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Architextuality, *archipraxis*, *interpraxis*: Pop-Rock Music Culture from 1950s UK to 1990s China – A Note.

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Keywords: popular music; UK; China; rock and roll; architextuality; archipraxis, interpraxis

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ABSTRACT

In focussing the musical, visual and performative aspects of pop-rock music culture from the 1950s in the UK and in 1990s China, this text demonstrates the multiple transcultural nexuses that traverse post-1950s music culture globally. Methodologically, the theory of intertextuality is advanced, and the terms *interpraxis* and *archipraxis* are coined in the context of music, bodily movement and visual performance.

It concludes with two main points:

- i) At certain historical moments in different societies pop or rock culture as a whole has stood against a society that demands conformity, while at other moments, only sub-strata of popular music have done so. Authority everywhere is wary of the disruptive influence of any sound that is not its own, or over which it has no control, and that is why new sounds must be either recuperated and neutralized or otherwise erased.
- (ii) From the accounts, films and videos of performances discussed what emerges is the pervasiveness of not only the intertextual, but also numerous instances of *interpraxes* and an *archipraxis* straddling half a century and several oceans and continents.

En se concentrant sur les aspects musicaux, visuels et performatifs de la culture pop-rock des années 1950 au Royaume-Uni et des années 1990 en Chine, ce texte démontre les multiples liens transculturels qui traversent la culture musicale mondialisée depuis les années 1950. Sur le plan méthodologique, la théorie de l'intertextualité est poussée plus loin, et les termes « *interpraxis* » et « *archpraxis* » sont inventés et articulés dans le contexte de la musique, du mouvement corporel et de la performance visuelle.

Il se termine par deux points principaux : i) À certains moments historiques dans différentes sociétés, la culture pop ou rock dans son ensemble s'est opposée à une société qui exigeait la conformité, tandis qu'à d'autres moments, seules certaines sous-catégories de la musique populaire l'ont fait. Partout, les autorités se méfient de l'influence perturbatrice de tout son qui ne leur appartient pas ou sur lequel elles n'ont aucun contrôle, et c'est pourquoi les nouveaux sons doivent être soit récupérés et neutralisés, soit effacés. ii) Il ressort des récits, des films et des vidéos des performances discutés non seulement l'omniprésence de l'intertextualité, mais aussi de nombreux exemples d'*interpraxes* et d'une *archipraxis* qui s'étend sur un demi-siècle et à travers plusieurs océans et continents.

Popular music before the rock and roll era started in Europe in the late 1950s.

Rock and roll first became popular in the UK and northern Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s after having appeared in the US around 1956. But before that period what was meant by *popular music*.

In Britain after the Second World War, 1945, until the middle of the 1950s, popular music entertainment was transmitted by radio. The television was still not widespread. People also learnt the popular songs from watching films at the cinema.

Often people would watch the same film several times. The cinema was dominated by Hollywood and so the music and songs people heard were those that accompanied American films. Musicals (films which consisted in large part of musical entertainment) were very popular.

People would also sing songs at home and in public houses, the English PUB. The songs were often those learnt at the movies. This popular culture then was not folk culture; the songs were not popular songs in the sense of traditional folk songs. Pub-singing in the 1950s was karaoke before and without the recorded soundtrack.

In this sense the 1950s was already the era of mechanically and electrically reproduced culture. It was simply that this was not yet the epoch of mass consumption of consumer goods – record players, and TV sets were still not widely owned.

The pub singing, radio entertainment, and movie-going so prominent in Terence Davies's 1988 film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, provides an interesting representation of popular entertainment in working class England in the moment just before the rock and roll revolution. It is set in Liverpool where in the late 1950s, rock and roll, in the guise of Merseybeat, first made itself felt in Europe.

Popular music in the sense of American rock and roll, first made inroads in Britain in the late 1950s. Again, the movies played a large part in its popularisation. Movies, in this pre-MTV age, provided the visual model for popular music fans.

Elvis Presley was of course the first major white entertainer to exploit the potential of rock and roll – a musical genre – very closely imitating black blues music. Britain soon produced its own imitation Elvis Presley; his name was Cliff Richard. Starting in 1961 Cliff's records often held the number 1 spot in the UK hit parade, alternating with Elvis records.

