, English) New York disc jockey. The girls crash in a disused warehouse, describe their adventures as “our own renaissance” (working in a seedy strip club notwithstanding), initiate their media campaign (of throwing television sets off buildings), and form the Sleez Sisters for a live performance broadcast of polemical punk—effectively hijacking the airwaves.

An upbeat ending consists of impending fame for punk Nicky (Robin Johnson) after a crowded guerrilla gig atop a Times Square building, and Pam (Trini Alvarado) warming to the idea of returning to her respectable former life, allaying her parent’s fear of a Patty Hearst-like transformation of their “kidnapped” daughter. The critique of patriarchy and the opportunistic media has occurred; a new youth culture of inclusivity (and cross-class friendship), channeling the authentic experience of the New York streets, has been formed; and perhaps Times Square has been unwittingly regenerated in this.

An attempted cultural intervention into New York urban life also determines *Downtown 81*, via the need to leave an impression on the world. Jean says, in voice-over, “I could see the handwriting on the wall, and it was mine; I’ve made my mark on the world, and it’s made its mark on me.” The graffiti extends to societal critique (rather than self-promotion):

> Which institutions have the most political [. . .]
>
> a television
>
> b the church
>
> ~~c SAMO©~~
>
> d McDonalds.

Jean surveys his handiwork once he has also been ejected from his slum-like apartment for nonpayment of rent, whereupon he embarks on a homeless odyssey—a nightclub, groups

rehearsing, a strip club, a fashion show—with music (diegetic and extra-diegetic) shifting from jazz to rap to post-punk. But Jean, with spray can rather than easel, produces art constantly, with the streets serving as blank canvases. He is a walking reflector of, and offers continuous commentary on, the alienated urban condition. Jean assumes that the fifteen minutes are effectively already in operation, and the equivocation is merely whether his audience comprises hobos or hedge fund managers. So the fairytale fantasy that concludes the film does not seem, in the context of Basquiat's actual life at least, so far-fetched. Debbie Harry, of Blondie, is transformed from a homeless woman to the wand-wielded "Bag Lady Princess" once Jean has graciously kissed her, and leaves a suitcase of bank notes, with which Jean, exclaiming his catchphrase ("boom for real!") then absconds into the night, leaving these downtown environments. "Was I dreaming?" he asks. "No. Maybe I was just waking up—waking up to my own luck. Luck is where you find it." So a mise-en-scène of garbage and destitution is transmogrified into sudden wealth and escape—and, for Basquiat himself, street art into the most collectible of art pieces. This was to occur at the point of a boom in the international art market, for which a fresh credibility, or even "realness," was needed—as found in figures who seemed to channel authentic street art to uptown galleries, such as Basquiat and Keith Haring.

But Jean's company, and thus his positioning for finding luck, is cannier than Wren's. The punks of *Smithereens* listlessly note that the New York punk scene is over at the point of Wren's arrival, with Los Angeles as the new center—leaving the aspirant scenester without a scene, and hopelessly chasing after something that may not exist. In *Downtown 81*, figures such as Debbie Harry, Kid Creole, Fab 5 Freddy, and Kool Kyle indicate the emergence of a multicultural, multimedia pop art scene for the 1980s. And Jean, in their locale, is therefore positioned at the point of something that is about to exist. The resultant cultural and urban regeneration is so strange and rich, and future-oriented, that *Liquid Sky* places an unnoticed

visiting UFO in the midst of the post-punk melee. Here aliens are able to crash New York loft parties to “score” their equivalent of heroin, which is an orgasm-induced neurological chemical reaction—and with only a stiff academic interloper aware of this visitation (“aliens appearing in specific subcultures—punk circles”).

