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What on earth is a riot grrr!?

Punk rock emerged in our society in the late 1970's. The purpose of punk was to provide a haven for youth in particular who "struggled with feelings of alienation from the social,

economic and political forces around them.”(Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.136) Punk mentality followed the laws of “anyone could be a punk” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.143) and the “punk scene is of punks, for punks, by punks” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, pg.144) allowing people to understand that this was an individualist movement where through a collective you were able to determine what punk meant to you. Punk culture was mostly music; however, a variety of Punk zines were produced at the time also to further spread their ideals to a wider audience. This movement was for all genders until it developed a change in mentality where women were reduced to being “at the back of the club with other females holding their boyfriend's jacket” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, pg.138), this shows the first stage of being squeezed out of their own community. Furthermore, in the words of Sofia Klatzer it “then became this whole macho, anti- woman thing” (Coulombe, 1999, p.256) and women did not go to the concerts anymore because they “were afraid of getting killed.” (Coulombe, 1999, p.256) This shows the epitome of not feeling safe in a place that was supposed to be made for them. Moreover, punk dissociated from the ideology of femininity, women were encouraged to be “one of the boys” (Downes, 2012, p.208) through, acting and dressing more masculine and rejecting women as peers. Furthermore, sexuality became a big issue within this movement as women would have to walk the line between being a “slag or drag,” (Downes, 2012, p.207) whereas the sexual exploits of men at the time were not considered in their punk status. This lack of accessibility within a place they should have felt safe was the birth of the Riot grrrl movement. So, this brings us to the thesis, what on earth is a riot grrrl?

Riot grrrl started in Olympia 1991 as part of the third wave of feminism, the female led band Brat mobile in association with ‘fanzine editor’ Jen Smith created the first official Riot grrrl zine. Furthering on from this, weekly all female riot grrrl meetings were formed from “zine makers, activists, artists, musicians and members of the punk community in their teens and early twenties.” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.139) Originally this was started to challenge the sexism found in the North American punk environment but gradually spread across the country. On July 32nd to august 2nd 1992 Washington DC riot girls held a convention in

which girls could come together to discuss topics essential to the movement at the time, these involved “sexual identity, self- preservation, racism awareness, surviving sexual assault and whether riot grrrls fit or don’t fit in the community”. (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.139) This allowed a space to formed for girls to come and understand what riot grrrl meant to them. By 1993 weekly riot grrrl meeting were being held across the country.

The goals of the movement were formed through grrrls feeling underrepresented in the second wave of feminism. The riot grrrl manifesto can be seen in the statement below;

“BECAUSE we girls want to create mediums that speak to US. We are tired of boy band after boy band, boy zine after boy zine, boy punk after boy punk after boy ...
BECAUSE in every form of media I see us/myself slapped, decapitated, laughed at, trivialized, pushed, ignored, stereotyped, kicked, scorned, molested, silenced, invalidated, knifed, shot, choked, and killed ...
BECAUSE every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We ARE the revolution.”

(Reinstein, 1993)

Riot grrrl was a movement blossoming from punk, meaning it still held the core value of punk being about “asking ‘why’ and then doing something about it.” (Sinker,2001, p.10) This activist attitude is very prevalent in riot grrrl culture. The aim of this movement has been clear from the start by emphasising that “we are not trying to make money or get famous; we’re trying to do something important” (Kathleen,1991) and this is truly what riot grrrl stood for, a group of women committed to “girl empowerment and self-representation”. (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.136) Due to most grrrls feeling like they lost their innocence to the assault of catcalling, the movement aimed to merge “girlhood and feminism”. (D’Angelica, 2009, p.6) This was achieved through rebranding the word ‘girl’ into ‘grrrl’ presenting the idea of a “roar”, (Gottlieb and Wald, p.266) allowing people to understand that this gender was not to be ignored or undermined like it had previously been. The media presented the word ‘girl’ with the connotations, “girl=dumb, girl=bad, girl=weak.” (Kathleen,1991) Gottlieb

and Wald summarise this as “instead of tirelessly insisting on the right to be called women” (Gottlieb and Wald, p.266) riot grrrls enforced a defiant word showing the anger behind the movement.