In terms of intertextuality, the relationship between Elvis and Cliff can be seen as an intertext. Cliff constituting a visual and aural performative imitation of Elvis, a hypertext to the hypotext Elvis. And yet Elvis himself is in an intertextual relationship to the rhythm and blues music of black musicians such as BB King. Genette calls the relationship between a text and a genre to which it belongs architextuality

Elvis however is no more a text than Cliff Richards, and the relationship goes beyond written word or musical notation. What is important in Elvis's and subsequent rock and roll culture is not simply the reproduced product sound and lyrics, but the performance and physical, visual appearance – the affect – style, fashion, the choreography of gyrating hips.

While architext and intertext may incorporate the recorded state of performance and appearance coupled with sound and word, I propose the coining of a new category of archipraxis to incorporate the multiple aspects of popular music cultural practice. Thus, the overall relationship of Elvis and Cliff to their rock and roll predecessors would be that of archipraxis, while Cliff's imitation of Elvis would be an instance of *interpraxis*.

To return to the history of rock and roll in the UK, apart from Elvis and mainstream representations of rock and roll, what access was there to other rock'n'roll music? Why did so many groups spring up in Liverpool? Why was this early rock and roll called Merseybeat? Quite simply, Liverpool was a port. Sailors, stewards, those who worked on ships – this was the pre-aeroplane mass transport era – brought back records from the United States. The voyage only took three or four days.

The Beatles' first hit was 'Love me do', released in October 1962, but their first number one hits were "From Me to You" and "She Loves You" both released in 1963. By later standards such music and visual performances were not shocking, but

in the late 1950s and early 1960s such music and dancing was considered unconventional. Even the hairstyles were considered revolutionary. Men had not worn long hair before in the twentieth century. Women had not worn such short skirts. Thus, the difference in physical appearance of the musicians was as important as the difference and newness of their music. This contestation of conventions became a marker of pop and rock music culture.

In a broad sense we can see the entire popular music scene and its associated fashion and youth cultures as a protest against the dull conformism of post-war British society. And yet the economic climate for this new youth culture which after all focused on commodities (pop groups as commodity but more specifically their records) had been arrived at through the gradual expansion of the consumer economics of the 1950s.

At the end of the 1950s working class people had comparatively more money due to almost full employment and their money had to be spent on commodities if economic growth were to continue. Producers would see any commodity as useful if it assisted in this process. But while the hardware for cultural consumption such transistor radios, record players and television became increasingly available, new products, new sounds were accepted only slowly by the powers that controlled broadcasting.¹

While record players were also now available, how were record producers to make their songs known? Previously popular songs had been popularized by Hollywood movies and the cinema, but there were few rock 'n' roll movies and fewer and fewer people went to the cinema after the accessibility of television.

The BBC, which controlled all radio transmissions was slow to catch up with market demands and seemed stale, upper class, and remote. Radio Luxembourg was a commercial radio station broadcasting in English during the evening from Europe. Until the 1970s there were no commercial radio stations in the UK, and the BBC did not introduce its pop music station (Radio One) until the mid 1960s. Even then it did not play rock'n'roll 24 hours a day, so people listened to Radio Luxembourg at night. However, since Luxembourg was a long way off, reception in much of the UK was not good.

¹ "[... T]hree USA research scientists of Bell Laboratories, [Shockley, Bardeen and Brattain](#) managed, in December 1947, to invent a solid state device that they called [THE TRANSISTOR](#). They succeeded in creating a completely new amplifying device just by adding a second contact point to the already popular CRYSTAL DIODE based on a piece of germanium crystal with a pointed "cat's whisker" touching its surface. In 1956 in recognition for their extraordinary work they were awarded the Nobel Prize.... The diffusion and popularity of the transistor radio coincided luckily with the new Rock and Roll revolution and it is hard to say which one of the two helped the other one to succeed as many young persons regarded as a boon the possibility of taking with them the music that Elvis and others were throwing at them. Their parents were only too happy to let them have their own personal set which made the home valve radio free again for the domestic use. Also the fact that many of these small receivers could be listened to with an earphone made them attractive to those who wanted to listen to them in privacy and at their own volume level." "Sony managed to produce an even smaller shirt pocket set called [TR-610](#). This was (and is) the most typical of all transistor radios, the one by which all the others were going (and are) to be judged." Sony sold nearly half a million. "From 1958 up to the mid sixties an unbelievable and bewildering variety of models in all shapes, sizes and colours were produced by dozens of large and small Japanese manufacturers." Transistor radio mini-history <http://www.etedeschi.ndirect.co.uk/tr.radio.history.htm> accessed 6.11.2003; <https://web.archive.org/web/20070520074948/https://www.etedeschi.ndirect.co.uk/tr.radio.history.htm> 13.08.2025

