Punk style in British graphic design of the 70-s of XX century

Danylenko Lesya*

Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Kharkiv, Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

In this article the phenomenon of punk style has been reviewed. The task is given to consider the punk style as a cultural phenomenon in art and design, its roots and characteristic visual features and its value for worldwide graphic design language. Punk style was an alternative response to the modernist approach in graphic design in UK, style that originated in the 1970s in London and quickly spread throughout the country and reached other European countries and USA. The basis of its ideology was a youth protest against the established rules and regulations both in design, art and behaviour. Proponents of punk were both professional designers, frustrated by modernism and amateurs who wanted to express their creativity through disagreement with the existing regime or to approach to art. Punk style opposed itself to complex and costly technology implementation, and this led to a graphical language of punk, it became a source of creative energy for artists and designers. The practical realization of the idea of general creative availability was based on the use of rough collage, black and white photo, letters messy cut out with scissors and sometimes slightly tinted, screen printing without sophisticated printing process, scribble amateur fonts written by a thick marker. Denying technical virtuosity in music and design, punk removed gulf between the band and the fans. Punk movement in graphic design is most clearly evident in the design of flyers, posters, flyers for musical bands, fan music magazines called fanzines. In addition, despite the fact that this style hadn’t a clear political program, and mostly remained politically neutral, punk graphic language was the basis for striking posters of political orientation. Punk has enormously influenced worldwide graphic language — thanks to punk in the 1970s the foundation of graphic language of postmodernism has been laid. Nevertheless, punk’s short (this style existed for only several years) spontaneous explosion of punk anti-government creativity continues to inspire designers and musicians till today.

1. Introduction

In the 1970s, Punk style was a reflection of the new outlook of young people in design that originated in the late 1960s in the UK and the USA and reached its peak in the second half of 1970s. It started its development as young London street style.
development as young London street style. During few years Punk has spread all over the UK, spread on
clothing, hairstyles, music, environment and objects of graphic design, that has become a way of life. Punk
was also a popular youth movement of the 1970s in Europe and significantly influenced the graphic design
of other leading design countries.

2. Analysis of recent research

B. Hillier in the book ‘The Style of the XX Century’ (Hiller B., 2004), while considering style development
of different design areas in the world, also touched the British graphic design of the post-war period. The
researcher analyzed the socioeconomic and cultural conditions in which the Punk movement arose in the
UK, discovered its features. The history of origin, development and characteristics of the Punk style in
Britain were also investigated by S. Greeves and S. Ford (Flash L., 2010) in the articles to the exhibition
catalog of posters, record sleeves, flyers, collected by the artist and erstwhile punk, Toby Mott (London,
24 September - 30 November 2010). Features and ideology of Punk style were considered by E. Booth
Thus, despite the fact that Punk style was often considered in articles and books by foreign authors, at the
moment there is no study that would consider it in complex, that would find its genesis, characteristics and
its influence on the subsequent stylistic development of graphic design of United Kingdom.

3. Statement of research objectives

— is to identify the origins, characteristics of the punk style and its impact on the further development of
stylistic graphic design of the UK.

4. Results

Punk (from spoken engl. ‘punk’ — poor, nasty, scum) — anarchic style of behavior, clothes, music and
design. The phenomenon of Punk emerged in the 1970s on the streets of London. Rebellious and shocking,
Punk was a political and cultural phenomenon — a global youth movement, which relied on music, behavior,
language and youth protest as the main way of expression. This movement was an act break with the
past conformist, passive adoption of the existing order, a manifestation of bad taste, even vulgarity, often
accompanied by alcohol, drugs and violence

1970s were a period when Britain seemed weak and backward country. The lack of a coherent government
policy, continuous confrontation of Labour government and the Conservative Party of Margaret Thatcher
prevented recovery and sustainable development of the economy of the state in which the social and
economic stress caused by regular displays of the strike movement, power cuts, unemployment and inflation
against the backdrop of optimism of ‘swinging sixties’ caused a destructive mass dysthymia. This has
contributed to the destruction of what was taken in the youth culture and activation of the punk movement
as a result of the desire of young people to express themselves through their bodies, behavior, clothing,
music and art.

