

MAKE IT DANGEROUS

Canadian Film's Punk Sensibility

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Mark L. Lester's *Class of 1984*.

I am the future. So warns Peter, leader of the nihilist punks controlling Lincoln High School, the devastated, graffiti-drenched site of the unhinged Canadian film *Class of 1984* (1982). These slovenly, racist ne'er-do-wells sneer at authority, sling angel dust to sophomores, and mosh joyously to Teenage Head. After menacing their music teacher, Andrew Norris, into a murderous rage, they meet untimely ends via buzzsaw, via steering wheel, via skylight. Order once again prevails.

Shot in recognizable locations around downtown Toronto, *Class of 1984* presents as a statement on escalating teen

violence. Watching it now in all its revved-up paranoia recalls a certain fervour of its time – the fear that such untameable scum might be society's future. It also prompts consideration of what might constitute a “punk sensibility” in cinema, and how such an insurrectionary spirit (whether genuine or posed) has been filtered through a distinctly Canadian perspective.

Punk comprises many modes: a musical genre, a criterion, a stance. It's regularly self-contradictory, frequently self-negating, often quite stupid, and perpetually facing the pronouncement of its own death. It's a sensibility rooted

in failure, whether out of naiveté, failed ambition, or sheer absurdity. The narrative forms of punk cinema typically culminate in tragedy or farce (or a hybrid of the two). As Greil Marcus notes in *Lipstick Traces*, his foray to contextualize punk within a broader avant-garde tradition, “nihilism can find a voice in art, but never satisfaction.”

The form's easy signifiers have been well-recognized since the seventies: hacked-up leather, overheated miscreants slamdancing to rudimentary rock, sloganeering of a smash-the-system bent. British punks donned bondage-lite garb to rattle conservative sensibilities, while



Goin' Down the Road (d. Don Shebib, 1970).

America's disaffected youth rejected disco glitz for hard-core skateboarder grubbi-ness. Canadian incarnations, meanwhile, have often adopted a vulgar, quasi-work-ing-class hoser persona fuelled by beer and fuck-the-man disaffection. Bands like DOA, and later SNFU and No Means No, reveled in unpretentious Canadiana draped in flannel and toques.

Bruce McDonald's *Hard Core Logo* (1996) champions this vibe as it follows its titular group through a dismal reunion tour, faithfully depicting the rock circuit's beer-stained stages, bleak stretches of highway, and subzero post-show parking lots. Centred on the shaky homosocial camaraderie of Joe Dick and Billy Tallent, aging rockers losing step with time, it styles itself as a punk movie (anarchy symbols, cameos from Joey Ramone and Art Bergmann, lots of spitting), but little distinguishes these saps as anything but failed careerists, absent of any ideological energy. McDonald's heroes have more in common with the soft-metal burnouts of *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years* (1988) than the punks encountered in the first volume of Penelope Spheeris's landmark document-ary series.

McDonald's earlier *Roadkill* (1989) is another highway movie, a mishmash of

eschatological cues and *Wizard of Oz* riffs heavy with the blasé stance toward death that would define punk's later resurgence as nineties grunge (trench-coats, cigarettes). Its baffled heroine, Ramona, tracks the errant punk band The Children of Paradise, the plot not so much unfolding as occurring – a dream logic in tune with a certain breed of punk negation and its recusant stance; the band's leader, breaking his vow of silence, asserts there is “nothing left to say.” Yet in fleeting moments of connection, Ramona tastes liberation. Following the film's climactic carnage at the Apocalypse Club (subtly, not a thing here), she enjoys a vague awak-ening buoyed by newfound fortitude. Taking the stage, Ramona entertains her punkish audience, “Let me hear you say yeah.” And, as punks do, they say Yeah.