Also, in the 1960s there were a number of pirate radio stations operating offshore from on board ships in the North Sea. The reception from these broadcasting ships was a lot better. The most famous was Radio Caroline which commenced broadcasting on 29th March 1964.² Extremely popular with teenage listeners, these stations were forced to close down during 1967 when the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act became law, as part of the effort by the UK government to regulate broadcasting. The illicit "pirate" image of the disc jockeys, DJs, contributed to their popularity as heroes of a new anti-authoritarian generation. Later, after the pirate radio stations were forced to close down by the UK government, most of the DJs were employed by the BBC to start up its own youth-oriented pop music station, Radio One, which launched on 30th September 1967.

Youth grievances over the domination of culture by monopolistic and middle-class centralized radio and television corporations meant simply that any alternative even though still within the framework of commodity capitalism, could pass as rebellious and resistant to the domination of parents, school, and all forms of authority that attempted to limit the pleasures and desires of youth. Thus, while the capitalist economy was ready to adapt to youth culture in the realms of fashion and music, social ideology lagged behind. Youth culture was considered decadent by many parents, but the more it was represented as anti-authoritarian and rebellious by the older generation, the more the younger generation flocked to it. By the end of the 1960s the economy, society and authorities had adapted to the new popular culture, indeed it had been recuperated and could no longer be said to hold any threat to social norms.

The 1970s Punk movement was a reaction against this recuperation and the complacency of a still bourgeois society. Although bourgeois society was now tolerant of a now tame pop culture. Punk statements targeted conventional society – note their anti-royalty song/performance during the jubilee celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne. They were also seemingly against the commodity-oriented society which was failing British youth – in the mid-1970s there was increasing youth unemployment.

The Punk discourse was a radical and anti-capitalist one although few traditional Left parties would have identified with it. It was the conservatism of the whole of society including the traditional Left that was the object of Punk critique. The Punk leaders were quite overtly theoretical and political. They had understood that the generational differences represented by the contestation of rock and roll did not amount to a challenge to the system of government. The privileging of rebellion, anarchy and confrontation was, however nothing new to rock and roll culture. Within 1960s rock culture there were those harder tendencies that valorized revolt both in England and in the USA.

Punk and its associated culture of protest can perhaps be traced back to 1968. It was in May 1968 that the student demonstrations in Paris, France almost toppled the conservative government and brought about a shift in political thinking. The ideas of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem had been central to the politicization of the student movement which was tired of the traditional Left parties' conventional approaches. Revolution was in the air.

² "Radio Caroline actually started broadcasting in March 1964, from the MV Caroline, moored off Felixstowe and broadcasting on the famous wavelength of 199 metres. Moored nearby was the MV Mi Amigo, beaming out Radio Atlanta, which came on air in May. In no time the two stations merged, and one ship sailed round to the Isle of Man to become Radio Caroline North." <http://www.radiowaves.org.uk/memory/memory60.shtml> accessed 6.11.03

The 1968 Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia where the Communist regime had tried to liberalize itself in what was known as the Prague Spring also foregrounded the repressive and conservative nature of traditional Communist politics and institutions. For a while Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution brand of politics seemed an alternative to middle class and uniformed intellectuals especially in France and Germany.

However, Guy Debord had perceptively critiqued both capitalist and supposedly communist societies as societies of the spectacle in which rulers kept power by propagating images, and mounting spectacles (military parades, fashion, the Monarchy, the nuclear arms race, television). The Western Liberal democracies were termed by Debord societies of the "diffuse" spectacle, while China and Eastern Europe were described as societies of the "concentrated" spectacle. When something is diffuse it is less easy to see, when it is concentrated it becomes obvious more quickly. Twenty years later, in 1988, before "the fall of Communism", Debord described a new manifestation, that of the "converging" society of the spectacle, in other words the societies of the "concentrated" spectacle were becoming more commodity-oriented while the Liberal Democracies were becoming increasingly reliant on repression and state power. Again, Guy Debord was perceptive, this time in predicting the global history of the early twenty-first century.

