

Nihilism in Punk and Post-Punk Music

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Submitted to: Dr. Gabriel Solis

“Vee believe in nuthink Lebowski...nuthink!”
- Nihilist #1¹

It is not unusual to find direct references to the family of ideologies known collectively as “nihilism” in pop culture. In addition to the quotation above – taken from the Cohen brothers’ modern cult classic *The Big Lebowski* (1998) – references abound (direct and indirect) amongst a cluster of films made in the last 8 years alone. *The Fight Club* (1999), *Wonder Boys* (2000), *The Royal Tennenbaums* (2001), and *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) all feature thematic elements and even characters that are representative of nihilistic modes of expression. The advent of nihilistic expressions in popular culture is difficult to pin down with any certainty – a difficulty that is caused no doubt by the combined inefficiency with which the term is brandished in popular use, and the imprecision that colors much academic writing regarding its relationship, in particular to punk music and its stylistic descendants (here collectively known as “post-punk”)². A correlative problem is the illusiveness of the term “punk” as an adjectival definition of musical (sub)culture, style (fashion), and/or compositional methodology (musical style)³. And so it is that the first tasks of this paper will be to make distinctions clear where possible, and to lay the foundation for the application of those distinctions that follow.

The necessity of these distinctions will become clearer as they are applied. It suffices to say here that firstly, the clumsiness with which nihilisms have been reduced to Nihilism is one symptom of a general ideological confusion surrounding this music – a confusion that equates nihilism with anarchism or existentialism, and ethics with metaphysics or politics. Secondly, without a particulate definition of “punk music,” it is difficult to cope with the network of overlapping – but non-equivocal – musics variously known as “punk,” and it becomes more difficult to trace the effects of punk on music that – though clearly related – arrives after the punk moment (roughly 1970-8)⁴. These distinctions in place, I will attempt an analysis of the representational apparatuses (lyrics, music, music videos) of three bands: The Sex Pistols, The Smashing Pumpkins, and Radiohead⁵. Clearly, a host of other bands/performers could have been chosen (for example, The Buzzcocks,

¹ Everything about the invocation of nihilism in the Cohen brothers’ film fits superbly – from the sheer absurdity of their appearance in the film (which seems to spare no absurdity), to the Dude’s own passive acceptance of the meaningless – (the “whatever-ness”) of his own absurd situation – to the laying bare of the artificiality of Mr. Lebowski’s achievements/persona, the meaningless of relationships, and the utter lack of any question of the role of morality/ethics in the discourse of the film. The character of the nihilists (simply called “Nihilist #1, #2, #3”) is an anthropomorphism of the idea, which impregnates the film ideologically.

² Witness, for instance, Greil Marcus wrestling with the term in his “secret history” *Lipstick Traces* (Marcus, 8-14).

³ Witness, for instance, Laing’s wrestling with the term in his *One Chord Wonders* (Laing, 7-14).

⁴ This dating seems to emerge from the collective accounts I examined – though admittedly its termination is dictated by the end of the *Sex Pistols* initial period of activity.

⁵ By representational apparatuses I mean the various means that bands use to communicate ideologies to their listeners.

The Clash, The Ramones, Nirvana, Green Day, Nine Inch Nails, Walter and Sabrina, etc.), the reason for these choices being that – from the author’s perspective – the chosen bands clearly and uniquely illuminate the importance of the tighter ideological distinctions advocated above.

Nihilisms

It is believed that early nineteenth-century polemicist Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1749-1832) popularized the term “nihilism,” which figured prominently as a pejorative in his *Spinoza Letters*, first published in 1785⁶. The word “nihilism” is a derivative of the Latin “nihil” which means “nothing,” or “nothingness⁷.” Jacobi used it as an invective against the atheistic nothingness, which, from his perspective, was caused by the Enlightenment assertion that reason is the sole instrument of epistemological certainty. This is certainly the association that most colors lay discourse surrounding the term today⁸.

Will Slocumbe, in *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, relays a more nuanced and useful network of definitions – one that attempts to take stock of the term from both a historical and genealogical point of departure⁹. The first distinction Slocumbe makes is between nihilism as Jacobi uses it – as an ideological technique that is applied pejoratively to opposing ideologies that “make nothing” (that is, “make meaningless-ness”) of the ideology it is wielded against – and as genuine philosophical position in which some aspect of the human experience is stripped of its ontological or ethical value (*its meaning*). Both of these larger distinctions will be important to the discussion surrounding punk music because as we will see, there are specific techniques that punk utilizes to reduce *ad nihilo* various institutions, also it will be important to examine how nihilism as a set of genuine philosophical positions will relate to various aspects of the punk representational apparatus.

It is within this first distinction – nihilism as a technique – that the reader will encounter Nietzsche’s primary dissatisfaction with religious belief, Christianity in particular. Nietzsche, contrary to common misperception, was actually not a nihilist, but an anti-nihilist. Surprisingly, in his estimation, it was in two specific ways that Christianity was the primary cause of nihilistic expression in his time. Firstly, Christianity was a system of beliefs that drained the physical, quotidian world of the mortal life of it’s meaning. In, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1886), Nietzsche’s protagonist preaches to the culture, admonishing them for allowing Christianity and its ethical mores to limit the freedom of

⁶ Though instances of nihilist expressions vastly predate this – for example consider the opening verse of *Ecclesiastes* in the Old Testament of the Bible: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the teacher, ‘Vanity of vanities – all is vanity.’” According to Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon – the word “hebel” used in this passage translates to “emptiness.”

⁷ (“Nihilism.” Harper-Collins Dictionary of Philosophy)

⁸ (Slocumbe, 1)

⁹ This methodology will serve as an example when I attempt to carry out the same treatment to “punk.”

their own humanity¹⁰. Christianity was one example among many of the “slave morality” that usurps the will of the individual. And for Nietzsche, the will is everything, the only possible source of meaning available in a post-ethical world. Secondly, in *Will to Power* (1901) – as Slocombe notes – Christianity’s fixation upon truth eventually caused its collapse as, from Nietzsche’s perspective, it proved itself to be illogical and untenable¹¹. The collapse of Christianity brought in its berth, a resounding sense of the meaninglessness of existence. The framework for interpreting the importance of life, the validity of actions, and the expectations of the future were suddenly gone. Nietzsche’s concept of the *übermensch* was in part a response to the nihilism of post-Christian Europe. The “superman” was master of his own fate who has overcome slave morality and the nihilism that it produces by what Nietzsche referred to as the transvaluation of values – the transcendence of common social coin – the will striving towards the power of self-affirmation on its own terms.

The second set of distinctions of nihilism that Slocombe reconfigures for his readers, divides the generic term nihilism into genres: ethical/moral nihilism, metaphysical/ontological nihilism, epistemological/alethiological nihilism – to which I will add political nihilism. This exercise in genre building reveals that of course, the word nihilism may be tacked onto the end of any field of human thought (being, truth, actions, etc.). But this is no serious criticism unless the genres prove to be either useless or redundant¹². I add political nihilism to the list for two reasons: firstly because this term is found in philosophical encyclopedias as a distinct form, and secondly because none of the other terms seemed to fit as well with one of the many particular forms of dialectic engagement that bands like the Sex Pistols and Radiohead in their own unique ways evince.

Epistemological nihilism states that knowledge is impossible (either due to the noumenal emptiness/irrationality of the universe, or the putative inability of our senses and intellect to concoct a faithful conception of the noumenal universe and its operations)¹³. Metaphysical nihilism is a many-shaded phenomenon in its own right. Firstly and most simply it is the belief that there is no god/higher power that created/sustains the universe – atheism (better, materialism). Secondly and less simply is the belief that the universe itself doesn’t exist – in a weak sense, one might imagine that what we call “the universe” is a concept (a perception) that strictly speaking, has no meaning apart from the assignment of a meaning given by us (the observing subject). In the strong sense, one might

¹⁰ (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 5-6)

¹¹ (Slocombe, 16), (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 10, [aphorism 5])

¹² This is the reason that Slocombe does away with Karen Carr’s separate categorizations of epistemological nihilism from alethiological nihilism (the anti-belief that truth is unknowable, and thus is meaningless as a concept).

¹³ By “noumenal” the reader will understand something like “the universe as it is in reality, as it is in itself without commerce with human perception.” This term is part of a binary opposition that sets it against the “phenomenal,” which is “the universe as we (sentient humans) understand it as mediated through the senses and the intellect.”

imagine that it signifies a belief that the universe (including ourselves) literally doesn't exist – a negation of the Cartesian principle of *cogito ergo sum* in which we, and the world around us, are illusions. More generally speaking though, metaphysical nihilism is concerned with the relationship between natural and supernatural – a realm most easily confused with existentialism – and for groups like the Smashing Pumpkins, who flirt with metaphysical nihilism, it is the struggle that threatens to terminate in the denial of the spiritual (from a theological perspective). Ethical nihilism is the denial that specific ethical/moral systems (read: codes of behavior) have universal justifiable validity: meaning. In the absence of ethical mores, it is therefore possible that hedonistic egotism and violence will fill the void. And although Slocombe posits that such a turn would be one possible reaction to nihilism (rather than constitutive of ethical nihilism as a whole), it's important to recognize that this reaction is arguably the most historically demonstrated one. I will attempt to show that it is this form of nihilism that the Sex Pistols and their work most uniquely embody. Finally political nihilism is the belief that government and authority are more harm than good – and I would add, could also be thought of as the disbelief in the value or possibility of political engagement as a meaningful way to effect change within the institutions of political control. This form of nihilism is significant to the discourse found within Radiohead's representational apparatuses¹⁴.

Nihilism through the *Via Negativa*

Having examined the term from within (by splintering it into subsets), it is necessary to gain more clarity by comparing the term(s) of nihilism with two other ideological positions with which it is easily conflated. By saying what nihilism is *not*, or in some cases that it is *not necessarily*, we can further increase the pixilation of our examination of the music. This pixilation will perhaps yield surprising results in the case of bands like the Sex Pistols and the Smashing Pumpkins. And so it is necessary to make a few loose distinctions where they can be made between nihilism and anarchism, and between nihilism and existentialism.