Even once the term “downtown” had been fully recovered, for the purposes of real estate vocabulary, some ghosts of punk seemed to remain, haunting the upwardly mobiles classes who then moved in on punk’s old stomping grounds. In *Copkiller* (Faenza 1983), John Lydon plays a character who occupies a spacious Central Park apartment owned by a violent renegade police officer, wages psychological warfare against him, and finally seems to drive him to suicide—as if a return of the repressed punk sensibility.[6] In *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), Seidelman’s next film after *Smithereens*, a bored suburban housewife is sucked into a street life picaresque once she encounters and follows the freer spirits who make New York’s public spaces their own, engendering an existential crisis that destabilizes her comfortable middle-class existence. And punks were often cast as class-boundary-crossing home invaders in innumerable exploitation and vigilante films from the time, as  for *The House on the Edge of the Park* (Deodato 1980), or the Dirty Harry or *Death Wish* cycles of films: violent, dispossessed, and returned to their former role as savage delinquents.

## London Punk Films

Hebdige ([1979] 1991) is precise in his dating of the emergence of punk as “a recognisable style,” with the “critical attention” (142) afforded to the Sex Pistols in part through their “sensational debut in the music press” (25). This was during the “strange apocalyptic summer” (25) of 1976, with the resultant “moral panic” around this rebarbative new culture following in September 1976 (142). But other voices from the time, perhaps more familiar

with the rougher parts of King's Road—such as the World's End council estate (a Victorian slum transformed by Brutalist architecture, awash with hard drugs across the 1970s, and in close proximity to Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's fetish boutique shop, SEX)—are less certain in terms of punk as the emergence of a style and a sound.[7] Musician Jah Wobble's (2009) recollections of the time are mostly given over to punks as a minor faction in internecine and bloody street warfare, caught between existing mobs of Teddy Boys, football hooligans, and the National Front.Lucy Toothpaste's ([1979] 1982, 296) recollection of the emergence of punk was, as part of the Rock Against Racism organization, functioning as a bulwark against the sexism and misogyny of the music industry (especially of the 1960s), as well as racial violence. And violence determines many London films of this time: some suggest a society on the brink of civil war (e.g., *Pressure* [Ové 1976], *Babylon* [Rosso 1980], *Made in Britain* [Clarke 1982], or *Breaking Glass*), or a postwar wasteland (e.g., *Jubilee*), or an authoritarian central government keen to exert ever great control over revolts in the abandoned slums (e.g., *D.O.A.*, *Pink Floyd: The Wall*). Council estates are presented as battlegrounds, and state institutions are seen to be in terminal decline, as in *Britannia Hospital* (Anderson 1982). All of this is bluntly counterpointed with the heritage and pomp of the Silver Jubilee celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II: two diametrically opposed visions—a United Kingdom versus a dis-United Fiefdom.

Political groupings in this mix are seen to be merely interested in gaining power—an anarchist reading that seems to have informed *Jubilee* in particular. Jarman had initially envisaged a film that radically broke with the social realism he read as synonymous with politically engaged cinema (see Walker 2002, 191) for a film called *H卐GH FA卐ION*, to be dedicated to "all those who secretly work against the tyranny of Marxists fascists trade unionists maoists capitalists socialists [*sic*] etc . . . who have conspired together to destroy the diversity and holiness of each life in the name of materialism" (quoted in Peake 1999, 246–

247). Such an anarchistic reading would have been apparent too in the unfinished Sex Pistols film *Who Killed Bambi?*, scripted by McLaren and Roger Ebert, with initial shooting begun under the direction of Russ Meyer in 1977.[8] Even a relatively commercially conventional film such as *Breaking Glass* follows the struggles of a poppy "new wave" group in the face of such tyranny: fascist punks, police aggression, music industry indifference to anything other than the escapist disco sent blaring across housing estates, record companies staffed by aging and predatory hippies, and a threadbare civil infrastructure immobilized by industrial action. Such embraces of a total critique seem in keeping with the entire orientation of the early years of punk: a fight against one unified establishment, mounted via visceral shock, which could be said to represent both a radical rejection of the establishment order (and its plans for the best of its youth), and a revealing of the actual degeneracy of these establishment-best youths, as evidenced in the rebarbative nature of the punk culture in which they participate.