At that time, mass publication of punk magazines about music, culture, and style begun in the UK. Graphic language of these journals determined use of torn-out letters and ready-made images, cut out from popular newspapers, printed and handwritten inscriptions (mostly written by an ordinary marker), modeled and stuck together to produce an original for reproduction by lithography and photocopying (Pic. 1). Thanks to British magazine ‘Fanzine’ (from eng. ‘fan magazine’) all punk fan magazines of youth culture and rock bands in different directions received the title ‘fanzines’. In design of these magazines the punk ideology was shown by means of visual anarchy.

Just like in the clothes, Punk style first emerged as ‘anti-fashion’ that had characteristic features of uncertainty and formlessness, in graphic design it was an alternative response to the Modernist approach. Punk expressed protest against the established rules and regulations and found a ready response among designers disenchanted with Modernism. The visual aesthetics of Punk was as provocative and emotional, as well as music of this movement. The real revolution in graphic design was the use of contrasting images shot on city streets, with camera flash in dark clubs or being brightened by neon. Further, their quality had been deteriorated due to poor printing in one color (usually black) on cheap paper on top of colored spots. In ‘over-roasted’ punk pictures preference was given to messy handwritten inscriptions similar to graffiti. ‘In general, graphic solutions created the impression of speed of execution, as if there is no time to lose and bustle’ (Flash L., 2010).


Representatives of Dada, the anti-art movement declared that art could be made out of anything. Punk, the anti-rock movement was based on the conviction that anyone who could plunk bass guitar could be a member of the musical group or make music. Similarly, the objects of graphic design: flyers, posters, record sleeves could be created by anyone who had several newspapers, scissors, glue, markers and access to copy machines. ‘Punk was anti-design’, have confirmed researchers of graphic design language Edward Booth-Clibborn and Danielle Baroni (Booth-Clibborn E., Baroni D., 1980). ‘Torn’ graphics answered the ‘do it yourself’ principle and amateurism was not an obstacle. Collage didn’t demand professional skills and was aimed to express shock and black humor that were also quite characteristic to punk. It is no coincidence, that many of the examples of punk posters, covers and flyers that showed amateur graphic art remained anonymous.

In England, among the most original punk graphic designers was Colin Fulcher, who adopted the name Barney Bubbles. After apprenticeship as a design assistant, B. Bubbles began a successful independent professional activity (Pic. 2-4). The result of his collaboration with the record company ‘Chiswick Records’ and ‘Stiff Records’ is an impressively huge amount of posters for rock musicians, record sleeves and advertisements in music magazines.

Unlike his earlier works, when the master used a wide palette of graphical tools, combining elements of collage with drawn images and fonts, as is it was often done by designers of Modernism, later projects of B. Bubbles for record companies are the result of conscious selection of design tools and techniques. His symbol for the ‘Blockhead’ band (1977), the ideogram that perfectly reflected the aggressive musical style of the group (Pic. 3). Graphic works of Barney Bubbles were always based on the active use of letters, inscriptions, text blocks, creating an original design exclusively from the design elements.


In 1977 year book «Not Another Punk Book» was published by designer Terry Jones, which was ironic and highly professional parody on punk publications. There have been used graphic techniques and methods of Punk style in the book — torn pieces of newspaper and cut out pictures, inversions of fonts on colour dies and stamped inscriptions taken with marking machines (Pic. 5, 6). While the aesthetics of Punk was largely formed spontaneously during attempts of amateurs to express themselves, T. Jones' book was a bold design experiment based on original and conscious reading of the punk graphic language.

This publication, along with some underground magazines was a striking example of British graphic design of the 1970s. Another magazine among such magazines was a London weekly ‘Time Out’ (Pic. 7-8). Inside pages of this magazine were more disciplined versions of scandalous known magazine ‘OZ’ (Pic. 2), and covers were demonstrating all the technical possibilities of the time — computer arrangement; extremely enlarged photo and photocopies, distorted by displacement of paper; instant polaroid photo, underexposed or overexposed, scratched or painted etc.

Extremely varied in technique and artistic-imaginative means, they were based on drawn graphics, solely on means of font graphics (Pic. 7); on photo opportunities combined with collage and drawn images (Pic. 8). The magazine ‘Time Out’, as most publications of punk direction, was not related to politics and had an entertainment focus.
Despite the fact that Punk had not a clear political program and the vast majority of punks and punk bands were politically neutral, party representatives tried to increase its influence on the masses by attracting to their side the Punk movement. Both the right and successful left-wing parties joined and attracted punks to their affairs, focusing on issues such as unemployment and racial discrimination. From the right-wing parties, the National Front (NF) inspired a growing social tension turned towards racial issues. The most famous was the action ‘Rock Against Racism’, a powerful graphic ad which showed musicians’ mobilization against fascism. From the left — Pseudo-Marxism combined with a few supporters of radicalism of 1960s to follow progressive politics, unlike the failed Labour reformism.