The two realms of nihilistic expression that are easiest to confuse with anarchism are ethical and political nihilism. While it is important to acknowledge that some forms of anarchism, as discussed in many philosophical reference resources, are nihilistic, not all forms of anarchism are. Anarchism shares with political nihilism, the desire to negate (make nothing of) all forms of

¹⁴ By way of cautionary statement, it must be said that these bands represent so many other possible ways of slicing up the universe ideologically and categorically. My purpose in this paper is not to claim that the only (or perhaps even the central) feature of the idiolect of either of the bands is one of nihilism – only that the portion of their work that I intend to discuss does. The Sex Pistols aren't a "nihilism band," but they are a band whose work engages with the tenor of nihilism and its principles.

representative government. It shares with ethical nihilism, the rejection of all forms of authority¹⁵. And like most forms of nihilism (and existentialism), anarchism replaces the deterritorialized form of social-political control with the ego (the will), which makes self-determinations. However there are some forms of anarchism that are different from all forms of nihilism in at least three important ways. I am principally referring to the anarchisms of Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin.

Proudhon was the father of Mutualism, a form of anarchy that shares with all forms the abolition of centralized authority. The telos of this form of anarchy, however, is not the destruction of *order* (as in individualist anarchism, a form that may accurately be dubbed nihilist) but its replacement with something putatively better – with what Proudhon refers to as “spontaneous order.” Bakunin’s collectivist anarchy resembles something more akin to communism without the State as arbiter of production and ownership. In the case of both Proudhon and Bakunin, the central concerns are with property/labor rights and ownership, rather than with philosophical meanings and determinations. With Mutualism and Collectivist anarchy, the reduction of the State to nothing is purely an instrumental activity aimed at creating a situation that better respects human freedom. Political nihilism – mediated through Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism as a destructive force that leaves alienation in its wake – does not seek for or anticipate that a better system is either possible or attainable.

Bakunin clarifies that, when speaking of anarchism:

“I mean that freedom of the individual which, instead of stopping far from the freedom of others as before a frontier, sees on the contrary the extending and the expansion into the infinity of its own free will, the unlimited freedom of the individual through the, freedom of all; freedom through solidarity, freedom in equality; the freedom which triumphs over brute force and the principle of authoritarianism, the ideal expression of that force which, after the destruction of all terrestrial and heavenly idols, will find and organize a new world of undivided mankind upon the ruins of all churches and States¹⁶.”

Notice that Bakunin’s definition of freedom, as formulated above, is not purely or singularly a *personal* freedom, but it is a collective freedom. Freedom for the individual is coterminous with that of the other. Bakunin values economic and social equality, and of justice, human dignity, and “moral and spiritual well-being.” Whereas Johnny Rotten’s anarchist – who *is* anarchy – wants to “destroy the passerby.” The anarchist of “Anarchy in the U.K.” does not speak of solidarity, but only

¹⁵ Though ethical nihilism rejects authority structures based on the principled anti-belief that authority (which in most instances really refers to systems of ethical beliefs and behavioral principles as opposed to political institutions which are themselves only the guardians of those beliefs and principles) lacks validity because it is not objectively justifiable.

¹⁶ (Bakunin, *Where I Stand*, 1)

destruction. He embraces the first part of Bakunin's formulation "The passion for destruction..." but leaves out "...is a creative passion, too!"¹⁷

Proudhon, like Bakunin, speaks of an anarchy whose ethical values are derived from the commune rather than solely from the ego. Authority has a place in Proudhon – its rightful and native soil is within the family unit – and explaining his views on the relationship between authority and the State, he argues that the State

"...borrowed from the Family, the second component part of Humanity, the principle which is proper to it alone, Authority, and by the arbitrary use of this principle, they constructed an artificial system, varied according to periods and climates, which has been regarded as the natural order and necessary for humanity"¹⁸.

There is no room in the Sex Pistols' ideological commitments for the authority of the family. The Pistols, by means of a reversal, destroy entirely the authority that Proudhon the anarchist admits as natural. "(Don't Give Me) No Lip (Child)":

*"Don't you give me no lip child
Don't you talk back to me
You're no lip child
That ain't the way it's gonna be."*

"Don't you give me no lip, child, don't you talk back to me": God, from an eighteen-year-old, that's pretty sarky stuff!" says Rotten¹⁹. The ironic and rebellious heat generated by this Dave Berry cover was such that it demolished the daydream of patriarchal authority by descending upon it like an act of teenage terrorism. There is no negotiation, just a violent seizure of power.

Existentialism (or proto-existentialism), as is noted above, is really the proper philosophical category for a philosopher like Friedrich Nietzsche. Among the ultimate concerns of existential thought are numbered concepts such as freedom, value (meaning), self-affirmation, anxiety (concerning death, fate, meaninglessness, guilt), and responsibility. Although certain existentialist assessments of the human condition may share some affirmations with nihilism (such as the "death of god" or the imperative to define one's own essence in contradistinction to the passive assumption of self-definition from institutions of power and authority), the two fields of thought are distinct and contrary approaches to understanding the human condition. The existentialist contract with reality is one of a constant positive dialectical engagement. It is constant because it is fundamental to living in the world. It is positive because it is concerned with creating meanings and acknowledging ethical responsibility. It is dialectical because it involves living vitally in the tension that is created by anxiety

¹⁷ (Bakunin, *The Reaction in Germany*, 1)

¹⁸ (Proudhon, *General Idea of Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*, 240)

¹⁹ (Savage, 126)

by taking the anxiety “onto oneself” through what theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich calls “the courage to be²⁰.”

Nihilism on the other hand, as Nietzsche portrayed it, is a philosophy of collapse or ultimate resignation. The nihilist no longer looks for meaning, but rather surrenders to the impossibility that meaning exists. Nihilism is a philosophy of negation, a system in which false meanings are uprooted violently but at whose end there remain no true meanings in their place. It is a “unilect,” the nihilist does not balance his negation with a positing – even one that is “in spite of...”²¹ The concept of the *übermensch* was Nietzsche’s affirmation that nothing is not enough – this is what makes his work existentialist – the *übermensch* is a Romantic caricature of the engagement of the full-blown existentialists of the early twentieth century.

Punk as an historical moment vs. Punk as a genre

Following Will Slocumbe’s bipartite examination of nihilism, it will be necessary to briefly compare the differences between an historical punk and a generic punk. By establishing a more flexible definition of punk – that is, an a-historical one – it will be possible to build links and acknowledge influences more fully. To adopt a merely historical definition will force us to exclude bands like the Smashing Pumpkins and Radiohead, not to mention Green Day, Nine Inch Nails, the Offspring, and Nirvana. Though nearly none of these bands are 100% Punk and nothing else, and though they are perhaps as different from one another as they are from the Sex Pistols or the Ramones, it is significantly arguable that without the punk moment, they would not exist as they do. The technical and stylistic topoi that these groups share make a generic reading of punk a useful activity.

As a moment, both Laing and Savage join a host of other commentators in aligning the opening salvos of punk with the disintegrating economic environment of the British Empire and the hopeless economic prospects of the Bowery district in the city of New York²². Savage also portrays a world that has turned on its youth, and a youth subculture that had resorted to tearing that world down as much as is possible by tossing aside its social restrictions and commendations, and becoming its own advocacy. This is the real ideological force of the DIY aesthetic.

The punk moment was the creation of a particular set of individuals. Savage’s book England’s Dreaming begins as the personal history of Malcolm McLaren, along with Vivienne Westwood, the ideological and financial father and mother of the Sex Pistols. *The End of the Century*, Michael Gramiglia and Jim Fields’ treatment of the Ramones pays due reverence to individuals such

²⁰ (Tillich, 86-90)

²¹ (ibid, 32)

²² (Laing, 5) (Savage, xvi, 4) See Also Legs McNeil’s descriptions of the Bowery in *The End of the Century*

as Hilly Kristal, Danny Fields, Arturo Vega, and Legs McNeil as personalities that played influential roles in the creation and publication of the American punk moment. Because the major media outlets and record labels made for finicky, conservative, and ultimately undependable bedfellows to the punk movement, a self-advocacy that was somewhat of a small wonder rose to meet the needs of the movement. This self-advocacy took the form of fanzines such as Mark P's *Sniffin' Glue* in Great Britain and John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil's *Punk* in the United States. There were probably hundreds of these fanzines in variously sized circulations that served to put the word out about bands like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, The Stooges, the Ramones, and their cohorts. The DIY aesthetic was a result of the music industries uncertainty about both the marketability of this new (and seemingly dangerous) music, and the mainstream media's hypocritical self-righteousness regarding it. This music expressed its power in the form of an unsettling mirror that was forced into the hands of both the music business and the mainstream media – a mirror that only reflected back the superficially obeyed social norms against which these bands raged. Punk's definitional response to the glam rock and cock rock that preceded it, with its positioning as the music of amateurs, low-lives, drop-outs, and freaks, is also a central temporal identifier. That is to say that punk's putative anti-virtuosic vitriol that was aimed at the glam and cock rock genres, and which was a reaction to the aesthetic elitism and artificiality, was all of the moment as it was shared by several other punk rock groups and individuals. In Don Lett's 2005 punkumentary *Punk Attitude*, New York Doll David Johansen voices this complaint:

"You know Rock and Roll had become just this be-denim-ed kind of...drum solo..kind of thing and what we wanted to do was bring it down to three minutes and put that Little Richard drag on top of it and that's what rock and roll was to us..."²³

and Leg's McNeil adds:

"You know everyone was so fed up with what was going on with rock and roll, which was Deep Purple...these big bloated concerts where they did these organ solos for twenty minutes or these guitar solos for twenty minutes..."²⁴

The Sex Pistols declare that they are "pretty vacant," they wear unemployment as a badge of honor, as a matter of conscious choice rather than of victimization. But to speak of punk boredom as merely a result of the lack of occupation would be a mistake. The boredom of the first punk generation was not merely the result of a collective dissatisfaction with the perceived stagnation and grandstanding within rock music, but was also a social and perhaps existential boredom as well.