Thus *The Punk Rock Movie* (Letts 1978) documented, on Super 8mm film, the new youth culture of punk performances and punk audiences at the Roxy Club in 1977—often from the middle of the action (shot from the audience's vantage point, along with shots of the audience)—and the results present a scene that challenges the viewer to find affinity. But the film does present the punk culture aligned to such a total critique. Nazi insignia decorates bondage gear, and intravenous heroin use and self-harm are seen at length—compared to which a performance by the minor punk band Eater, in which a severed pig's head is hacked with meat cleavers on the stage and the remains lobbed into the audience ("you ain't got no brains"), seems little more than shock-tactic theatricality. In the context of the ascendancy of right-wing militancy, and compared to the engagements with state oppression found in the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson or Misty in Roots, or activism such as the Black People's Day of Action organized by Darcus Howe in 1981, or even the film *Nighthawks* (Peck 1978),

concerning London's underground gay culture, punk, as documented by Letts, seemed little more than an inward-looking phase of (white) petit bourgeois nihilism. Indeed, the only police intervention seen in *The Punk Rock Movie* is around complaints about the "offensive" window display in SEX. This punk-as-shock, or punk as given over to rebarbative excess as an end in itself, may seem to be, for *The Punk Rock Movie*, a reading founded on an encounter of the white quarter of punk, in the Roxy Club and its environs. Letts himself was a figure working at the wider intersections of punk and reggae during these years (see Letts and Nobakht, 2008), where these seemingly disparate genres of music, and their followers, found elements of common, progressive ground. Julien Temple's *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980) could be said to deal entirely with shock tactics too, as a canny strategy of cashing-in on the bewilderment of record companies in the late 1970s, and punk is considered entirely in this respect by the manager of the Sex Pistols throughout the film. Temple extends the shock-tactics approach to the film itself, by staging both softcore pornography (with glamour actress Mary Millington simulating public sex at length) and pedophilic pornography (a nude and seemingly underaged girl filmed, and positioned, in a sexually objectifying way—for Sex Pistol Steve Jones, who acted in the film, "that noncey scene"; Jones and Thompson, 2017, 209).

For *Rude Boy* (Hazan and Mingay 1980), ideological battle lines are established through the graffiti and posters that cover the public spaces of the young protagonist's Brixton council estate (seemingly from the National Front, skinheads, the Anti-Nazi League, and a number of campaigning socialist parties), as well as the protests, marches, lines of riot police, hurled bricks, and burning cars he sees as he travels to his job. But Ray's (Ray Gange) job—minding the cash register, in a desultory way, of an unheated late-night Soho sex shop—does not suggest the need to radicalize and rally the everyman at such a divisive time. Ray is presented as politically confused: idolizing the Clash (which, when seen for the first time,

includes Joe Strummer in a Red Army Faction T-shirt), sporting a Bob Marley T-shirt himself, on the receiving end of police hassle, and yet agreeing with his skinhead friend's rants against "left-wing wankers" and reveling in an anti-intellectual bent. The politics of punk (and reggae) culture seem not to be understood. Ray's proletarian odyssey, which comes across like the vicarious plot of a Richard Allen skinhead novel for the New English Library (a night in prison after giving a policeman some lip, snooker in a youth club, dealing with requests for "harder" pornography in Soho, sweaty punk gigs, popping pills and stealing booze, being fellated in the toilets of a nightclub, hitching lifts from lorry drivers by the side of motorways, and fellow roadies roaming around in their underwear in cheap hotels), suggests no quarter for a developing political consciousness.[9] The concerts by the Clash seem to work as a crucible of social tensions, with the band channeling the alienation of their fans into their energetic screeds against the establishment, which form the basis of a collective experience for those in the venue. But the audience members are beaten by the bouncers, and the band members repeatedly arrested by the police, and seem unable to connect with Ray (and, by extension, those he represents). Freedoms, as associated with liminal spaces, seem in very short supply: all the characters seem propelled from one dire environment to another, constantly searching for food and cadging drinks, washing their clothes in makeshift ways, dodging the police or lugging their belongings with them. Despite their commitment and raw power, then, the Clash gain no ideological traction, and all the while the Conservative Party moves closer to power—from the glimpsed Saatchi and Saatchi election poster "Labour isn't working" to, in the closing seconds of the film, Thatcher entering office as prime minister in May 1979.

*Babylon* (Rosso 1980), which, with reggae rather than punk, Brixton rather than Soho, and Jah Shaka rather than the Clash, can be read as a Rastafarian *Rude Boy*, and is more exacting in respect to the overwhelming challenges to forming proletarian consciousness.