Movement ‘Rock Against Racism’ wanted union of explosive energy of radical (left) politicians and musicians to create ‘emotional alternative’ to far-right nationalism. Graphic artists and graphic designers were the driving force behind this movement, one of which was the designer of the ‘Sunday Times’ magazine, David King. During the 1970-1980s years he created a series of posters of political description (Pic. 9, 10). Being limited by tiny budget and concise deadlines, D. King mastered rapid technology of implementation of posters. He often created parts of his works printed twice — ‘point-to-point’ to give an intense, hard impact. The choice of colors was not accidental — black and red flag was a symbol of anarchists who in many positions supported punks. Designer arranged and increased sans serif font in rough photo prints, with strips of black paper, sloppy cut out with a scalpel.
Policy played some role in the development of the Punk movement, but for punk political direction was not the main affair, more numerous achievements in graphic design Punk reflected into the printed output of musical direction. As a subculture built on rock music, Punk reflected itself in graphic solution of badges, stickers, posters and banners for bands, flyers, record sleeves etc. (Pic. 11). More than any other movement that have ever existed before or after, Punk was presented by a poster: music groups that were banned on daily television and radio, were fighting for the right to be heard.
Printed posters, instead became an effective and virtually free way to appeal to the public. Punk opposed to complex and costly production, and this was an additional source of creative energy for punk posters. It was peculiar for Punk to disown any ancestry and grossly violate the convention by its antisocial behavior. In the movement, which connected art school graduates and working youth were people who were aware of the place of Punk in the history of avant-garde, such as «Sex Pistols» designer, Jamie Reid. He created a poster based on portraits of Queen Elizabeth signed for the track of Sex Pistols group ‘God Save the Queen’ (Pic. 12).

As antisocial, nihilistic movement Punk lasted only for a few years. Groups that had not been self-destructed achieved commercial success, disregarding the real punks. But despite the nihilistic message «No Future», this short, spontaneous explosion of anti-government creation continues to inspire creative artists and musicians till today.

5. Conclusions

Punk style emerged in the 1970s on the streets of London and quickly spread throughout the country and reached other European countries and USA. This style reflected a new youth outlook in street style, clothing, hairstyles, environment facilities, approach to art and design. Punk style was an alternative response to the Modernist approach in graphic design. Like Dada, punk rejected any succession, positioning itself as a starting point, but these two currents shared desire for grossly violate their convention of antisocial behavior, aggressiveness and incompatible combination. Representatives of punk were both professional designers, that were frustrated by Modernism and amateurs (punk musicians) who wanted to express their creativity through disagreement with the existing political regime or to approach to the art. Anti-design approach of Punk manifested itself in the belief that anyone could create any object of graphic design, so called do-it-yourself direction. Representatives of Punk opposed to complex and costly technologies by using newspaper cut outs, thick cheap Xerox paper, scissors, ordinary markers and photocopy machines. They created their works by making rough collages with the use of black and white photo of low resolution, messy cut out letters by scissors that were sometimes slightly tinted, raw screen printing, amateur fonts by hand with the help of ordinary marker. This led to a graphical language of Punk and was a further source of creative energy for artists and designers.

As a subculture built on rock music, punk reflected in graphic solution of badges, stickers, posters and banners for bands, flyers, packing for record sleeves and punk fan magazines — fanzines. More than any other movement that ever existed before or after, Punk was presented by a poster, music groups, banned of television and radio, fighting for the right to be heard, printed posters, which became an effective and virtually free way to appeal to the public.

Punk didn’t have a clear political program, and most punks were politically neutral, but punk graphic style became the basis for striking posters of political orientation.

A society that first demonstrated rejection of the punk movement rapidly absorbed it, mixing punk with other youth subcultures, removing inconsistencies and turning them into a source of profit. Punk did not
last for long — less than for two years it had exhausted itself, becoming a profitable venture for record companies, and becoming part of the system against which the representatives of this movement has fought. Nevertheless, short, spontaneous explosion of punk anti-government creativity made a huge impact on the further development of graphic design of United Kingdom and other leading design countries and continues to inspire designers and musicians to this day.

References