Boredom as "ennui" is the result of two simultaneous situations, one internal the other external. The internal "making meaningless" of the values that sustain respectable adult society with

²³ (Letts, *Punk Attitude*)

²⁴ (ibid.)

its decorum and subterfuge took the form of shocking dress and shocking lyrics. The dress, as has been well documented elsewhere, was often a calculated reversal or confusion of gender roles, class symbols, and other social symbols drawn together in order to make dissonant the various messages contained in clothing and other products. Punk dress may have been shocking, but it was certainly also very, very thoughtful. The lyrics, as we've already seen to some extent, were calculated to be equally shocking – a dutiful rendering up of the very symbols that we are told express the odd, the brutal, the abnormal, and the taboo. When “the highest values devalue themselves” all that remains is to be either bored or terrified. In this respect, the Sex Pistols and the Ramones *became* the terror of boredom – they became “anarchy.” The psychological violence enacted upon the youth of the Seventies was in real terms, only a repackaging of the social violence reserved for the lower echelons of society – the outcasts²⁵.

The shock techniques of the punk subculture can be seen as the realization that real social power – the power to command attention and response – lay in the foregrounding of celebratory associations with taboo subject matters and social *personae non grata*. The open defilement of the monarchy, the racy clothing, and the audiences (composed of hookers, homosexuals, and other “ne'er-do-wells”), were the sites of resistance upon which bands like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones could do battle with ethical norms. Likewise, the use of the Swastika is a prime example of the punk appropriation of the ultimate symbol of evil used – in most cases only as a means to an end – in order to make meaningless the belief that any moral system had universal, justifiable validity. The swastika for contemporary Western society is simultaneously a symbol of the greatest possible evil, and a symbol of our social failure to insulate ourselves against its bizarre and grotesque appeal. When the Jordan or Sousxie Soux and other early punks sported swastika armbands, they did so from within a culture whose actual members willfully chose to believe and support the ideas of National Socialism. And if not National Socialism, then white supremacy, and if not white supremacy, then colonialism, and if not colonialism then one of a host of sexual, racial, and gender-based bigotries that have practically become symbols themselves for particular periods of Western social history. These public displays were a way of rubbing societies nose in its own excrement – if they are shocking, it is in the same way that the silent corpse of Abel must have shocked Cain. As suggested above, the Sex Pistols were not committing acts of anarchy proper. These songs had nothing to do with ownership, property, the right to manage road construction contracts, or to oversee the efficient operation of public health care and education. The Pistols sang about one's ownership of oneself, about the absolute right, not of a transvaluation of values, but of a *transgression* of values.

²⁵ Larry Grossberg holds that this psychological violence has been a perennial feature of Western society. In his essay “Reflections of a Dissatisfied Popular Music Scholar,” one of his primary criticisms of rock scholarship is that it fails to engage in the public discourse in defense and advocacy of youth. (Grossberg, 44-5).

Already from the preceding paragraphs placing punk music in its early situation, it is possible to begin to see traits that punk shares with music that preceded it and music that followed it regardless of whether or not that music has been called “punk²⁶.” This is why it is necessary to examine punk as a genre – as a set of characteristic choices – so that we can make meaningful the connections that inform the genealogy that is suggested. In no particular order one may say that punk rock as a genre include the following: discursive relationship with musicianship, the negative/destructive/rebellious impulse, political/social commentary, and ennui (boredom). It is possible to find other similarities such as the DIY aesthetic (for instance recall the Radiohead decision to release *In Rainbows* the band’s – most recent studio album – *sans* recording contract over the internet for free²⁷). What will be interesting to us is not simply to point out *that* there is a sense of boredom in Radiohead and the Smashing Pumpkins as well as in the Sex Pistols, but instead to map out the unique shades of that boredom; what it means, where it comes from, and the purpose that it serves for the idiolect of each band.

In countless interviews and articles examining the historical roots of punk (as noted above), much has been said about the musical incompetence and simplicity – the reduction to nearly nothing – of musicianship (the technical abilities, the range of expression, and the group dynamic) of bands like the Sex Pistols, and the Ramones. This crudeness lent much to the sense that the bands on stage couldn’t care less about the audience in the pit, or especially the critics lurking in the shadows. Actually the relationship is much more dynamic, more theatrical. As long as the sense of not caring is communicated (and much care went into creating this sense), then the audience was given a cause to participate in, a real *esprit de corps* that was an aspect of negating ethics. Furthermore, the negation of musicianship flowed in a larger sense from the negation of personhood, ego, agency – of something very hard to parse out in words, but evident in the expressions encountered in the music.

²⁶ Take for example what one could call “proto-punk” bands like MC5 and The Stooges, and what I refer to as post-punk bands like Green Day, Smashing Pumpkins, and Radiohead. This is to acknowledge that a genre like punk is neither a phenomenon that is radically new and disconnected from the history of rock music at large, nor was it a phenomenon that completely disappeared. Rather it evolved or emerged from the confluence of a given number of historical eventualities, and it splintered and diffused its influence and its spirit into a strand of other musics – musics that I refer to as “post-punk.”

²⁷ Davis Scheiderman’s article “[We Got Heads on Sticks/You got Ventriloquists](#)”: [Radiohead and the Improbability of Resistance](#) is particularly insightful in terms of the band’s (and their record label’s co-option of DIY methods and personifications utilized in their virulent marketing techniques. Such that mixed messages are sent about the true nature of the band itself. Yorke consistently opines about the manner in which the music industry has packaged, managed, and controlled the band’s creative and personal lives. The latter efforts seem contingent on an understanding of the band as independent agents that have overcome the need for large corporate support.

While there are traces of the negation of musicianship to be found in regards to Radiohead in particular, the larger negation of personhood is clearly present in the music of both themselves and the Smashing Pumpkins:

*I'm a creep, I'm a wierdo
What the hell am I doing here?
I don't belong here...*
(Radiohead, "Creep")

*My reflection, dirty mirror
There's no connection to myself
I'm your lover, I'm your zero
I'm the face in your dreams of glass
So save your prayers...*
(Smashing Pumpkins, "Zero")

*Cause you're all whores and I'm a fag
And I've got no mother and I've got no dad
To save me the wasted, save me from myself
I lie just to be real, and I'd die just to feel
Why do the same old things keep on happening?
Because beyond my hopes there are no feelings*
(Smashing Pumpkins, "Tales of a Scorched Earth")

Billy Corgan's "zero" and Thom Yorke's "Creep" are echoes of the self-negation of Johnny Rotten's "pretty vacant" youth – the self-loathing is really an exultation in the sheer destruction of the self – a self-affirmation of the empty self. The loser is entirely worthless, only knows three chords, does the opposite of what is ethically valuable, and has "no feelings" and "no future."

When Johnny Rotten yells "get pissed, destrooooooyyyy!" at the end of "Anarchy in the U.K.," he was expressing one of the core values of the punk social dynamic. John Holmstrom remarked: "We wanted punk rock to wipe out the hippies, blow up the whole world, and start it all over again...²⁸" The response to a broken social order from the punk perspective was to smash up the bits even smaller, burn them into oblivion and sweep away the ashes. For bands like the Clash, there was a constructive aspect that balanced the destructive force – but for the Sex Pistols, the post-deluge repopulating of the social world was never to come. As Greil Marcus has it: "There was a black hole at the heart of the Sex Pistols' music, a willful lust for the destruction of values that no one could be comfortable with...²⁹"

It's true that rock and roll has always to some extent been a rebellious art form (a fact that led Letts to trace punk's genealogy through Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley). However, the flavor of rebellion that emerged from punk music is rather unique in that it acted as a kind of dam break. Punk rebellion is first and foremost *total* in its commitment. Elvis Presley sang music and danced in a way

²⁸ (Letts, Punk Attitude)

²⁹ (Marcus, 10)

that raised eyebrows, but he also cut gospel albums and played well the part of the penitent convict when the internal need arose. His rebellion was a rebellion in spite of the fact that he no doubt believed that some of what he had done was sinful, bad. Patti Smith on the other hand crooned, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine...” It was Smith’s music, not Presley’s that would become an important point of departure to so many early punk rockers.

The destructive/rebellious impulse finds different garb in the music of the Smashing Pumpkins and Radiohead however. Radiohead embodies the negation by positioning themselves outside of it – and in doing so their rebellion is like a grown-up version of that of the Sex Pistols. Whereas the Sex Pistols’ music was an emoting, a direct embodiment of the anger of boredom, Radiohead leaves the anger for the listeners to construct for themselves. They do this by simply describing (although in no neutral terms) the political, economic, and ethical forces, both visible and invisible, that are destroying personal agency and freedom in the modern world. Theirs is a much more sensitive appreciation of the causes of socio-economic degradation and inequality, and so theirs is also a more rational and nuanced expression of those causes. The band members consistently cite writers such as Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Philip Larkin, and other anti-establishment academic and artistic figures as being influential in their own thinking³⁰. The flavor of rebellion in Radiohead’s idiolect is not youthful and self-destructive, but informed and critical.