National Front and police violence (and constant aggressive racism from white working-class Londoners) against the "immigrants" seems to drive some in the Jamaican community to conservative religious groupings, some to retreat into newly formed family units (as with Ové's *Pressure*), and others to random violence. The key figure in respect to the nascent multiculturalism of *Babylon* (a cultural inclusivity that capitalizes on liminal spaces)—the porkpie-hat-wearing former skinhead Ronnie (Karl Howman), who hangs out with his Jamaican friends in their lock-up, and shares their recreational drugs and sound systems—is eventually tagged as an unwelcome emissary of the white world, despite his impassioned protestations, and assaulted accordingly (see Figure 4). Thus, resistance is assembled along ethnic rather than class lines, indicating a successful dividing and conquering of members of those strata who may otherwise have helped mount a collective cultural front—even "Punky Reggae Party" of opposition, to recall Bob Marley's 1977 single

**<COMP: INSERT FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE>**

# Conclusion

An essential difference that emerges between the New York and London punk films is one of the reading of the punk lifestyle. At its most optimistic then, in New York, this reading anticipates new forms of bohemianism and creativity, and a culture (and cultural industry) reborn from the wreckage. Even though there are many losers, the films tend to prefer the winners (the Jeans over the Wrens)—the new cultural scene requires, and so generates, individuals' success stories. In London, however, this existence is swept into an ideological battle between more extreme political formations: the coming Tory neoliberalism of Margaret Thatcher, and right-wing militants (particularly the National Front) versus—and in a literal sense, in the rioting on the streets—various socialist formations. In this respect, the cameo of

Warhol in *Blank Generation* (talking about the films of Jean-Luc Godard) can be appropriately contrasted with, in *Rude Boy*, the "cameo" of Thatcher herself (at a party conference, vowing to eradicate the youth crime endangering wealth creation). Both these figures are correctly identified by the filmmakers as pointing to emergent cultures of the 1980s.

For New York punks on screen, alienation is an access to a liminal picaresque, freeing the individual from the pull of parental and societal expectations—for better (as in *Downtown 81*) or for worse (as in *Smithereens*). For London punks on screen, alienation immobilizes and disorients those who once could have been expected to form a cultural opposition, and in grimy liminal spaces more reminiscent of the flophouses of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) than the sweep and adventure of Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). In both of these social contexts, disco seems to offer a tempting circumnavigation of all these issues: seduction over sedition, hedonism over alienation, domestication over squatting, and, with disco's entry into the mainstream, new uptown fashion hot spots over the dangers awaiting downtown.

If the year 1977 can be taken as Berardi's "turning point," then the years of punk across this can be read as a riotous interregnum: a culture after the failing of the old order but before the re-establishment of law and order on the cusp of the new decade. Around this interregnum, New York punk film seems to chart the ending of one world and the beginnings of another (with elements of post-punk, new wave, and hip-hop already surfacing). London punk film, which seems to chart the end of the world altogether, necessarily lacks such optimism.

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Figure 1. From disco ubiquity to urban domesticity: the slum spaces of New York City are reappointed as snug apartments for the upwardly mobile, anticipating the inner-city regeneration of the 1980s, and the communalism of *Friends*, in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

Figure 2. The punk aesthetic as invigorated via osmosis: downtown environments for edgy performers, as with Richard Hell in the inferno of New York: Open City, in *Blank Generation* ( 1980).

Figure 3. D.I.Y. Warhol: the crash pad as factory for image generation—but self-promotion via proto-selfies, for a runaway Edie Sedgwick wannabe, only results in the hard lessons of "no future" rather than any mythical fifteen minutes of fame, in *Smithereens* (1982).

Figure 4. Ghetto of the city: the foundations of a fledgling multicultural front, uniting Rastafarians and a former skinhead through a love of dub vibrations, cannot withstand the violence of the political vibrations emanating from the London of the New Right, in *Babylon* (1980).