Filmed in *Night of the Living Dead*-esque black and white, *Roadkill* takes an ambivalent stance toward its Ontario landscape (“This land wasn't made to support human life,” Ramona muses) as McDonald indulges in corny scenes of the downhome Canadiana kitsch firmly enshrined in our enduring, self-installed narrative. Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) serves as a progenitor of this breed of dirtbag realism. Like *Roadkill*,

Goin' Down the Road uses a documen-tary-like, rough-hewn aesthetic (the film actually began as a documentary project) to tell the story of a pair of down-and-out Maritimers travelling westward in pursuit of lucre and lager. Its bump-kin heroes, Pete and Joey, arrive in a scrappy Toronto brimming with proto-punk energy. Tragically out of step with the unyielding city in a transitional, post-sixties cultural climate, they prow record shops and Yonge St. bars, cat-calling at women and bathing in booze. With their prospects dimming, they even-tually awaken to the futility of the cap-italist machine: “Everything keeps going around in the same circle,” Pete laments, “the same stupid thing over and over, and there ain't nothing happening.”

The linkage of work and identity, and a rejection of this ideal, foretelling punk-ish stances to come, also lies at the heart of Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1964), a coming-of-age story à la *The Graduate* (though arriving three years earlier). Its hero, Peter, is an obnoxious yet charming Toronto kid daunted by a world of conformity and allegiance to “the almighty buck.” While his ges-tures of rebellion are tame – shoplift-ing, swiping his father's car for a 401 joyride, mouthing off to his probation officer – his worldview is prototypically punk (even if plinking his banjo on the TTC is about as rockin' as Peter gets). The punk sensibility is invested in rough determinations of justice, i.e., not “sell-ing out,” rather than moral valuations. Resigned to a parking-lot-attendant job, Peter's tragedy is that he might become precisely what he fears most: a working stiff like his parents.

Two tales of beat-generation wastrels bummed out by society, *A Cool Sound from Hell* (1959, see p. 19) and *Bitter Ash* (1963), navigated similar concerns. The affable Montreal artists and smalltime crooks of Allan Moyle's *The Rubber Gun* (1977), while chiefly focused on maintaining their drug habits, also take punkish delight in flouting cops and indulging in boho lei-sure. Out of boredom and antipathy, they cultivate new styles of behaviour in defi-ance of a humdrum establishment, their hardscrabble existence fuelled by animus similar to punk culture's combustibility.

The possibility for renewal out of trauma is a defining common feature of Canadian cinematic narrative. With tensions rooted in a multifarious, elusive “national identity,” the rough matter of history – colonialism, class strife, the church – can be sculpted into revamped, yet familiar, forms. Denys Arcand’s quasi-allegorical *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), Robert Lepage’s *The Confessional* (1999), and the trippy works of Guy Maddin all employ these historiographical, metafictional tendencies to ironic effect.

But to the punk sensibility, tradition is the enemy. Rather than indulge in such nuanced subjectivity, the punk impulse is to smash, to chide, to insult. Nostalgia is boring, self-aggrandization via hackneyed sentiment to be held in contempt. Against these pressures, the punk appoints itself the future, a point of nullification so a new history can be forged. In doing so, the punk draws its strength from community, or at least a shared program of definition. The punk sensibility should therefore not be mistaken for coarse nihilism; rather, it’s a measure of reclaiming and sharpening identity: you are, for now, a punk among punks.

Documentary projects like *The Last Pogo* (1978), *Bloodied But Unbowed* (2006), or books like *Treat Me Like Dirt* (2009), have preserved the record of Canadian punk-rock outfits like The Viletones, The Subhumans, Forgotten Rebels, and their ilk. But such efforts also threaten to veer into nostalgia and deification, as the countless documentaries, summations, and retrospectives dull the genre’s history into just one of many phases in a cultural continuum. The DIY aesthetic propagates a sense of immediacy, of history witnessed as it unfolds; nothing screams “authenticity” like unwashed punks shot through the cruddy lens of scratchy celluloid or cheap videotape.

While this documentary feel self-consciously permeates narrative works like *Hard Core Logo*, it can be better experienced in Peter Wronski’s *Crash ‘n’ Burn*, an impressionistic take from the summer of 1977. Shot in Toronto and New York, its footage of groups like The Diodes and notable figures like Danny Fields and The Viletones’ Steven Leckie (a.k.a. Nazi Dog)

captures the performativity and inward questioning already evident in punk-rock’s nascent period (by all accounts, Toronto punks considered the NYC scene tame and already past its prime). Here we see hard-core kids driven both by ardent belief in their scene’s ideals and the disillusionment already settling in.