The early Smashing Pumpkins destructive/rebellious impulse was not aimed at a political target, as was much of that of the Sex Pistols or Radiohead. Corgan’s anger is an especially painful because it is completely powerless. In a modulated form of the spirit of early punk, Corgan sings:

*“The World is a Vampire, sent to drain
Secret destroyers, hold you up to the flames
And what do I get, for my pain?
Betrayed desires, and a piece of the game...”*

Despite all my rage I’m still just a rat in a cage...”
(Smashing Pumpkins, “Bullet with Butterfly Wings”)

³⁰ (Doheny, 89)

“Spaced,” from 1994’s *Pisces Iscariot* could have been penned by Johnny Rotten himself:

*“Dad
Dead
Was I ever alive
Fucking makes you alive for one moment...”*

*I was born alive
I’ll fucking kill you
I’ll beat your soft baby head with my own hand...*

*While I may be no expert on this reality,
There is no god, but shame
god is hurt, god is cold
Try that once, god is dead
There is not another one
Battle...”*

Clearly something else is taking place in the Smashing Pumpkins idiolect – the anger in this music is an existential anger, and the focus of the rebellion and negation is not terrestrial, but heavenly. It shares with Sex Pistol anger, directness, and an emotive flavor – the image of an alienated child.

Boredom (ennui) exists within a complex philosophical network of meanings, causes, and responses, however a couple of simplifications can be made for present purposes. Firstly, boredom relates to nihilistic expression in that it is a result of the nihilistic technique of “making nothing of.” When a value is de-valuated, be it ethical or ontological, it creates a void – a boredom. This boredom, predictably, only causes more negation – it is one of the prime movers behind the destructive impulse:

*“There were times, I’m sure you knew
When there was fuck,
Fuck, fuck all else to do...”*

*The record shows, I shot a bloke
I did it my way.”*

(Sex Pistols, “The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle”)

Secondly, boredom relates to existentialism in that it is the terror of realizing the emptiness of those things which we turn to for value. Or put positively, existential thought is a creative, alternative response to nihilistic negation. Where the negation of nihilism represents a terminal stage – a conclusion beyond which no other conclusions are possible, the ennui of existentialism results in the ultimate question of man’s freedom and his responsibility in light of that freedom – the significance of choice.

Sex Pistol boredom, as depicted in “Pretty Vacant” is a paean to passivity. The non-entity of the song makes no decisions, is perpetually out to lunch, and above all *doesn't care*. In the words of “Seventeen” they are lazy sods that don't work because there is “no reality.” However, the purpose of boredom in early punk music and particularly in the Pistols, as Marcus points out, is that it was recognized as a method of social control³¹. This sentiment was evoked eloquently by a graffiti slogan sprayed on the wall between the Ladbroke Grove and Westbourne park tube stops of London:

*“SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY – TUBE – WORK – DINER [sic] – WORK –
TUBE – ARMCHAIR – TUBE – WORK – HOW MUCH CAN YOU TAKE –
ONE IN FIVE CRACKS UP”³²*

The response to this boredom was to fill up one's time with activity that negated the ends of the social control for which the boredom was created. Don't go to work. Don't behave. Reject the ethical, moral, political, and spiritual values that are forced upon you as a means of control. Resist!

Boredom in Radiohead is actually quite similar in its teleological interpretation as in the Sex Pistols. As is discussed below, Yorke's lyrics for a significant portion of the Radiohead discography, particularly in *OK COMPUTER*, describe the synthetic pall of suburban ordinariness and resignation. The sheer obedience and innocence that are taken advantage of reveal a sinister core behind the peaceful veneer depicted in songs like “Palo Alto,” “Fitter, Happier,” and “No Surprises.” The response to Radiohead's ennui is not contained in the lyrical representations of the subjects of the songs – they are warnings, and Radiohead's songs are songs of complaint in the anachronistic sense³³.

The Smashing Pumpkins have a different sense of boredom that is ennui proper, its existential expression. Although the band's idiolect features lyrics that engage with the patterns of social control and manipulation common to the Pistols and Radiohead (for instance in the song “Zero”), the majority of the lyrics that address ennui do so from the perspective of a person struggling to replace empty values with meaningful, self-determined values. In one instance, it seems as if Corgan echoes the Sex Pistols “Pretty Vacant” when he sings:

*My boredom has outshined the sun
It's all down low
I just want to have some
Little fun*

*Oh yeah, another day
Oh yeah, what a waste
What it is, It never was
I don't care or give a fuck*
(Smashing Pumpkins, “Plume”)

³¹ (Marcus, 49-53)

³² (Savage, 111)

³³ That is, they are “laments”

But when Billy Corgan sings, “I just want to have some little fun” there is no conviction there – it’s not possible to see this as a genuine statement, it is its own criticism. On the contrary, in another song from 1995’s aptly titled *Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness*:

*I fear that I'm ordinary, just like everyone
To lie here and die among the sorrows
Adrift among the days
For everything I ever said
And everything I've ever done is gone and dead
As all things must surely have to end
And great lovers will one day have to part*
(Smashing Pumpkins, “Muzzle”)

The ordinariness Corgan describes here is intimately connected to the finitude of the human condition, and this finitude is in turn directly connected to the nothingness of transitory meaningfulness. How can human actions, relationships, and identities have any real meaning if they will ultimately cease to be? This thought is the emotional import of existential boredom and it informs the Pumpkins work from this particular period profoundly.

The Sex Pistols and ethical nihilism

Mary Harron, a Canadian-born journalist and one-time writer for *Punk* magazine once characterized the early punk music scene of New York thusly:

“Hippy culture had gone very mainstream: for the first time Bohemia embraced fast food.” It was about saying yes to the modern world. Punk, like Warhol, embraced everything that cultured people, and hippies, detested: plastic, junk-food, B-movies, advertising, making money – although no one ever did. You got so sick of being so nice, mounting an enforced attitude of goodness and health. Punk was liberating and new: the idea of smoking sixty cigarettes a day and staying up all night on speed³⁴.”

This characterization would not be out of touch with the reality of the Sex Pistols’ London. Although there was a mutual dislike for hippie culture in Britain, the nexus of British punk rebellion was located within the doldrums of respectable citizenry³⁵. And although the vast majority of rock music historically and statistically vilifies conformity and values its rejection, Brit-punk non-conformity can be traced to a specific set of tangible social and economic conditions. Yet bands of the Sex Pistols’ persuasion were going far beyond a simple social non-conformity. Their aims were something much more like total ethical negation. After all, one might just as well become a hippie if one’s only goal was non-conformity, or become an Oxford don, or a pearl fisher, or a Trappist monk. The way that the Sex Pistols performed non-conformity was predicated not just upon doing something that is uncommon, but doing something that is absurd and, from an ordinary and sober

³⁴ (Savage, 133)

³⁵ Consider Sousie Sioux’s savoring of the thought that punk music was a definitional “fuck off” to the hippies (Letts, *Punk Attitude*)

perspective, meaningless. As stated above, this consisted not of a transvaluation of values, but of an absolute dialectical negation of anything that could logically be considered a beneficial value either socially or individually.

Songs like “No Feelings” and “The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle” reveal that not every possible value is devalued in the Sex Pistols’ idiolect. The one value that remains is the uncontested sanctity of absolute personal freedom. However, instead of being the cornerstone of an ethic, unlimited personal self-determination is the ultimate negation of any ethical system when what is ethical is designated (as is ordinarily the case) as what is universal (that is, what is “universifiable,” that which can be made to apply to every human without exception). If the first law of ethics is “don’t make an exception of yourself,” then building a personal ethics off of self-exception – as do the Sex Pistols – cannot but result in an irresolvable contradiction: nonsense, meaningless, devaluation, negation – making nothing.

The music of the Sex Pistols is not only a negation of the mechanisms of socialization (of the state, of the family, of religion, of society) as a means of bringing about the *summum bonum*, but also a negation of the core value of the *summum bonum* itself. This negation is brought about not solely towards the end of increasing personal freedom and youthful amusement, but as Mary Harron went on to express:

“...people needed to say something that negative. I liked that time of decay. There was nihilism in the atmosphere, a longing to die³⁶.”

One peculiarly extreme way in which ethical nihilism is articulated in the music of the Pistols can be seen in the songs “Belsen Was a Gas,” and “No One Is Innocent.” The celebration, let alone the *mention* of what occurred at Bergen-Belsen (a notorious Nazi extermination camp located in Northeastern Germany), and in the manner of an unthinkable *pun*, is immediately offensive even without hearing any of the lyrics of the music itself:

*“Belsen was a gas I heard the other day
In the open graves where the Jews all lay
Life is fun and I wish you were here
They wrote on postcards to those held dear...”*

Nowhere in the three minutes or so of the songs duration does Johnny Rotten ever pronounce a moral judgment upon the Nazi offenders of Bergen-Belsen. This fact doesn’t prove that he held no disdain for those Nazi perpetrators or their actions, but rather that there is nothing so sacred as to not be utilized towards the desired ends of negating the concept of an ethic itself. “No One Is Innocent” is not the negative way of stating that “everyone is imperfect,” but rather of negating the concept of guilt itself by means of wallowing in it – by immersing oneself positively in a

³⁶ (Savage, 133)

paean to the most extreme examples of evil one can find. This is why in “No One Is Innocent” nearly all of the villains are contemporary and historical. By turns, the Pistols’ implore God to save Martin Boorman, Myra Hindley, Ian Brady, Ronnie Biggs, and Idi Amin. Near the end of the song, they also ask God to save the Good Samaritan³⁷.

Martin Boorman was a well-known Nazi (the head of the Party Chancellery and Hitler’s private secretary), Myra Hindley and Ian Brady had in 1965 together committed the Moors Murders, and were convicted as child murderers – acts which they had undertaken as an artistic statement³⁸. Ronnie Biggs was involved in an infamous one-million-pound 1963 train robbery, and he had escaped the authorities on several occasions finally settling in Rio de Janeiro as a popularly celebrated outlaw³⁹. Idi Amin was the notorious Ugandan dictator who violently suppressed political opposition and generated policies that caused the deaths of between 100,000 and 500,000 of the citizens of his own country.