Of special note as thinker and planner of the English Punk movement was the manager of the Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren, a one-time student activist who had been influenced by the Situationists such as Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. "The middle classes invented the commodity. It defines our ambitions, our aspirations, our quality of life. Its effects are repression - loneliness - boredom," wrote McLaren.³ But it was the performative behaviour of Sex Pistols especially Johnny Rotten (John Lydon) coupled with his verbally profane outbursts that secured the group notoriety and saw their records banned from the BBC. The Sex Pistols' gestures, statements and lyrics were not simply provocative, they often accurately and poetically summarized youth's dissatisfaction in 1970s capitalist modernity, and youth's menace.

Maintaining a radical critique of society while rejecting traditional politics and being led and informed by a one-time disciple of the Situationists, was a trait of the early Punk band. McLaren sported on his T-shirt in 1976 the slogan "Be reasonable, demand the impossible", a recuperation of a 1968 slogan on Sorbonne wall. And yet McLaren was also a showman, and so performative "events" designed to shock would be foregrounded in leftist Punk discourse. 'Always announce your music in the most theatrical manner possible,' declared McLaren.⁴ Thus, the Sex Pistols concert on a River Thames barge during the Queen's Jubilee celebration set out to shock bourgeois and working-class patriotic sensibilities. But at the same time, their crude rejection of the status quo was in some ways the construction of another spectacle which itself would be recuperated by the recording and entertainment industry - even shock and revulsion can be turned into commodities.

Punk bands proliferated, New Wave rock music followed it, the politics of Punk got lost in the commercial recuperation. The new era was that of Post-Punk. There were plenty of protest songs. Songs became about political issues rather than against politics as Punk had been. The new protest music was like the old protest music and addressed issues. Songs about Nelson Mandela, about South Africa, about nuclear weapons were plentiful. There were songs against racism, against police

³ Malcolm McLaren, 'Intentions for a Film', May 1971.

⁴ In Julien Temple (director), *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, London, Virgin Films, 1980.

brutality, against Third World starvation, and in favour of gay rights. The new sub-cultural ideology critiqued issues. It became part of 1989s-90s issue politics. Tom Robinson was typical. His songs, like several of Bob Dylan's and others', often critique the chauvinistic patriotism of his own country (in this case Britain). For instance, there is the ironic song "The Brits come rolling back" which deals with the arrogant and nationalistic way in which the British often travel to France and other countries. Class is also critiqued in this song since those who travel most often to France are the upper and middle classes. This kind of song is really a return to the concerns of the American blues and folk music traditions.

POP-ROCK IN CHINA

Popular music as a modern medium, recorded and transmitted by mechanical and electronic means has developed and expanded throughout the twentieth-century, and phonographic, tape and compact disc recordings have had almost as much of an impact in Asia as it has in the West and in other societies where the technology of recording and diffusion has been available. Already in 1930s semi-colonial China there was a burgeoning recorded popular music industry.

During the 1950s to the 1980S, music production and consumption was tightly controlled by the Communist Party state. It was only after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that Western music started to filter into China once again. But even then it was quite strictly controlled. Only such safe and sedate music as the American middle-of-the-road Carpenters or John Denver were allowed occasional air-time.

Rock and roll and all black-derived music was strictly banned. Aspiring Chinese pop musicians, however, could get tapes of Western music from foreign friends. Everything arrived at once – The Beatles, The Stones, and Punk. All Western music 1960s, 1970s, 1980s was a revelation, was a novelty. Rock, heavy metal and Punk was most admired.⁵

In early 1980s anti-establishment music it was the state that was targeted rather than bourgeois, consumer society which was only just re-emerging. In China pop musicians who have engaged in protest have focussed on national authority and power as the objects of critique. And yet as in the beginning of rock'n'roll culture in the USA and the UK it was the whole sense of the culture of rock'n'roll, the anti-conformism of dress, hair length, general "attitude" as well as the music that was meant to shock authority and the older generation, those with power. Given a political authority sensitive to the least cultural divergence from the norm, from its sphere of control, rock music did not need specifically political lyrics, or lyrics of protest, sound itself coupled with the image, pose, or spectacle was sufficient to mark the rebellious position of the young agent of rock'n'roll in the Chinese context.

In MTV made by mainland pop groups and their producers and managers, (although never officially broadcast in China, and thus consumed via illicitly received satellite TV) one of the interesting features, even of supposedly oppositional MTV has been the way it has deployed images and symbols and sentiments of nationalism

⁵ For more detail see: Gregory B. Lee, "'The East is Red' Goes Pop: Commodification, hybridity and nation- alism in Chinese popular song and its televisual performance', in *Popular Music* [Cambridge University Press] 14,1 (January 1995), and *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press; London: C. Hurst & Co. 1996), chapter 6.