Zero-budget production values and a sense of tightknit community brighten the art films of G. B. Jones (also of landmark post-punks Fifth Column). *The Yo-Yo Gang* (1992) and *The Lollipop Generation* (2008), shot on recognizable locations using handheld cameras, exemplify, on the other hand, a choppy, punkish celebration of sex, solidarity, and community.

Punk has always been integral to queer art in the way that it allows for the expression of outrage through irreverence and defiant co-opting of forms. As a mode for expression for Canada’s minorities, however, punk has a thorny history, having typically been the province of wound-up white males. While punk’s factious tenor shares kinship with those filmmakers whose work gives voice to the underrepresented, that sense of piss-take irreverence rarely intersects with films vying for broader social revelation.

Jeff Barnaby’s *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013) portrays the hard-fought existence of a seventies-era Mi’kmaq reservation, where hustlers peddle narcotics in order to pay off Indian agents and avoid being placed in residential schools. Amid a community dulled by drink and drugs, any joy squashed by white oppression, Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs’ young Aila wields a spiky cunning. “This is what brings my people together,” she sneers, “the art of forgetfulness.” Aila, seething with punkish derision, chooses action in the face of obliteration. Barnaby engages in postmodern perspectival interplay, merging traditional fables with manga-ish animations and zombie-horror tropes. The potential cutesiness of such devices, however, is supplanted by the intensity of this community’s struggle. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* thereby demonstrates the limitations of a punk sensibility when approaching actual injustice: while punk’s sedition tends to

be waged in the terrain of the symbolic or the sheerly conceptual, Aila’s struggle for redemption – rooted in historic atrocities still resonating – transcends any such doomy absurdities.

And yet taking critical inventory of any counterculture ultimately proves a futile enterprise: once codified, it loses its potency. The subculture itself splinters and auto-extirpates before the inevitable descent of the suited opportunists. Mainstream depictions of punkers quickly became a staple of eighties Hollywood fare – a scorn for delinquency befitting the end of Reagan-era conservatism. Canadian incarnations and connections inevitably emerged. While shot in British Columbia, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains* (dir. Lou Adler, 1982), starring a young Diane Lane and with Sex Pistol Steve Jones and The Clash’s Paul Simonon playing bit parts, is a decidedly American story of mainstream commercialism. The cult teen romp *Rock ‘n Roll High School* (dir. Allan Arkush, 1979) begat the abysmal *Rock ‘n Roll High School Forever* (dir. Deborah Brock, 1990), a Corey Feldman vehicle notable only for its substitution of The Ramones in the original (Joey again!) with Toronto’s The Pursuit of Happiness.

Raunchy comedies appealing to overheated adolescent tastes arrived in heaps in the eighties, with Canadian productions benefitting from tax breaks. The cartoonish *Rebel High* (dir. Harry Jakobs, 1987) works almost as a bizarre version of *Class of 1984* (dir. Mark L. Lester, 1982), with its do-nothing juvenile-delinquent punks preying upon a sad-sack teaching staff. Painfully unfunny, it’s now forgotten to all but hard-core fans of VHS comedy junk (but preserved on YouTube). More enduring in the national collective memory is *Porky’s* (dir. Bob Clark, 1981), shapelessly raunchy and notable only for its long-held position as Canada’s top box-office earner. These comedies strive to offend, but offer little in the way of any punkish sneer; instead, they largely side with the entitled establishment the punk sensibility works to resist.

In Ivan Reitman’s *Meatballs* (1980), Bill Murray memorably stars as Tripper Harrison, Camp North Star’s lazy-lidded counsellor, who provides the majority

of the film's laffs. Any insurgency in Tripper's slacker persona is of a toothless, post-hippie variety. The real tension here is among the kids within the camp's isolated microcosm shaped by values of sexual approval and jockish competition – one quivers in dread of the society these young conformists will form. But amid this mainstream, disco-dancing herd, Chris Makepeace's Rudy Gerner stands out. Possessed of a sensitive, doe-eyed resignation, his vibe portends the post-punk new-wave style of years to come. Sweetly demure, and likely a Siouxsie Sioux fan, Rudy is surely doomed once summer ends.