The import of celebrating the acts of all of these notorious villains is that each act was a perpetration of what were simply other possible (if objectively evil) ethical/moral systems and the values that are meaningful to them. National Socialism was an ethical and moral system first, and a form of governance second. Art provides its own ethics in which the *summum bonum* is the expression of a sublime idea(I). The outlaw-folk-hero, of which Ronnie Biggs was an example, exposed a contradictory strain contained in contemporary petite-bourgeois culture. The celebrity criminal – a kind of rootless Robin Hood whose cowardly self-centeredness leads him into a nomadic invisibility – is a token of what is unethical even amongst the obedient subjects of Great Britain. Idi Amin was merely the latest incarnation of the hypnotic Hitler-style aristocrat in whose grotesque abrogation of the social contract a horrified but ultimately malleable public found perverse fascination. In all of these cases, what was as significant as it was apparent, was that the virtuous public was actually invested, fascinated, and in some deeply concealed way, jealous of each of these villains. In a manner of speaking, “No One Is Innocent” serves to illustrate that at the core of our social hypocrisy is the truth that we are already ethical nihilists – we’re just too cowardly to admit it. The inclusion of the Good Samaritan and his binary pairing with the “worthless creep” is another way of saying that there really is no difference between the two. To act virtuously is just as meaningless as to act un-virtuously.

³⁷ Asking God to save in this song is clearly reminiscent of “God Save the Queen” where Johnny Rotten intones “Gooood Saaaaaaaves” in a sarcastic snarl that negates both the concept of guilt and the concept of salvation in a single unspoken subtext.

³⁸ (Marcus, 28)

³⁹ (Savage, 455)

Though the protagonist of the Sex Pistols' *No Feelings* is entirely self-defined and has rejected any controlling ideology via a pathway of ultimate negation of societal norms, he is not the *übermensch* because his aim is not to overcome but to obliterate. He has no feelings for anybody else. Rather than the image of mankind as he will be in the ultimate stages of evolutionary achievement, Johnny Rotten's "*üntermensch*" is the very picture of social regression and devolution. The *übermensch* is the victorious cavalier that leaves the collective society behind only to draw its individuals forward into their own actualization⁴⁰. The *üntermensch* merely says, "To hell with you and your morality, I'm having fun."

The Smashing Pumpkins and metaphysical nihilism

Billy Corgan, however consistently positions himself as an *übermensch*, if not through choice, as a response to the alienation that threatens to engulf the psyche of his protagonist. Nowhere is this seen more explicitly than in the song "Disarm" where the listener is introduced to Corgan as the archetypal "lost boy" prematurely left alone "...to whither in denial..." to construct his own awareness:

*"I used to be a little boy
Alone in my shoes
And what I choose is my voice
What's a boy supposed to do?"*

Corgan is left to his own self-definition through denial as a response to his abandonment. To *choose* is the only meaningful act left for him, the only way to escape meaninglessness; these lines carry in themselves a dulcet weight, his choice is the only thing he has, and it remains a mere consolation. The fact that he does eventually seem to escape ultimate negation puts Corgan, along with Nietzsche, squarely in the existentialist camp rather than the nihilist⁴¹.

The gradual transitions of Corgan's metaphysical outlook can be discovered by a simple chronological exploration of the lyrics he wrote for the two incarnations of the Smashing Pumpkins, and the work in between (Zwan and Corgan's solo work). Upon a careful examination of the lyrics, it's possible to divide his metaphysics into three stages or periods: the first agnostic phase, the atheist/nihilistic phase, and the second agnostic phase. The height of the atheistic phase occurs at the height of the popularity of the first incarnation of the Smashing Pumpkins. It is hard to put an exact date on the beginning of the second agnostic phase, but it appears near the release of *The Future Embrace* (the aforementioned solo album). Both the agnostic phases of Corgan's lyrical output are

⁴⁰ He is like Kandinsky's artist class that draws the triangle of human consciousness ever upward through uncommon vision. (Kandinsky, 27)

⁴¹ Warnock positions Nietzsche along with Kierkegaard as a kind of proto-existentialist (Warnock, 12-22)

marked by references to Biblical stories and beliefs. The atheistic phase climaxes on statements that are quite similar to Nietzsche's madman proclaiming the death of God. Very early on though the agnostic question looms. In "Tristessa" from 1991's *Gish*, the singer poses this question:

*"Do you ever wake up and find yourself alone?
Do you ever wake far from home?
What you believe
You'll wish to receive
I won't believe in you
Tristessa..."*

Tristessa may actually refer to a quasi-autobiographical novel of the same name written by Beat poet Jack Kerouac. In the novel, the Mexican prostitute "Tristessa" (derived from the Spanish word "tristeza" that means "sadness") is the name Kerouac gave to a real life Mexican prostitute he had dated whose name was actually Esperanza (from the Spanish word for "hope"). The novel portrays the impoverished morphine-addicted junky as an innocent, saintly woman who navigates the terror of her life with transcendent grace. In Corgan's song, the aloneness and the alienation expressed by this lines quoted above are perhaps intimations of a soul for whom *esperanza* is slowly changing into *tristeza*. The song may on the surface be about an unfaithful woman (just as the novel may literally portray a Mexican prostitute navigating dangerous and immoral situations), but these lines seem to suggest that Tristessa is really a metaphor, or a token of something else – something much more fundamental. From the same album, we are given the first among many songs that reference elements of the Judeo-Christian Bible in "I Am One."

*"I am one as you are three
Try to find messiah in your trinity...
Am I as I seem?
I'm down
Down, so down...
Time is right for a guiding light
Try to turn to reasons in your bitter life...
Try to look for something
In your city to Burn, you'll burn"*

The reference here is partly reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6:4, 10

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord God, the Lord is One...
And when the Lord God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers..."*

This passage, often known as "the Shema" is an affirmation of God's oneness that is practiced by Orthodox Jews as part of daily religious ritual. Of course, the inclusion of the messiah into this verse, and the reference to the trinity is a Christian adaptation of the original Jewish text. Here, rather than being an affirmation of God, it is a questioning. Corgan expresses Nietzsche's concern with nihilism – that it exposes the former believer to metaphysical meaninglessness. In the Biblical passage, this

command occurs in the context of the transit of the children of Israel into the Promised Land – a destination that gave meaning, identity, and a purpose to the people who believed that God was guiding them to that destination. Corgan’s character is depressed because he senses a lack of that “guiding light” and is looking for something with which to make sense of his bitter life. Note that although a great deal of doubt is being expressed, there is no sense that the question itself is meaningless or absurd.

Siamese Dream serves to intensify these themes found in *Gish*. Two years after the release of the latter, Corgan sings:

*“Jesus
Are you listening
Up there
To anyone at all?”*

*We are the fossils
The Relics of our time
We mutilate the meanings
So they’re easy to deny...*

*Behind me
The grace of falling snow
Cover up everything you know
Come save me from the awful sound
Of nothing”*

*(“Quiet,” from *Siamese Dream*)*

Here the phrase “We mutilate the meanings so they’re easy to deny” suggest that meaning is a thing that may be manipulated instrumentally (that meanings are created rather than received). The appearance of the concept of denial (similarly as pointed out above in “Disarm”) combined with the desire to be “saved from the awful sound of nothing” is a portent of an aspect of Corgan’s metaphysics that will become more pronounced later. For now, the nothingness remains a threat and a fear – it is not yet surrendered to, accepted. The reference at the end of the verse to the falling snow reminds one of a similar metaphor invoked by T.S. Eliot in “The Burial of the Dead” from *The Wasteland*:

*Winter kept us warm,
Covering the Earth in forgetful snow...⁴²*

⁴¹ (Eliot, 1)

The T.S. Eliot of *The Wasteland* is attempting to convey something about modern life that resonates deeply with the brokenness and dissonance of Corgan's verse. The poem depicts a ruthlessly fragmentary modern world where meaning is likewise threatened by the sheer absurdity and disconnectedness of human thought and experience. It is interesting to note that Eliot's spiritual journal is in many ways similar to that of Billy Corgan⁴³.

"Geek U.S.A." features two references to the story of the fall of mankind taken from Genesis chapter three:

*"Lover, lover let's pretend
We're born as innocents
Cast into the world
With apple eyes...."*

*And then I knew we'd been forsaken
Expelled from paradise
I can't believe them
When they say it's alright..."*

The passage in Genesis doesn't actually mention what kind of fruit with which Eve was tempted, but it has become a tradition to refer to the apple as the fruit of temptation. This song references the Christian doctrine of original sin; that human beings come into the world malfunctioning, so to speak. Traditionally, the Judeo-Christian belief system locates the alienation and absurdity that exists between humankind and their situation in the world in the rift that occurred when Adam and Eve committed that first sin. The results of their crime (which was not eating fruit of course, but of seeking the knowledge of both good *and* evil) was that they were ejected from paradise (also referenced in the song), and a primal tension was created between humankind and its environment (toil by the sweat of the brow, pain in childbirth, death and the killing of animals for both ritual purification and sustenance).