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[1] In this respect, the film reads disco as much more than a fad or evening pastime; disco represents a new lifestyle altogether, presenting opportunities for romance and betterment for its initial enthusiasts. Recent scholarship on disco has argued for the genre as a radical continuum of utopian dissent, extending the countercultures of the 1960s through queer and gay cultures and communities of the 1970s (and on into AIDS activism in the 1980s; see Crimp 2016), and emergent drag cultures and non-heteronormative performance (see Hilderbrand 2014), and also anticipating, in the idea of massed dancing bodies communing with the machine music of synthesizers and drum machines, radical currents in electronic dance music (see Halligan 2016). Disco is no longer, then, "a five letter word that can't be uttered in polite company; no longer the guilty pleasure hidden in the closet," as Peter Shapiro (2007, 276) puts it. But all such readings note the degeneration of disco, from its early years as associated with gay nightclub scenes to its commercial zenith, with a disco floor in every mid-range hotel. See also Lawrence 2004, 2016.

[2] The film, originally called *New York Beat Movie*, was shot in 1980–1981, and edited and first released in 2000, with the lost dialogue soundtrack recreated. On the setting of *Wolfen* in respect to its particular moment, see Toscano and Kinkle 2015, 108–136.

[3] Despite some overlaps with the films under examination, this chapter will not consider the loose No Wave film movement, which was associated with No Wave music—that quarter of purist punk that was antagonistic to their sold-out punk contemporaries (in the sense of having signed with major record companies, as was the case with the Sex Pistols; on this position, see Moore and Coley 2008, 116). On No Wave filmmaking, see Goddard (2013, 115–130). While many of the No Wave films were taken as artifacts of the punk sensibility of the time or communiqués from the punk underground, my concerns is more with films that sought to reflect rather than extend this scene, from the moment of this scene.

[4] Cultural connections between leathersex subcultures and punk—which shared close sartorial concerns, and the coming together of a number of men in semi-public spaces for collective physical exertions—remain unexplored. Strains of gay pornography from North America in the 1970s could therefore be read as punk cinema—including the work of Fred Halsted, such as *Nighthawk in Leather* (1982), and the blending of the enacted threat of violence from leathermen with the promise of rough sex (see Halligan and Wilson 2015).

[5] This has occurred through, for example, Nirvana working with and reviving the Raincoats—which seems to have been a crucial element to Kurt Cobain's feminism (on this, see Raphael 1996, 98–113)—or Raincoat Gina Birch's importation of punk aesthetics and sensibility into the music videos she subsequently directed, particularly for the Libertines, and the same with Vivienne Westwood's fashion designs, to the present, and those exemplifying her influence, such as Alexander McQueen. Or through autobiographical writing reclaiming the era from a female perspective, as with Lydia Lunch ([1997] 2007), Alice Bag (2011) and Viv Albertine (2014), who writes about her time with the Slits with a sense of sisterly mentorship and support, and a sexual liberation that was not beholden to desire (164, 113–116, for example, respectively). If I bring these specific and indicative examples to attention here, it is in part from a feeling that some of the women discussed in terms of punk films still teeter on the edge of uncritically assuming old roles: for the food preparation seen in *The Decline of Western Civilization*, in the romantic fickleness of *Breaking Glass*, in the sexualized models of *Liquid Sky*, and as a vision of beauty and salvation in *Downtown 81* and *Rumble Fish*—

and to which could also be added Richard Hell's posses of female followers in two of the films discussed in this chapter.

[6] The film is also known as *Corrupt* and *Order of Death*. On its reworking of the seminal 1960s countercultural film *Performance* (Roeg and Cammell 1970), with Lydon in the Mick Jagger role, see Prothero (1999, 62) who also considers the way in which *Copkiller* uses Lydon's Johnny Rotten persona for its dramatic conceits: Is Lydon's presence "really" that of "the homicidal anarchist he claims, or merely a whining, over-indulged poseur? In other words, much the same question that hung over Lydon's head through the Sex Pistols period and beyond."

[7] In one of its several redesigns, SEX would later reopen under the name World's End.

[8] For the script, see Ebert 2010.

[9] Allen's actual novel on punk, *Punk Rock* (1977), in part centered on "aggro" on the King's Road, conspiratorially cast the entire culture as a sophisticated attempt by the media establishment to fleece the young.