Teenage societies breed contempt, both against the adult forces governing them and within the ranks of their peers. In Matt Johnson's *The Dirties* (2013), suburban Toronto dorks plot revenge against their high school's bullying foes. In another story of homosocial camaraderie, movie-obsessed Matt and Owen use their art as a bid for self-preservation to reshape and transcend their dismal reality. Like Rudy in *Meatballs*, acute sensitivity to the injustice of their social milieu is both the source of their anguish and their most powerful asset. If punk narratives must culminate in farce or tragedy, *The Dirties* undoubtedly demonstrates the latter; but the force of its protagonists' revolt, however ill-conceived, is its own form of victory.

The profoundly bizarre kids' film *The Peanut Butter Solution* (dir. Michael Rubbo, 1985) also stakes claims

against a domineering establishment, its cheerful levity masking an inscrutable thematic core. Any plot summary would, frankly, only serve to bewilder. Residential Montreal is the battleground for a war between children enslaved into manufacturing paintbrushes for a megalomaniacal art teacher. Leading their revolt is Michael, a mopey, prepubescent dreamer (reminiscent of *Nobody Waved Goodbye's* Peter) who goes prematurely bald after seeing a ghost, and ... anyway, okay. For all its silly elements, the film demonstrates a grotesque comedic sense aligned with the underdog, the overlooked, the dismissed – and a gleefully surreal, at times horrific, bent.

Schlocky horror and sci-fi have always been integral components of the punk ethos – think Stooges/Ramones/Cramps/Misfits – bringing to light unvarnished corners of the pop culture spectrum. Canadian horror productions like *Black Christmas* (dir. Bob Clark, 1974) and *Prom Night* (dir. Paul Lynch, 1980) reaped box-office success, but these slasher flicks come doused in establishment morality and mainstream teen titillation. Drenched in weirdness, Jack Bravman's *Zombie Nightmare* (1986) opens with Motörhead's "Ace of Spades," and plods downward from there. Though it aims for cheap punk thrills, its Z-movie production values, dreary Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue setting, wooden cast (Adam West! Tia Carrere!) and "voodoo" plot mechanisms are mostly just depressing.

The sci-fi oddity *Metal Messiah* (1978) is loftier, ambition-wise, gloomy cold-war imagery and lo-fi scuzziness bringing an aura of menace to director Tibor Takács' story of a messianic rock figure in a post-Bowie vein, though its sensibilities reside more in the realm of cheap glam.

These relics, embracing nothingness over hope, flaunt a corrosive ferment born in Cold War disillusionment. Zale Dalen's *Terminal City Ricochet* (1990) plows snarkily into this field with a cast that includes the Dead Kennedys' Jello Biafra and DOA's Joe Keithley. Its critique of American culture incorporates fevered juxtapositions of cable-TV pastiche, post-Rodney King police brutality, and fears over falling "space junk" – it's very late-twentieth century po-mo, and gleefully dumb. It's also very Canadian, with its villain, a power-mad American tycoon, taken down by Germain Houde as a French hockey-jersey-wearing revolutionary. As zingy as a two-chord anthem, it wears thin stretched over ninety minutes.

Bruce LaBruce's *The Raspberry Reich* (2004) is a parody of/homage to Godardian didacticism, as well as a full-on queer fuckfest. As a comment on the military-industrial complex, it's both direct and oblique, co-opting Che Guevara and Baader-Meinhof imagery and sloganeering to rail against heteronormativity and sexual commodification while indulging in goofy porno acting and campy setups. Sexual liberation



Rhymes for Young Ghouls (d. Jeff Barnaby, 2014).

enables defiance against sterile modernity (“Heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses!”), with LaBruce adopting a stance of typical Canadian dubiety that draws upon Euro-Marxist philosophy to destabilize American culture, all with tongue in, uh, cheek.