1994's *Pisces Iscariot* is the next stop, further into the territory of metaphysical nihilism. In "Frail and Bedazzled" Corgan opines that "I've lost my soul, lost I'll stay between your hands and my beliefs." "Spaced," a song that clearly portrays a distraught and deconstructing mind was mentioned briefly above. In it we find the first Nietzsche-like statement:

*"There is no god, but shame
God is hurt, god is cold
Try that once, god is dead
There is not another one."*

⁴³ Eliot began life in the Universalist Church, but was discouraged by what he perceived to be its theological emptiness, later went through a crisis period, and emerged with a sort of "committed agnosticism." (Sigg, 14-5)

The “recurring messages of badness” and the “whaling souls of shame” are set in contrast with statements like “fucking makes you feel alive for a moment,” and “I’ll beat your soft baby head with my own hand” which are the voice of heedless transgression. It’s as if Corgan is purposefully treading upon forbidden ground in order to declare his rebellion. From this point on, Smashing Pumpkins are in the second “nihilistic” period. The next studio album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* was a two-disc release that contained over thirty songs. Beginning with Corgan’s “Zero,” whose protagonist becomes a sort of recurring character, Corgan rehashes the Nietzsche-ian declamation quoted above, this time tying his own sense of meaningless into the meaningless of the dead God:

*“Emptiness is loneliness, and loneliness is cleanliness
And cleanliness is godliness, and god is empty just like me
Intoxicated with the madness, I’m in love with my sadness...”*

A kind of cyclical loop is created here: empty = lonely = clean = godly = empty. This is a statement of futility – there is no escaping emptiness because everything you might turn to in order to escape it is essentially the same thing. In the music video for “Zero,” while Corgan sings this line, the camera zeros in on a priest in full celebrants regalia hoisting the grail above his head blessing the elements of the Christian communion. The cup, just like the ritual it represents, which is itself a symbol of a symbol at a ritual carried out between Jesus Christ and his disciples, is empty. Although this song may be about a man’s fixation upon the woman that provides him with meaning, the double statement that both are really devoid of meaning constitutes the purpose of that gesture. This is a portrayal of the nihilistic collapse where the madman has nothing certain left to cling to but his own sadness at the loss of everything. However, in none of this music does one get the feeling that the protagonist shows remorse or regret for casting themselves into this eternal cycle of meaningless and misery. His surrender to the resounding eternal nothingness of his reality leads to a desire, apparently, to celebrate and exacerbate his own nothingness by espousing a position of self-abuse and debasement. “Bullet with Butterfly Wings” is perhaps the seminal Smashing Pumpkins assertion of futility, containing what had become in the nineties, a slogan for dispossessed youth:

*“Despite all my rage I’m still just a rat in a cage
Despite all my rage I’m still just a rat in a cage
And someone will say what is lost can never be saved...”*

which eventually finds its fulfillment in the final refrain:

“And I still believe that I cannot be saved”

In the video, Corgan is wearing his Zero shirt announcing himself as the anti-hero. The central imagery of the video expresses the futility that the singer bemoans lyrically. A mass of slave figures are trying desperately to crawl out of a vast muddy crevice in which they are imprisoned like a herd of cattle. They dig and they climb, but they are repeatedly knocked back into the pit. Our attention is drawn to a single galley figure that emerges from the crowd of slaves (himself also

attempting to escape). It becomes clear as he is attacked by the throng that he is meant to be seen as a representation of Jesus being sacrificed for their freedom. Although the mass is washed off after his sacrifice (suggestive of some form of atonement? sanctification?) they are never able to escape the pit in which they are trapped. “I still believe that I cannot be saved.” Even the sacrifice of these singularly beautiful individual is meaningless because it is unable to deliver us from our true captivity to futility. However, in a perplexing turn, the Jesus figure does actually “rise again.” He is motivically linked to the butterfly of the songs title (who emerges from its cocoon robed in beauty – a resurrection of a kind).

Ave Adore (Latin, “Hail love”), which was released in 1998, is a pop album with dark thematic strains that alternate between a settled sense of metaphysical resignation, and a subtle re-appropriation of Biblical imagery and verse. “Shame,” for instance contains as its central imagery a passage from the New Testament book of 1st Corinthians:

Shame

“Love is good and love is kind

Love is drunk and love is blind

Love is good and love is mine

Love is drunk all the time.”

1st Corinthians 4-8

“Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast...

It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered

It keeps no record of wrongs...”

Despite the ambiguous reference to the Corinthians passage, the Billy Corgan of *Ave Adore* seems no closer to any kind of belief in the divine than the Billy Corgan of *Siamese Dream*. “For Martha,” Corgan’s elegy to his mother who died of breast cancer in 1996, speaks of a narrator who is “shattered as belief” who will yet somehow see Martha on “the other side.” It’s important that what “the other side” consists of is not named. Instead, the listener is told “But for the grace of love” – note, not for the grace of *God* – the narrator would “choose the meaning of heaven.” It is of course, a matter of conjecture to hazard a guess at what that phrase really means, but so be it. Is the voice of this song saying that love as the supreme value motivates him to say what is truthful (authentic) rather than what is comforting? Thus, love prevents him from choosing to believe that there is a Heaven above in which Martha will be waiting to greet him when he dies?

“To Sheila,” more than any other song on the album, addresses the topic at hand:

*“Twilight fades through blistered Avalon,
The sky’s cruel torch on aching autobahn,
Into the uncertain divine, we scream into the last divide...”*

*Lately I just can’t seem to believe,
Discard my friends to change the scenery
It meant the world to hold a bruising faith
But now it’s just a matter of grace”*

Rather than clarifying his metaphysical position, “To Sheila” features lyrics that capture the tension of a questioning soul. That the divine is “uncertain” is certainly less nihilistic than saying “god is dead,” but the third stanza marks Corgan’s narrator as unable to believe in the divine. Here the discarded faith is spoken of as a stage that was important but ultimately only transitory – not the final destination, but a means to it. Grace in the context of these lyrics is, no doubt, a reference to the Christian concept of grace as “unmerited favor.” But without a sense of the divine intact, what can grace mean in this context other than “chance” – the unmerited favored that is also unmet? On the other hand, perhaps what is meant is a sort of pun – a referring to both senses of the word, the sacred and the profane – also signifying by grace, the elegant refinement of moving through the world with courteous goodwill despite the rough winds of uncertainty and absurdity.

Ave Adore marked the point where the tensions that threatened the band began to spell out the impending end for the original members. Darcy Wretzky, the bassist left in the middle of the next two albums (after *Machines of God I*, but before *Machines of God II: Friends and Enemies of Modern Music*)⁴⁴. The two albums were intended to be a “Ring Cycle” of proportions similar to *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. For the albums, Corgan had worked out a story line that involved a character named “Glass” that had grown out of Corgan’s “Zero” anti-hero. Furthermore, each of the band members were to have a character, a persona of their own that they would be constantly trying to embody (on stage and off), all of this in the style of David Bowie’s *Ziggy Stardust* persona. The band fell apart before the project was completed, and none of the band members had embraced Corgan’s plan with any amount of commitment.

Assessing the metaphysical world of these albums is incredibly difficult to do because, although the storyline of Glass and the Machines of God is rife with spiritual sounding language and references to aspects of Christianity and other religions, it’s difficult to tell exactly how (if at all) autobiographical this story is. What further complicates the issue is Corgan’s reluctance (much in the style of Thom Yorke’s) to divulge an authorial commitment to any fixed meaning of the texts. Corgan however released a number of “writings” attached to this particular album, one of which entitled “The Meaning: *Glass and the Machines of God, a modern fable*,” proves to be most helpful.

Corgan writes:

“the I OF THE RADIO [God], told zero that his life was predestined, and in order to fulfill his destiny he would need to devote his life to a much higher calling, one that would look beyond the material trappings of the occluded world...this epiphany that he was indeed important was a life changing and soul shattering experience, giving him newfound confidence and spiritual purpose...he finds sudden clarity in his spirit, but can now see the utter shallowness of his real (and particularly) public life...this sudden change causes many around him to distrust where all of this is coming from...but his band stands with him when he changes his name to GLASS and rechristens the band the now aptly titled MACHINES OF GOD...”⁴⁵”

⁴⁴ (Fricke, 1)

⁴⁵ (Corgan)

Things don't go entirely as planned for Glass. He meets the woman of his dreams, but becomes myopic, paranoid, and preachy. He tells the drug addicted June of his calling, she calls him a madman, his record flops, and his fans ridicule him. He decides (after June is killed in a car accident) to have one last tragic show...

"...after the final concert GLASS is quickly forgotten by the public, and he takes to living in an empty warehouse away from anyone at all...he has always felt alone, but now all of the things that gave him strength, focus, and identity are gone...he faces his own doubt and mortality for the first time...he begins to walk by himself at dawn thru the waking streets, and slowly finds an inner peace with his spirit...he begins to forgive and accept the things that have happened to him, and understand that his desire to find perfection above his own humanity led him to things that he did not really want or need...he begins to love and empathize with others without fear of consequence, and so in his aloneness realizes that he was never really alone at all...GOD has always been with him, and always will be...and so in this moment he fulfills his destiny, both for himself and for GOD..."⁴⁶

Despite the difficulties of drawing conclusions regarding the level of autobiographical correlation between Billy Corgan/the Smashing Pumpkins and Glass/the Machines of God, a few things can be said. Firstly, Corgan identified himself as *Zero* – it was the persona from which he sang, and the one through which fans of the period understood him. Secondly, in many of Corgan's interviews, he has voiced frustrations similar to those of Glass, who becomes jaded by the inability of the public to embrace his sincere belief in the importance and significance of his work, and also his frustrations with navigating the expectations audiences have regarding his musical and personal identity. And finally, I would add that the ternary spiritual journey evinced in the life of Glass is actually very much similar to the life of Billy Corgan. After having played his final, tragic show at the Metro in Chicago (the place where the Smashing Pumpkins had played their very first show together) Corgan became a solo act (post Zwan, he released *The Future Embrace*) and has in a very public way, found peace with god.

In an interview completed shortly after the release of his solo album, the interviewer had the following to say of Corgan:

"Corgan doesn't draw a line between faith and spirituality. He embraces elements of Catholicism as well as Buddhism and a new global philosophy that integrates spirituality into every aspect of life, but he's not obsessed with rituals of practice"⁴⁷.

Corgan's new spirituality is an amalgam of several world religions mixed with some good old-fashioned new-age spirituality via guru Ken Wilbur. Wilbur runs a website on which he disseminates information on what he calls "Universal Consciousness," an eccentric form of pantheistic thinking that emphasizes the role of the avant-garde artist (such as, from Wilbur's perspective, Corgan, rapper Saul Williams, singer Alanis Morissette, among others). The site features articles and discussion

⁴⁶ (ibid.) The capitalization of GOD appears in the original.