The bikini kill's song of 'double dare ya' became a rally chant used within the scene, stating “we're bikini kill, and we want a revolution girl-style now!.” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p.140) This shows how deeply music was rooted within this, and how overall this movement would have been completely different without having this as an outreach for fellow girls. In contrast to the separation found in punk music concerts at the time, riot grrrls encouraged girls to come to the front of the stage where they gave out lyric sheets giving a sense of protection from the band. In these concerts they would use songs that focused on issues such as domestic abuse, rape, sexuality, female empowerment, and women's health allowing their goals as a movement to shine through. In these concerts they would challenge known norms by dressing in provocative clothing, showing that femininity is what you make it not what others deem it to be. Within the media this movement was constantly misinterpreted allowing for the manifesto to become hidden. Corin Tucker from Heavens to Besty stated that “I think it was deliberate that we were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear,” (Dunn, 2005) the word 'ridiculous' presents the idea of being undermined for their goals. Further proving that reporters misunderstood the movement “it was just too provocative for the reporters to comprehend.” (D'Angelica, 2009, p.1) Moreover, it was stated that even female journalists tried to reduce the movement to a fashion statement, by focusing on the look of the movement. The media took many of the articles, essays, and fanzines “out of context” and “misprinted what we had to say” (Dunn, 2005) without addressing the principal issues tackled by the movement. The media wanted to present a negative change taking place which is usually due to fear of the unknown. However, this only encouraged grrrls to understand that their movement was for themselves and you either “got it or you did not.” (D'Angelica, 2009, p.1)

The problems within the movement came with the policy of “check your gender at the door” (Downes, 2012, p.232), for 'female only' gigs. This caused problems for policing this policy

as it “discriminated against queer gender presentations” (Downes, 2012, p.232) allowing for masculine presenting individuals or transgender women to be excluded from the event. In having women only events it encouraged young women to take interest in this subculture, due to the ensured safety of the company they would be in. However, off this, there was an increase in “gender-based discrimination and anti-feminist violence” (Downes, 2012, p.232) furthering my thesis that fear and violence against this movement was formed through the misinterpretation of what riot grrrl was.

This brings us to the format of zines. A zine is defined as a “DIY magazine,” (Zobl, 2012) these ‘magazines’ would often take on a collage look by cutting and sticking photographs and words to then photocopy into a small booklet. The negatives within this are that riot grrrls were “unprepared to build a truly inclusive movement,” (D’Angelica, 2009, p.6) as they failed to adapt for working-class women especially of colour had no access to making zines.

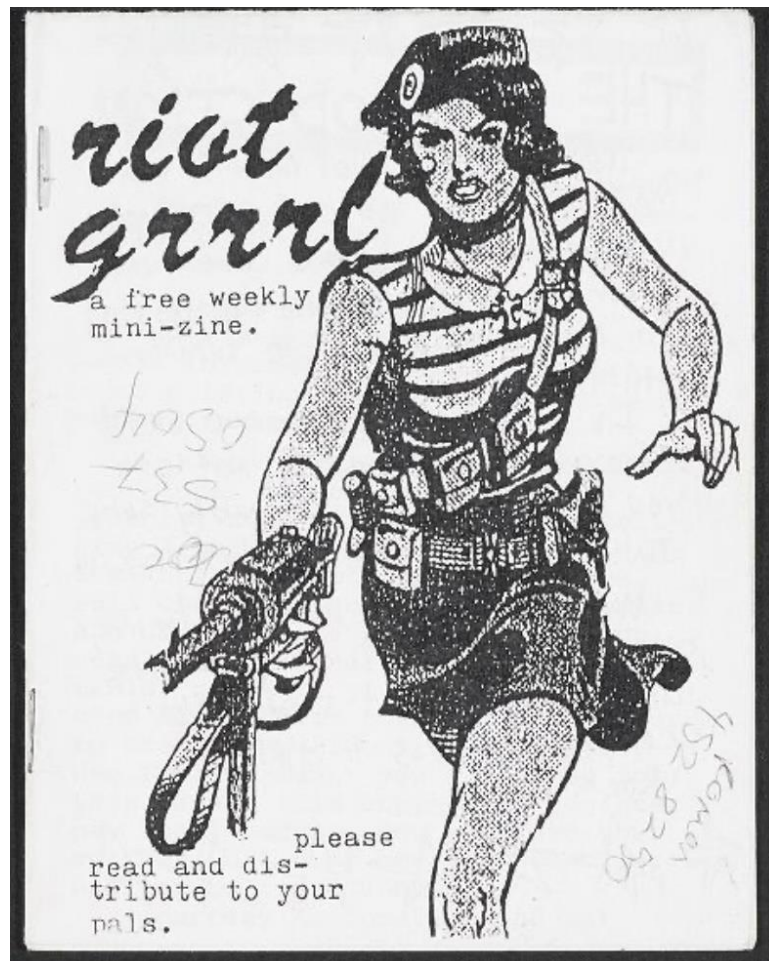


Fig.1, Riot grrrl, Klein, 1991

When choosing to analyse the riot grrrl zines I found it useful to focus on one complete zine as it allowed me to get a feel for how they would have been read at the time. This zine is reflective of the look, achieved in following the punk 'DIY ethos. This cover embodies the idea of a fight. Using the imagery of an 'army' woman allows the viewer to make an automatic link to the ideals of strong, brave, and protection. In holding a gun, it presents the idea of being on the offense from a competing force. In furthering inspection of how this grrrl is presented, she looks like she is representing how many people at this time were dressing instead of wearing an official uniform. The reclaiming of sexuality can be seen in the revealing clothes worn by this individual, presenting the idea that your clothes do not define your capabilities. In this character wearing a cross around her neck, it could link to a sign of rebellion with this symbol being used heavily in rock and metal subcultures in the 1960's.