In this vein, the punk sensibility explicitly links bodily freedom with intellectual liberation, both ironically and in earnest; when the punks of *Class of 1984* declare “life is pain, pain is everything,” they delineate a stark boundary, a declaration of a leather-studded *stunde null*. The young radicals of Mathieu Denis and Simon Lavoie’s recent *Ceux qui font les révolutions à moitié n’ont fait que se creuser un tombeau* (*Those Who Make Revolution Halfway Only Dig Their Own Graves*) (2016) take this belief to its most impassioned extreme. With the 2012 Quebec student protests as backdrop, these self-styled revolutionaries traverse their world like ghosts, with contemporary Montreal, populated by restaurating bourgeoisie and sniffing bureaucrats, presented as a twilight world of traffic and commerce.

Railing against enemies both imprecise (neoliberalism) and explicit (the Charest administration, their baby-boomer-generation parents), these heroes are strident in their demands, but their passion is justified by the enormity of their foe. Onscreen text and monologues implicate the viewer directly in this struggle via unmediated communiqués that demand a taking of sides. *Ceux qui font* is, arguably, less a call for any specific political action as it is a portrayal of youthful fury in which idealism is honoured, not impugned.

This revolution aims for a rupture of history, a catastrophic reset that supersedes the individual: “Yesterday doesn’t exist,” one character pronounces, “Tomorrow is a distant dream. Today, we are born!” In the struggle against illegitimate authority, she continues, it is “incumbent upon us to dethrone our fathers.” To these revolutionaries, who would most likely deem the very premise of “punk” deplorable, nostalgia is a transgression worthy of punishment. While the punk wallows in its own grime, the revolution offers transcendence;



Bruce LaBruce’s *The Raspberry Reich* (2004).

through the collective will, as one character attests, “we will never die.”

Transcendence, from both society and self, is also at the twitchy heart of David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983). With Toronto at its most desolate standing-in for generic urban North America, Cronenberg offers, depending on your perspective, either a prescient take on cynical media manipulations or a dated piece of schlock cinema. Qualitative evaluations aside, *Videodrome* undoubtedly distills the punk sensibility: insurrection, irreverence, and nihilism encrusted with a fair amount of absurdity (and the icy sexuality of new-wave empress Debbie Harry).

Rubbed numb with overstimulation, James Woods’ TV producer Max Renn (modelled on TV mogul Moses Znaimer) seeks out “tough” new material – ostensibly to titillate the fleeting attentions of his stations’ viewers, though he’s clearly a man on his own quest. The punk’s is a restless soul, wrenched tight not just by alienation from external society but from a pained awareness of its inner alienation.

Its makers might be capitalist swine serving the military-industrial complex, yet the ambiguous entertainment entity “Videodrome” offers the salve of release, not only sexual but psychological: “It has something you don’t have,” Max is told, “It has a philosophy. And that is what makes it dangerous.” Information and knowable reality is imparted to the neophytes of Videodrome’s “philosophy”

via video messages, hallucinated and/or real, suffusing everything in a destabilized anxiety – much like the spastic rhythms *Terminal City Ricochet* apes and mocks. Cronenberg’s vision of a frenetic, blood-crazed American media is a quintessentially Canadian critique, equally outraged and amused at such insanity.

Recruited as a terrorist in Videodrome’s service, Max slips further into this miasma by becoming “the video word made flesh,” just as the revolutionaries in *Ceux qui font les révolutions* aspire to become embodiments of their revolutionary ideals. For Cronenberg, the body is where political action is made manifest, but is also rendered futile, just as the punk predilection for bondage garb links the intimate space of the (fashion-formatted) body with the societal sphere. Similarly, the physical expression of the punk-rock moshpit fuses abrasion with pleasure, agony with fun. As the boneheads in *Class of 1984* insist, “life is pain, pain is everything.”

Ultimately, Max sheds his bodily form in his mission of “total transformation,” and the transcendence achieved only through death. Here is the punk sensibility taken to its zenith, in equal measures tragedy and farce. The poignant nature of such futility is, perhaps, why punk is perennially deemed a dead enterprise, yet its filmic representations persist, albeit in ever-shifting permutations – the punk ideal forever remains ferocious, joyfully unruly, and ultimately meaningless. ✧