⁴⁷ (Kozlowski, 2)

boards about politics and spirituality and is decidedly post-organized-religion. Corgan responds to Kozlowski's questions about his current spiritual commitment, saying:

*"I know it sounds a bit trite, but I sort of believe in everything. The Christian religion has its own Karma just like the Buddhists have their own Karma. They all have their strengths and weaknesses."*⁴⁸

The newest incarnation of the Smashing Pumpkins features only Corgan and Jimmy Chamberlain from the original line-up. The band's website features among other things, a new blog where band members write about their daily routines and about life in the Pumpkin Patch. Leafing through the different entries, one discovers that Ginger Reyes feels "...really blessed to be able to play in this band and to be able to play music almost every night." Chamberlain thanks the blog's fans for all of their prayers. Lisa Harriton discusses her love for both sudoku puzzles and "sacred poetry." And Billy, who rarely posts, had the following statements to say:

*"I love the work, but I am pretty exhausted day after day...however it is the **S**pirit of the good fans...with much help from God...so my **S**pirit is strong."*

"I believe God talks to me each and every moment of my life, the only problem being that I don't listen...God does not want us to be unhappy, or to mourn for that which has no meaning."

"...if God is love is truth, then you are that to me...SP stands at the center of my musical truth, and mirrors how God stands for me at the center of all truth..."

Radiohead and political nihilism

The primary image of nihilism in the music of Radiohead is derived from the transformation of what I call "Citizen X" into "Citizen Faust"⁴⁹. Earlier on in the Radiohead discography, the lyrical ambiance of *Pablo Honey* and *The Bends* concentrates less on explicitly political, environmental, and economic themes and more upon issues of personal authenticity and relationships. The former album certainly does little to distinguish the band from other "alternative" offerings, and it has been compared to the work of two bands that have to a greater or lesser extent informed their early music-making: the Pixies and grunge-rockers Nirvana⁵⁰. But already by the latter album, one may observe a focusing in on a number of themes that will become significant to the band's idiolect in the long-term. The themes of technology versus the natural – of alienation, transformation, and

⁴⁸ (ibid.)

⁴⁹ "Citizen X" is a reference to the average-ness and anonymity of this subject (rather than to the Citizen X of the 1995's made for TV movie). "Citizen Faust" however, is clearly a reference to the mythological Faust, who is led to his damnation by the Devil due to his own vanity. The reason for my characterization of the latter will become apparent.

⁵⁰ (Moore and Ibrahim, 141-2)

mechanization, as Doheny identifies – are taking form⁵¹. The dramatization of these thematic ideas through the human subject forms a strain of thought in Radiohead’s work that I identify as the transformation of “Citizen X” into “Citizen Faust”. Technology represents, in Radiohead’s music, anxiety, subjection, control, threat, power, and containment. It is a symbol of what is happening to our society, and a tool by which the capitalist “machine” transforms human beings into pliable consumers stripped of their individuality and social agency (“Citizen Faust”).

Citizen X represents a sentient, but weak individual who is alarmed by the perceived loss of his own social agency. “Prove Yourself” of *Pablo Honey* is such a person:

*I can't afford to breath in this town,
Nowhere to sit without a gun in my hand.
Hooked back up to the Cathode Ray,
I'm Better off dead,
I'm Better off dead,
I'm better off...*

*I want to breath, I want to grow
I'd say I want it but I don't know how.
I work, I bleed, I beg, I pray,
But I'm better of dead,
I'm Better off dead...*

The desire to breath, to grow – to transcend the boredom and fear induced by the “cathode ray” of the television (Aldous Huxley’s nightmare of the entertaining totalitarian state) – cannot be achieved despite great effort. Already one can sense the despair and the exhaustion that verges on the nihilistic collapse of “I’m better off dead.” However, the desire to transcend is still present, if weak and exhausted, and the activity of an individual with social agency struggling to exercise that agency suggests that the belief in the value of action is still alive. The speaking subject of “Fake Plastic Trees” is likewise exhausted and frustrated by the artificiality of false beauty created in a society that takes its cues from the fashion and entertainment industry. His “fake plastic love[r]” takes to watering plastic plants (which despite this care and nutrition could not possibly “grow”), lives with a plastic surgeon, and looks/tastes real despite the implicit contrary. The exhaustion of resistance in such a transmogrifying world is nearly enough to conquer him, but there is still some fight left in him (albeit only to flee a lost cause):

*“But I can't help the feeling,
I could blow through the ceiling,
If I could just turn and run.”*

⁵¹ (Doheny, 35)

The Bends signals the introduction of thematic elements that will eventually transform Citizen X into Citizen Faust. “Planet Telex” sounds as if it was an admonition to Citizen X that no matter what he does “Everyone is, everything is broken.” And the speaking subject of “The Bends” asks: “Where do we go from here?” while bemoaning his ennui in the face of self uncertainty:

*Just lying in the bar with my drip feed on
Talking to my girlfriend, waiting for something to happen
I wish it was the sixties, I wish I could be happy
I wish, I wish, I wish that something would happen*

Lisa Leblanc accurately assess the tone of *The Bends*, suggesting that the conjunction of music and artwork (that of Stanley Donwood, the band’s longtime visual collaborator) “conveys the individual’s anxiety and insecurity in contemporary society emphasizing a personal fear of inadequacy, of being unable to effect change, or to make a meaningful contribution⁵².” Citizen X still desires to be an active agent, but is beginning to lose his confidence in the possibility of meaningful political action. This feeling is surely familiar to the youth of “generation X,” many of whom become practical political nihilists as a result – and this is the substance of the battle of Radiohead’s lyric work, and the battle that is lost by Citizen Faust.

Around the same time as *OK Computer*, the B-side “Palo Alto” bemoans the transformation of human social relationships into theaters of superficiality. Here in the future, stock pictures of domestic tranquility are mixed with odd references to work life and the authority figures that define it. Behind all of the tranquility and apparent satisfaction lies a palpable layer of the surrender of individuality and social agency. “In the city of the future” Citizen X has begun to lose himself in the flux of social expectations.

According to Doheny, *OK Computer* was the first album in which Radiohead “became political⁵³.” This is clearly a simplification, especially if the definition of “political” is restored to its broader sense as “social” – that which regards the meanings and activities of social orders, of “the body politic.” In the broader sense, Radiohead’s music has shown a tendency towards politics from the beginning, but Doheny is correct if the intention was to point out the new sense of explicitness, focus, and materiality of the band’s (semi-ironic) penetration of the ideological strains imbedded in capitalism and the socio-political constructs that support it⁵⁴. And if *The Bends* portrays Citizen X in the last fledgling throes of exhaustion, *OK Computer* portrays his final transformation into Citizen Faust.

⁵² (Leblanc, 85)

⁵³ (Doheny, 74)

⁵⁴ For more on the irony of Radiohead’s anti-capitalistic idiolect, I refer the reader to Davis Schneiderman’s article “We Got Heads on Sticks/You Got Ventriloquists’: Radiohead and the Improbability of Resistance.” (Tate, 15-37).

Where Citizen X is tired, but aware, Citizen Faust has fully surrendered to the authority structures of the capitalist machine entirely and as a consequence, has himself become a machine. Citizen Faust will not rebel against the authorities above him because – just as they have transformed him into the technologies with which he relates only ambivalently – they have begun to transform him into themselves. He has internalized the meanings of his position in the “system” such that he is no longer able to separate his own personal story from the one that is being spun around him. This loss of the will, of the ego in real terms, is the final operation of nihilistic surrender upon the soul – to negate meaning *in toto* is ultimately to negate the identity itself:

*“I am the key to the lock in your house, that keeps your toys in the
basement*

*And if you get too far inside, you'll only see my reflection
It's always best when the light is off, I am the pick in the ice
Do not cry out or hit the alarm, we're friends till we die*

*And either way you turn, I'll be there, open up your skull
I'll be there, climbing up the walls⁵⁵.”*

This is the nightmarish dystopia that is always threatening to unfold in the Radiohead idiolect. It is perhaps an indirect translation of Rosen’s conceptualization of the “danger” of nihilism as a “permanent human possibility⁵⁶.” The capitalist complex has Citizen Faust in check, possessing as it does his safety, his livelihood, and finally his identity. According to Radiohead, the devil’s greatest trick is to convince you that he doesn’t exist⁵⁷.

Citizen Faust actually never provokes our pity or consolation. He stands out to us as a warning of the failure to become the *übermensch*. He is anesthetized by fear, convention, and material comfort. His failure to undergo a transvaluation of values is marked best perhaps in the songs *No Surprises*, and *Fitter, Happier*, both from *OK Computer*. *No Surprises* is the story of a subject that will “...take the quiet life...” even if it means some carbon monoxide. Filled with symbols of status quo familiar to us from *Palo Alto* (handshakes, unwanted job, safety, predictability, domesticity), it invokes the image of a man who has so succumbed to practical nihilism that the question of meaning has itself become invisible. *Fitter, Happier* literally transforms the human subject into a machine (a computer program that was originally designed to be an imitation of a human voice). Unlike the “little boy” about whose existential “throwness” Billy Corgan sings in “Disarm,” the Radiohead robot-man of *Fitter, Happier* does not have its own voice and is entirely incapable of choice in the first place. It is a program; it must be programmed. And is programmed in this song by a repository of self-help maxims that are really social expectations posited as a checklist of approval

⁵⁵ “Climbing Up the Walls,” from the band’s third studio album *OK Computer*.

⁵⁶ (Rosen, xiv)

⁵⁷ And if the devil doesn’t exist in this case – then neither do you in any practical sense.

bequeathed upon the well-balanced gentleman. The submission of Citizen Faust to these expectations is transformed into a list of adulations that might as well appear on the sticker of a used car in a car lot. They are selling points such that the subject, by means of social control, becomes himself a product for the consumption of others. Like the subject of Auden's *Unknown Citizen* his identity is a construction of anonymous sounding observations about his malleability and social passivity. He is "concerned, but powerless."