In the case of the former Hong Kong-Taiwan-managed, Beijing pop group *Heibao* 黑豹 (Panther), while their 1991 video *Wu di zi rong* 無地自容 may show the group attempting to occupy and recuperate official Chinese space for their generation – in a way similar to the Sex Pistols' invasion and occupation of the official space of the River Thames and its bridges as we see Panther in the Forbidden city, on the Great Wall, being ticketed by a traffic policeman –, might we in fact simply be seeing a plain old-fashioned, capitalist exploitation of China's monuments and contemporary socio-political discourse? Intertexts with Western visual performances of the 1960s and 1970s abound. And thematically and performatively we are here again in the realm of the archipractice of the 'rock group' and its decades-long visual and affectual history .

Also exploiting the national heritage is a group whose very name lays claim to the Chinese "tradition": 唐朝 Tang Dynasty, whose 1992 made-for-MTV video makes use of a sort of Orientalist dream sequence of an abandoned, Tang temple, the Buddha, and even earlier ruins, situated somewhere on the periphery of China, the Gobi desert in fact.⁶ Again the video is a tissue of intertexts and interpraxes relating to Western pop-rock performance and music, and to the premodern literature of "old China".

Both the Panther video and the Tang Dynasty MTV video foreground the potent image of the guitar. Jody Berland has described the use of the guitar thus: "The image of the young-male-musician-with-guitar can mean, in a single flash, everything: bobby sox, punching out the boss, hitting the road, opposing the war...dancing till dawn, coming on ..." And what does it *mean*: again everything and nothing. It means: "this performance is real, a physical act in real space and time, an authentic cultural event,... today's folk culture, today's resistance, ...truth, today's avant-garde, today's lyric poem -- and also: don't take this seriously as art, ...or as anything else either: this is just a commercial."⁷

The Tang Dynasty video evoked here was broadcast on Asian MTV in 1993 by satellite from Hong Kong across India and south-east Asia and the outhern half of China. In Guangdong Province satellite dishes were common, and programmes were recorded on VCR machines and pirate videotapes sold on the streets. As in Hei Bao's videos the band itself is seen performing both in the studio (in typical masculinist heavy metal poses), and on location. Whilst the past supplies the props (temples, Buddhist images, and so on) the video production technique is standard for the supposedly "postmodern" modernist video: we never know why certain things happen, or even precisely what *is* happening. We are forced to exist in a non-rational, haphazard universe where we cannot expect any "closure" [any final resolution] of the ordinary kind."⁸

The other archipractical video technique this video adopts is also typical of 1980s heavy metal videos, in which the bands are depicted in the studio exuding a hectic vitality. Thus, we cut between the known and knowable heavy metal band in classic pose, and an incoherent narrative "undercut by pastiche" in which meaning "is undercut by images that do not line up in a coherent chain."⁹ But this video cannot ultimately resist having some of the images communicate an almost clear meaning.

⁶ Aired on Asian MTV, Star TV, Hong Kong to India and southern China, November 1992.

⁷ Jody Berland, "Sound, Image, and Social Space: Rock Video and Media Reconstruction", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 1986, p. 37. doi.org/10.1177/0196859986010001

⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987) 63.

⁹ Kaplan 63.

There are a number of large red flags displayed falling to earth on a battleground, and at the end of the video five red flags, perhaps emblematic of the five stars of the PRC red national flag, hang limply on poles in a dimly-lit interior, thus connecting the crumbling traditional signs of the past to the fading signs of the official present.

In the early 1990s, after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms started to turn China into a consumer society, we interestingly see a critique of consumer society emerge. The major example was 何勇 He Yong's 垃圾相 'Garbage Dump'. The video combines critique of consumer society with that of totalitarian society.

In conclusion, we can make two main points:

(i) We can see that at certain historical moments in different societies pop or rock culture as a whole has stood against a society that demands conformity, while at other moments, only sub-strata of popular music have done so. Authority everywhere is wary of the disruptive influence of any sound that is not its own, or over which it has no control, and that is why new sounds have to be either recuperated and neutralized or otherwise erased.

(ii) From the accounts, films and videos of performances discussed here what emerges is the pervasiveness of not only the intertextual, but also numerous instances of *interpraxes* and an *archipraxis* straddling half a century and several oceans and continents.