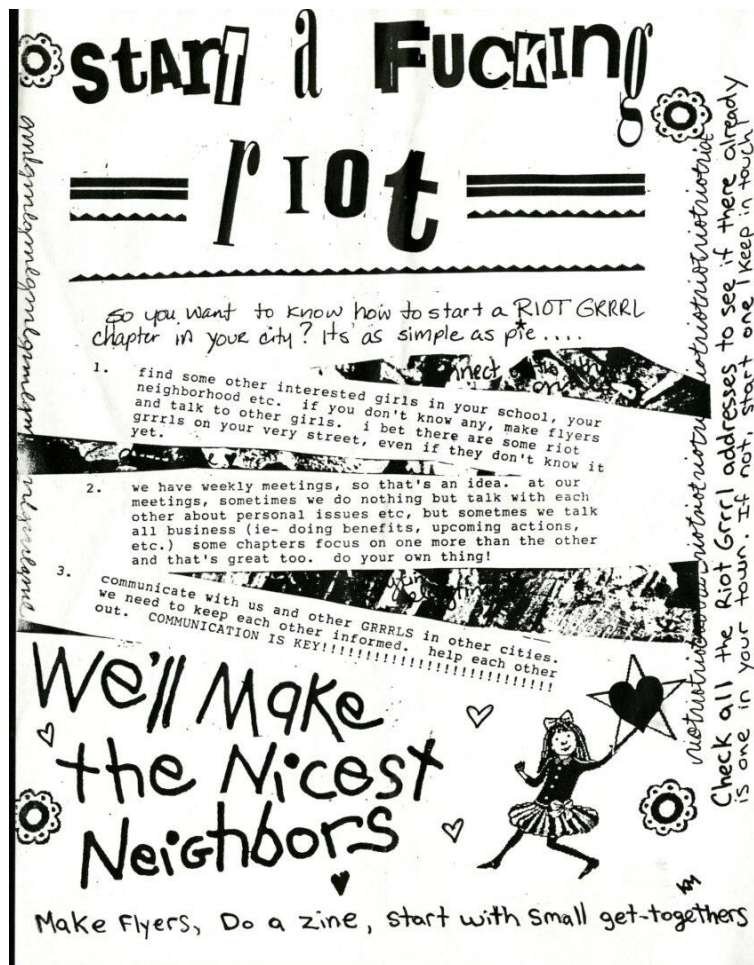


Fig.2, Riot grrrl, Klein, 1991

This piece of graphics perfectly encapsulates the true look of riot grrrl. This is prevalent in the collage style shown using cut outs of other pieces of designs, while handwriting and drawing onto the piece. Within the zines it known to combine whatever was available to you to create your vision. In using these letters as a typeface, it creates a look of a ransom note making a threatening statement capturing the viewers' attention. In using the word 'riot' in the title it not only links back to their name but to the insinuation of a call to action. With the childlike style of drawing and handwriting mixed with the profanity used in the piece, it amplifies the idea of reclaiming girlhood. In having small text for the main body, it forces the reader to fully commit to understanding this piece. The mix of type brings in the chaos found in rock music. The ending statement telling people how to get involved in this movement shows how they wanted this to be talked about and shared, they had no intention of being quiet in their goals and how they wanted you to achieve it.

