

Question 1: From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Illustration

2550

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The Pre-Raphaelites and the Punk

Movement

Throughout history, artistic movements have always used their work as a vehicle to challenge and distance themselves from the mainstream. Both the Pre-Raphaelites, an underground society of young artists who formed in London in the 19th century and the Punk movement of the 1970's are two sub cultures who share a number of key features and who will be critically discussed in this essay. *Both groups of artists as they may be referred to for the purposes of this essay*, freely used iconic imagery to challenge and detach from society at the time. This essay will explore each movement and what influenced and inspired them in addition to discussing how they came from similar political and cultural backgrounds. It will then critically assess primary themes, key writers and relevant practitioners and artists. Finally, two works will be analysed, *God Save the Queen* by Jamie Reid and *Christ in the House of his parents* by John Everett Millais.

The Pre-Raphaelites were accomplished artists in their own right before they came together to form the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, having met in the Royal Academy in London. John Everett Millais was a child prodigy who came from a wealthy background and was the youngest artist to be admitted to the Royal Academy in 1840 (Riggs, 1998a). William Holman Hunt was a Londoner who came from a middleclass family and went to the Academy in 1844, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti whose parents were immigrants also joined in 1844 (Riggs, 1998b; Riggs, 1998c). This group then grew to seven members, later attracting more. (Britannica, 2020). Primarily, the Pre-Raphaelites were dismayed with the art that the Royal Academy were producing because they felt it did not represent life (Roe, 2014). They wanted to return to the traditional styles of artists before Raphael such as in the times of Quattrocento in Italy around 1400-1499 (The Art Story, 2020). This period included the international Gothic and early Renaissance which can be seen reflected in their work. The art

they produced was, in contrast to Raphael (Shirley, 1978), a return to intense colour and nature, and it drew inspiration from Medieval tales and Biblical stories. During the industrial revolution, there was great wealth and many people benefited from it. However similarly there was also a great discrepancy between rich and poor with many people living in slums. Queen Victoria ruled and there were riots across Europe. The Marxist manifesto had just been written which had a global influence amongst artist, intellectuals, and academics alike. The Pre-Raphaelites dealt with topics such as “Poverty, emigration, prostitution, and the double standard of sexual morality in society” (Tate, 2020) which was rife at that time.

An important area of interest that influenced the Pre-Raphaelites was the writings of John Ruskin on the work of Turner in `Modern Painter` 1943, Ruskin wrote about Turner going into nature and painting from life:

“... go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.” (Guild of St George, 2020)

The Pre-Raphaelite manifesto subsequently grew in response to Ruskin’s words and the following was recorded in family letters by Rossetti.

*1, To have genuine ideas to express.
2, to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them.
3, to sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote.
and 4, and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.* (Tate, 2020)

The Brotherhood’s Art reflected this manifesto and aimed to challenge other art of that period and specifically the works that were held in high esteem and taught at The Royal Academy.

The Punk movement blew up around 1970 in America and in the UK primarily as a direct backlash to the ideals of the 1960’s and the Hippy movement. It was a movement dissatisfied

with politics, culture and the arts at that time and expressed itself through music and visual arts (Walker, 2002). The world was in economic turmoil after the oil crisis (Vernon, 1976). Political unrest with Reagan in power in America, and in Britain a battle raged between the Conservatives and Labour (Walker, 2002) for the hearts of the country. Furthermore, there had been mass strikes in industry and the rubbish men had walked out leaving the streets full of waste. There were riots in South London and across Britain (Sandbrook, 2010). There were IRA bombings in London, and Britain was in a state of fear (Bell, 2000). The Vietnam War had just ended, and America was rocked with the Watergate scandal (K, 2017) and the British government had created hard hitting reforms on public spending affecting education and the Arts. Jobs for teachers and lecturers in the Arts were not secure, leading to student protests around the country (Walker, 2002). This was a fertile breeding ground for the Punks who thus promoted anarchy and openly stated no faith in the system of the time (Simonelli, 2002). The Sex Pistols song 'No Future' expressed the dismay the Punks felt about Britain at that time (Walker, 2000).

Both the Pre-Raphaelites and the Punks share a number of similarities in terms of how they expressed themselves artistically and spread their message. The Punks created magazines and used them as a platform to express themselves through art, and to respond to what they felt was wrong about their world. Likewise, the original members of the Pre-Raphaelites expressed themselves and their ideals through art, literature and poetry in their magazine *The Germ* est. 1850 (British Library, 2020). The Punk movement was known for creating their own magazines, such as *Sniffing Glue*, which often used collage, cut out fonts and hand drawn images and text (Martin, 2016). Sourced from mainstream media, magazines, books and newspapers, both these artists had a vast source of materials at their disposal for their art and commentary. Cut out and collaged or developed by decollage, The Punks produced art

which was subsequently photocopied to reach a wider audience in the format of 'zines' or posters. These zines often did not reach a wide audience but were created out of passion (Martin, 2016). Similarly, The Germ shut down after four issues because it did not sell as well as hoped for (British Library, 2020). However, in the 19th century and brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the evolution of the print process began to develop on a large scale. Printers could now produce more copies of work and the advent of the steam train helped greater distribution in quicker time. (Taunton, 2014).

