



Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone
***The Punk Turn in Comedy: Masks of Anarchy* (2018)**

What are the fundamental grounds punk and comedy share in how they have sought to create and maintain alternative cultural and ideological scenes and spaces? How have both forms rejected tradition and professionalism, and what do they teach us about the figure of the amateur? What do these convergent narratives teach us about the politics of performance in and beyond the UK circuit?

In this oral introduction, Krista Bonello details the starting points and intellectual triggers of her research at the intersection of punk and 'altcom' which brought her to write *The Punk Turn in Comedy: Masks of Anarchy* (London: Palgrave, 2018). Bonello walks us through the various lines of thinking and case studies explored in the volume guiding us through the rich conclusions she has drawn about both 'genres' as complex aesthetic and social strategies for political critique.

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[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The book is called *The Punk Turn in Comedy: Masks of Anarchy*.

[00:00:31] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

It developed from my PhD research, which was funded by the AHRC, but probably goes even further back, because I grew up on UK alternative comedy and punk, even in Malta, and they were very much shaping influences on me. And I realised I wanted to explore that.

During my MA in Shakespeare Studies I discovered an interest in researching punk productions of Shakespeare – or rather the way punk elements, even if only sartorial, as was actually often the case – have been used in contemporary Shakespeare productions. I also have a longstanding interest in comedy, tragicomedy and parody, and I particularly discovered that again when looking at Terry Pratchett's Shakespeare. So unexpected as it might seem, my routes towards the more recent countercultural performance took, I'd say, some pleasantly meandering yet very foundational detours through the early modern.

[00:01:37] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

This book discusses the relationship between comedy and punk, from elements and strains of the comical in punk and that includes questions of tone for example, to the emergence of alternative comedy as the kind of 'punk turn' in comedy itself. So my argument is that punk owes a debt to comedy and alternative comedy owes a debt to punk as well as to comedy traditions and comedy through punk. And of course, both of them – both punk and alternative comedy – actually challenge any easy assumption of legacy. This book seeks to examine the singularity of that moment, trying to respect this singularity, even when taking this comparative approach. So for example, I look at the ways in which punk and alternative comedy challenged conventions of popular performance.



[00:02:49] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

There have already been wonderfully insightful and important works done on this relationship between punk and comedy by people like Oliver Double [2007], who actually was my PhD supervisor and has written about alternative comedy as well as music hall influences for example in punk, and Russell Bestley [2013] who has focused on comedy and punk. And these have been pioneers in this particular area and have been very, very important. It could be said that my book was the first full-length monograph to focus particularly on that intersection, and of course I engage with the attitudes associated with punk and alternative comedy both critically and reflectively, because there's also a little bit of personal nostalgia there too. My analysis also pursues some theoretical lines through, say, deconstruction – and there is arguably something quite punk about Derrida, for example. So deconstruction, and little bit of post-modernism.

[00:04:05] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

So the first part of the book explores the attitudes towards the past and the countercultural efforts to create alternatives to existing and traditional approaches – for example through parody, which is one approach, or a partial rejection of nostalgia. Nostalgia in some ways persists and of course it could offer a challenge to the present woes, so to speak. And I'm interested in these paradoxes, the idea that the turn towards, for example, excavating something new generally has taken place amidst the ruins of the past. For example, punk valorised the amateur as opposed to the skilled professional in the traditional sense, which led to the DIY approach. And there is something paradoxically atavistic, we could say, about this emphasis on finding new ground which is sort of also at the same time a back-to-basics kind of thing. So these complex paradoxes intrigued me, and the first part of the book is an attempt to provide contextualisation of punk and alternative comedy in relation to a rejected or reimagined past. Seeking to understand them on their own terms, even if those terms are always in some kind of relation to a tradition that's perceived to be dominant, through a kind of counterpoint.

After that, I move on to explore how that panned out in performance practice. So the first part provides some contextualisation, even intertextually situating punk and alternative comedy, and the next few chapters zoom in on the spatialised dynamics through a different kind of moment, and the changed terms of the relationship, in this case between the audience and the performer – which becomes a site of struggle. So the performer in punk and alternative comedy is no longer to be trusted as authoritative, so to speak, or heroic or likeably congenial. And the audience has an expanded repertoire of responses of its own, such as more vigorous heckling, for example, and the results were a shared and often gleeful antagonism. So this oscillation between distance and closing the gap, bringing the audience and performer closer. Oliver Double describes the Comedy Store atmosphere as a kind of 'gladiatorial contest', which I think is quite a nice way to describe it.