The import of Citizen Faust's social passivity is that it leads to apocalyptic results when it (fails to) confront the capitalist iron triangle while it carries out its wily machinations. Radiohead's political music (in the literal Dohenian sense), addresses two types of wrong that capitalist governments such as Great Britain and the United States perpetrate: crimes of economic greed, and environmental neglect.

"Electioneering" portrays the dichotomy that lives inside of the politician who says all the right things to get elected, but whose real world is engulfed in:

*"Riot shields, voodoo economics,
It's just business, cattle prods and the I.M.F.
I trust I can rely on your vote."*

The power of the lyrics stems from their invocation of striking symbols – the riot shields that symbolize control and play off of connotations the listener might have of historically charged images such as the tanks and rifles of Tiananmen Square, or Bull Connor's water canons firing into the crowds of 1960's Birmingham civil rights protesters. The riot shields are not neutral symbols, they are in the service of voodoo economists who coldly regard people as cattle and consolidate officialdom and authority into institutions like the I.M.F. that conceal within the garb of political and economic lingo, illegal if not immoral activities driven by greed and the lust for power.

By the fourth studio album *Kid A* the voice so often implied in the lyrics of *OK Computer* – the voice of *THE ESTABLISHMENT* – has begun to solidify into a more or less consistent character such that, until the most recent album *In Rainbows*, the Radiohead discography may be profitably seen as a single dramatic conception. The war between the invisible establishment – the "we" of the two lyrics excerpted below – and the subject who struggles to retain personal agency is portrayed as unevenly matched cosmic battle between the weaker individual good and the stronger corporate evil:

*"(Why don't you quiet down)
(Why don't you quiet down)
(Why don't you quiet down)
(Why don't you quiet down)
we are the DOLLARS & CENTS
and the PoUNDS and Pence
the MARK and the YEN
We are going to crack your little souls
We are going to crack your little souls."
(“Dollars and Cents,” *Hail to the Thief*)*

"We can wipe you out anytime (sit down , stand up)
We can wipe you out (sit down, stand up)
("Sit down, Stand up," Hail to the Thief)

Mark also the anonymity of the "we" that is never given a name. It is the combination of collective, powerful, greedy, impersonal anonymity that makes this voice especially sinister, and makes it especially difficult to resist. If it has imbedded itself inside of you (conditioned you through comfort and fear) and transformed you into its subject, and if it is ubiquitous yet entirely intangible, how can any of your acts of resistance against this undefined "we" have any meaning? Thus you arrive at a sense of political nihilism. In an interview originally printed in the N.M.E. and re-printed in Martin Clark's book Radiohead: Hysterical and Useless, Yorke gives voice to this very sentiment:

"...I sound like a loony. But there's [sic] an awful lot of shadows and malignant forces that are pulling the strings at the moment. It's barely human, it's something that's coming from somewhere else, and that is impossible to control...if you meet a powerful politician, it's just like shaking hands with thin air. The tornado has nothing in the middle. The gloaming to me is exploring this unhealthy darkness, which it seems impossible to counteract⁵⁸."

The music video for "Karma Police" from *OK Computer* presents another, visual, incarnation of this dark thesis. A disinterested Thom Yorke sits in the back seat of an old 1970's era mass-marketed middle class luxury car mouthing the words to the song with his chin dug into the front seat cushion. An invisible driver is chauffeuring him. Running in front of Yorke's car is a shabby-looking, beat-up, unshaven, middle-aged man who periodically looks backwards anxiously, trying pathetically to stay ahead of the vehicle – trying not to be run over. It doesn't appear that he'll be able to continue running for much longer when finally he stops, exhausted – Yorke's car stops too (apparently readying itself for the charge). Suddenly the man sees a trail of fuel running between the car and himself – he listlessly lights a match and tosses it onto the trail, which immediately ignites and snakes slowly towards the car. Noticing the immanent threat of danger, the invisible chauffeur places the car in reverse and begins to slowly retreat. The man's action saves himself and he disappears from sight as the car continues to retreat from the flames. All of this seems to affirm just the opposite of the thesis of Yorke's statement in the N.M.E. interview and the preceding paragraphs. The final images of the video show that the flames have reached the car, the hood is on fire and the car is slowly being engulfed in flames, but one thing has gone wrong for our protagonist. Yorke has mysteriously disappeared from the vehicle.

⁵⁸ (Clark, 166) The "gloaming," to which Yorke refers, is the subtitle of *Hail to the Thief*. It is an old English word that refers to twilight or dusk – the transitory stage between darkness and light, or vice versa. Yorke's use here seems to suggest that humankind as a political, social, economic, and environmental phenomenon, is moving towards an historical period of darkness.

If Yorke was the personification of the sinister disembodied “we” as formulated in the songs from *Hail to the Thief*, and the beleaguered man that he chases is the personification of Citizen X, then the political action, which initially gave the impression of being effective, will in the long run not prove to have eliminated the corporate enemy, but only to have delayed one particular incarnation of his threat to Citizen X. Yorke was a ghost, a hologram; thin air.

The End is the Beginning is the End

The reader looking for Ariadne’s Thread running through the story of this music will be either disappointed or intrigued depending on their point of view. I have not attempted to say either that The Sex Pistols, The Smashing Pumpkins, and Radiohead are Nihilists; nor have I attempted to say that all three bands are Punk proper. Instead, I have endeavored to show that a rhizomatic structure of ideas permeates the discussion surrounding these bands. The influence of punk music, and punk sensibilities infuses this music as thoroughly as do the cocktail of ideologies (nihilism, anarchism, existentialism) which power such sensibilities.

The Sex Pistols, although they are not anarchists except in the tradition of individualist anarchy that flows from the thinkers such as Max Stirner, are properly so-called nihilists. The nihilism of the Sex Pistols is an ethical nihilism very much consonant with the ideological thrust of individualist anarchism. Its scope of representation in the band’s musical œuvre is extensive. Songs like “No Feelings,” “Anarchy in the U.K.,” “Seventeen,” and “Pretty Vacant” each, in their own ways highlight aspects of the ethical nihilism developed in their music. The very image of the Sex Pistols that was carefully crafted and managed by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood was one of rootless moral abandon and conscious ethical negation. Metaphysical matters do not seem to have been at the center of the Sex Pistol idiolect. Although band members may have spoken of religion and their beliefs about life personally, the only role that god or religion played in the music was as fodder for an expression of their contempt for moral institutions (of which religious matters were merely one incarnation).

The metaphysical nihilism of Billy Corgan was in retrospect, only a phase. Corgan comes from Catholic stock, and after a period of what might not even turn out to be actual atheism, he returns to theism of a kind. Corgan’s spiritual journey is surely one that resonates with a great number of Generation-Xers and their younger brothers and sisters (beginning in a dogmatic religion imposed upon them from above, rebelling and tearing down, returning to a modulated sense of their childhood faith). It remains to be discovered whether or not the Billy Corgan of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* actually believed, as did Nietzsche, that god is dead, or whether he believed in the existence of a god that was unable to counteract the emptiness, meaninglessness, and futility of life.

Either way, politics had nothing to do with the idiolect of the early Pumpkins, and had only a superficial role to play in the new Pumpkins. For Corgan, the human journey to authenticity through a terrifying world of emptiness was a personal, individual, and metaphysical one – political bodies played only a peripheral role in the true life journey of Zero (the real person and the character), Glass, and his “ghost children.”

Radiohead’s early music suggested the influence of bands such as Nirvana and the Pixies, the alternative strand that the Pumpkins inhabited and that would lead to the “emo” of the late nineties and early oughts. This music is fixated upon personal authenticity, romantic relationships, and identity, but not politics. Very quickly though, Thom Yorke’s Oxford fivesome developed an idiolect saturated with political and environmental language and metaphor. What one must be careful to note here is that the character I have called “Citizen Faust” is a political nihilist, and *not* Thom Yorke or the band Radiohead. Citizen Faust, like the mythical Faust is led towards his undoing through his own vanity. Yorke portrays the modern day Faust as the pliable everyman who is whiled into a practical political nihilism through his desire for what we would call “the American Dream.” First he is told what he should want, he wants it, and his personal happiness and sense of belonging in the world is predicated upon silencing the inner anxiety that is the faint whispering whiff of his lost self agency. All of this is in the service of the invisible corporate-driven “ghost” for whom government, as every other institution, is merely an instrument engaged to satiate the greed and power lust of this invisible bourgeoisie. Yorke positions himself as a politically engaged, concerned, activist even while making the occasional statement exposing the pessimism that seethes below the surface of his beliefs and activities.

This music resonates with its fans on more than just a superficial sonic level. It is interesting, sometimes beautiful, sometimes funky, always in some way daring and empowering, but fan relationships to the music is rarely superficial. The Pistols found themselves in the middle of a punk culture that reached into every corner of the personal identity (clothing, language, theology, philosophy, politics, sexuality, authority, etc.) and they were both a reflection of and a catalyst to that culture. The Smashing Pumpkins found themselves at the epicenter of a culture that was well formulated and represented in the novels of writers like Douglas Coupland and Brett Easton Ellis – a post-moral, post-religious disenfranchised broken community of wanderers – “characters in search of an author.” The dark neo-Victorian pessimism and agnosticism of Corgan’s idiolect taps into the nostalgia and uncertainty of that Generation. Radiohead’s work found, despite its inherent bizarreness – a rather large audience because it voices the frustration and the desire to be an agent of positive change in a world where such change seems at the very best – unlikely. Punk music and its younger brothers are children of the enlightenment, exposing as they do the authoritative myths that hold the people bondage to invisible power structures and the futility they mask. It deals with the

oppression and futility in its own unique ways: rebellion, disbelief, exposure, ridicule, and ultimately, negation.