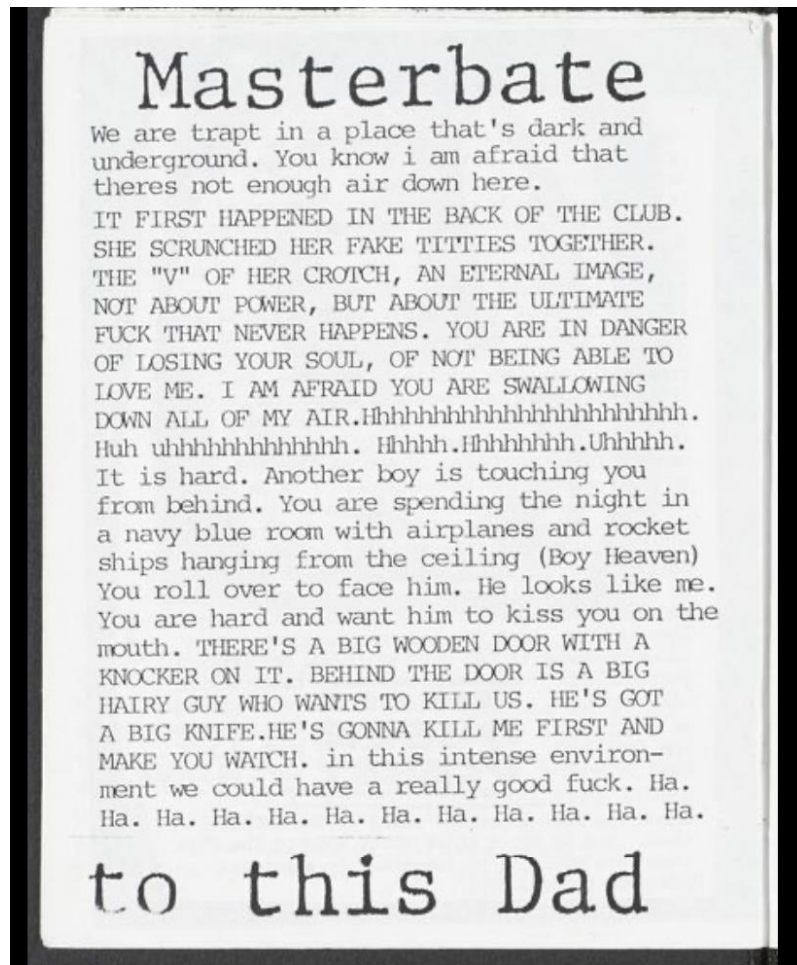


Fig.3, *Riot grrrl*, Klein, 1991

At first read I was unable to attain the meaning behind this piece as it felt like it was multiple storylines clashing together. The oxymoron found in this title of 'masterbate to this dad' creates a clash between sexuality and family. This could bring forwards the idea of an unhappy childhood due to the lack of connection to the word 'dad.' The opening two statements of being 'dark and underground' and having 'not enough air' implies to me that time is running out. This implies that there is change that needs to be undertaken before it is too late. The use of the phrase 'fake titties' implies that the author is unsupportive of this choice, or something has happened for the author to not like this character. We are then further introduced to the characters appearance through 'the 'v' of her crotch, an eternal image' in using this shape to describe her vagina it forms the ideals of a 'perfect woman'

linking to having larger breasts as previously read. As the story continues, we are introduced to the ideology that this could be about 'hookup culture,' this can be seen in the quote 'losing your soul, of not being able to love me.' This allows the reader to think that this is not an emotional connection between characters. In stating that the person is 'swallowing all my air' implies that the person is taking away something sacred to this woman and in limited supply, this may be representative of innocence. The next section is heavily based on 'boy fantasy,' this can be seen in ending the description of the room by stating 'boy heaven.' The description of the room brings forwards the ideas of being in the navy or the army associating to aggression and danger. In stating "he looks like me," allows the reader to consider if this is written as a forbidden romance or from a past lover. As for who 'me' is, we are never told genders so this could be a comment on the idea of queerness. In having a "wooden door with a knocker on it" brings in a sense of irony due to the comment made about the characters breasts. Furthermore, in using a door within this brings in the ideas of a transition happening or a shut off from something, the fabric of wood is known to represent "warding off evil spirits" (Basar, 2023) allowing the reader to believe that they are hiding for a reason. The use of violence in the next part furthers this idea as the thing they are doing is forbidden. This brings forwards the idea of 'she' being transgender and the 'eternal image' being that of a girl whilst still feeling like the wrong gender inside. The 'man' could take on the role of anxiety in the fact they are yet to feel comfortable enough to have sex. This piece is also heavily using sounds as transitions, this brings forwards the ideals of madness or a dream someone is trying to communicate to another person. Furthering from this, this whole piece focused on intensity due to its constant change between uppercase and lowercase letter feeling like this is a great representation of the intensity of punk has over this movement.

Riot grrrl is very much still present today, although it has been adapted into the 21st century mindset, it created festivals such as Queeruption and lady fest, allowing for a safe space for individuals to enjoy music. Riot grrrl never truly ended, even though it was deemed dead by the media once the bands who originated this movement broke up, the ideology was still

spread among young women to ensure the core messages never got lost. Although some see the new form of riot grrrls as a “watered down version” (Steiner, 2002) of what they originally were, things must always adapt to survive.

In conclusion, riot grrrl was a movement for the girls by the girls. Its goals introduced a new way to think about women within this industry and young feminists. These feminists utterly understood what it is to feel underappreciated and misunderstood firsthand and found a way to deal with it that not only educated but helped girls. This movement formed a community where before there was only unhealthy competition, I believe this movement to be the underlying contributor to the current freedom of expression we have as women.

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