And the closing part of the book moves on to consider the ways in which authenticity and ideas of authenticity and honesty are asserted by both alternative comedy and punk and their relation to performance, of course, which is another kind of paradox. The way John Lydon has put it was 'style without affectation'. So the honesty often took the form of a determinedly anti-euphemistic approach – so things like obscenity and also a reduction in possible ironic readings. Now, punk kept hold of – I mean, it has been argued that punk was in some ways altogether too ironic or could be easily misread. Alternative comedy, I argue, reveals perhaps a greater emphasis on this reduction of irony. So a more politicised stance, a more clearly politicised stance rather, in alternative comedy which took its cue from punk in terms of performance tactics, in terms of attitude. But for example alternative comedians would often make a more conscious and concerted effort to be anti-sexist, anti-racist, or at least non-sexist and non-racist, which of course counters the humour that could be found at the time on the standard club circuit. And the idea with this, again, this paradox, this honesty in performance emerges in a way, and has a bearing back on the preceding chapters – because of course it links back with, for example, the rawness of the atavistic amateur approach, but looks at it from a kind of different angle.



[00:09:12] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

I spent a lot of time with this book. It was very difficult to whittle it down to, you know, include everything I wanted to say because that part of it was very tough. But editing it and re-editing it, I think, it sharpened the material and it was an enjoyable process. Working on it from home, working on it in coffee shops – [*laughter*] which might seem like a luxury of the past. So yes, it was an enjoyable journey.

[00:09:51] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

It's generally acknowledged that academic writing and theorisation about comedy is often in itself woefully unfunny. I think I am fortunate enough that the presence of the rich material I engage with has an energy about it that I think continues to delight even when it's framed by critical commentary.

So, some of my favourite bits are actually the irrepressibility of those voices jostling for attention: quotations of comedy material being analysed – and these are the things that kindled my urge to write about this particular topic. They remain the spark basically, so I always enjoy engaging with that. I was, I think, particularly intrigued by the turn towards overstatement and the reduction in ambiguity, and I did enjoy writing about that too. I think that was partly interesting to me because of my interest in deconstruction – I had tended to prize ambiguity, and of course ambiguity is so often associated with humour. So I actually enjoyed that little realisation when the material caused me to question my own initial assumptions in a surprising way, where, you know, the material itself kind of surprises.

I think one of the other points that I really liked and actually would like to explore further – maybe a future project, I don't know – is the coupling of anger and humour. And that was an emergent insight that still particularly intrigues me and I think deserves more exploration.

[00:11:56] BONUS QUESTION

Duška Radosavljević: I wanted to hear a bit more from you about my favourite chapter in the book, which is the parallel between Richard III and Johnny Rotten.

Krista Bonello: In that, of course, you've got the convergence of my interest in Shakespeare and in punk! And I did really enjoy that. And also that's my favourite character in Shakespeare, Richard III. There is something very delightful about writing that and I think Richard III as a character already has been what Marjorie Garber [1987] discusses as sort of a parody of history. He parodies all the kind of very earnest, very serious history that has come before, and also, perhaps, the deformation of history and historiography.

So what I love about it, what I think it really shows – if we take John Lydon's comments seriously, and I do think there are grounds for comparing Richard III and the Johnny Rotten stage persona – I think one of the most important things that comes out of that is the sheer irreverence of it. The parodic irreverence towards, again: towards standards, authority, towards official history. With that, there's definitely a kind of sneering humour that is very, very punk.

DR: But when you say 'his comment', can you remind us what the comment was?

KB: He said that Johnny Rotten was influenced particularly by Olivier's Richard III, because there is the element of caricature in that and he loved that. He loved the comic villainy of it, the very over the top caricatured villainy of it. And then, [*laughter*] I look at it through the irreverence as well and the element of parody. Of course, John Lydon said this many years after the Sex Pistols. So it's more of a starting-off point for: 'Where could this go? if we follow this a little bit further, what could it suggest?'

Transcription by Nick Awde



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