Another area for consideration is the advancements in technology. The producers of Punk zines were greatly aided by the development of xerox machines known as 'photocopiers' and their availability made it easier for artists to produce and copy their zines. Punk zine 'Sniffin Glue' was produced on a photocopy machine and had a distinct style of art. Jamie Reed was a part of the Suburban Press which was a DIY magazine printed in Croydon (Sladen, 2007). Their lack of access to printing technology such as letterpress led to the taking of images from other sources such as the media, which were then rearranged, edited and recontextualised in order to express their thoughts on social and political ideals (Martin, 2016). Influenced by the Situationist art movement (Rasmussen, 2004) Jamie Reid used his artwork in the suburban press and the zines mirrored the DIY nature. (Martin, 2016)

The process comprised of cut and paste images and text edited through photocopying and reproduction and this style of art later defined the Punk art brand. For example, the Punks often utilised images of royalty regardless of status as a vehicle for their commentary



(God Save The Queen, 2020)

Jamie Reid's iconic piece of art, *God Save the Queen* is a cover design for the Punk band The Sex Pistols and uses photomontage and decollage to maximum effect. The building up of layers and the subsequent controlled tearing away of images has a visceral effect. This artistic statement can clearly be seen as a reflection on how the youth movement of Punk felt about royalty and society at that time. It has a powerful anarchistic and antimonarchic statement of artistic treason, as previously used by the Situationists (Rasmussen, 2004), and was designed in 1977 the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, which made it an even more controversial thought-provoking image. (Sladen, 2007). The appropriation of Cecil Beaton's photograph of the Queen which is photocopied in black and white and placed over the Union Jack, could be interpreted as a symbol of the power that royalty had over the nation at this time. This potent symbol is clearly hijacked by Reid. Through this depiction, the Queen is victimised by the tearing of the image, her eyes torn out. She is blindfolded, blinded by the missing piece of image, revealing the words 'God Save the Queen', a parody of the national anthem and the

power of the Punk movement. In an action of defacing the Queen, only God can save her now as Reid and the Punks have highjacked her for their mission. The blindfolding seems to comment on how she is blindfolded by her ignorance to the state of the nation, living in castles of power far removed from everyday life, no longer able to cast her eyes down on her subjects she is lost to their reality. The tear across her mouth gags her as she is denied the power of speech. Arguably, this symbolically questioned the freedom of speech in this country and our democracy. The name of the Punk band 'The Sex Pistols' is revealed again in Reid's anarchistic style of working, putting the band as the narrator for the nation's feelings and replacing the Queen's voice. Made up of different fonts and sizes, Reid's piece defined a style of text that would later come to symbolise the Punk style of art, loosely copying or representing the way kidnappers' ransom notes were written or produced. It could be claimed that this action lowers the Queen from a hierarchal being to a more human and vulnerable state, redefining her status, a powerful statement of Punk ideals.



(Tate, 2020)

This essay now turns to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood John Everett Millais's painting *Christ in the House of his parents*. This work is a powerful representation and fully encapsulates the ideals and manifesto of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The painting shows the skills of John Everett Millais as an artist and may be seen an example of the quality of art that would be produced by the Brotherhood. To capture with almost photo realistic clarity, this revised working class depiction of the Holy Family in Joseph's carpentry workshop brings this iconic scene right into Victorian times and makes the subjects more human, in contrast to the art that was being taught and produced in the Royal Academy (Barringer et al., 2012). Furthermore, the return to nature is seen in the image and detail of the carpenter's shop and Holy family scene. Rossetti wrote about this in the 'Pre-Raphaelite Journal' in November 1849, reflecting on how Millais went to a carpenter's workshop on Oxford Street to paint from life (Easby, n.d.). This can be seen in the detail that Millais has recorded in the painting such as the bench, the wood stacked against the wall, the shavings on the floor and tools, all

in exquisite detail, make the setting clearly a Victorian working-class carpenter's workshop not an iconic setting. Like the paintings of Caravaggio (Langdon, n.d.), Millais has captured the brutal reality of living in Victorian times, bare footed and looking like they have suffered with rickets. The finest details recorded, Joseph's working hands, his dirty nails and tan line on his arms show a working-class man. This piece of work clearly and powerfully reflects the human qualities that had been lost in previous iconic art of that period. In addition, the newfound intimacy is far removed from the awkward relationship between the figures as previous depicted in the Holy Family. Christ is shown as a red-haired child in a slum setting and not as the usual blonde royalty, but with working class parents. The painting is full of symbols that come from Christianity and the Bible (Barlow, 2017). Christ has the sign of being crucified or stigmata, with blood on his hand which he could have snagged on a nail on the table or door behind him. This might represent the cross, the nails a further sign of the crucifixion. Behind him on the wall a carpenter's triangle signifying the Holy Trinity and next to it a ladder, possibly the ladder to bring Christ down off the cross or a symbol for the connection between heaven and Earth. On it sits a dove which could be a symbol of the Holy Spirit which has descended on the scene as it did in the baptism of Christ. To the right of the painting a young boy possibly John the Baptist is carrying a bowl of water to bathe the wound or baptise the young Christ. A flock of sheep at the door may represent the future following Christ has with his Christian flock (Barlow, 2017).

Both pieces of art that have been discussed in this essay convey with sincerity the emotions and ideas of the artists and movements they are a part of. As Tolstoy said:

'the most important quality of any work of art is its sincerity.'³ Any true work of art expresses original thoughts and feelings' (Scott, 2002).

It can finally be argued that these representations strip the sacredness from previous images of deified art and not only empower them with new meaning and symbolism, but set them in context with the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto.

This essay has discussed both the Pre-Raphaelite and Punk movements and has set them in context in their respective eras, drawing on both their similarities and differences in terms how they used their art and imagery as a tool of social and artistic commentary. The Pre-Raphaelites and their manifesto sourced their images and produced their vast array of artwork and literature from nature. This enabled them to challenge and draw attention to social issues and to use their work as a vehicle of social change. Likewise, The Punk movement, albeit significantly more scathing in its attacks, used imagery and highlighted the need for social change through appropriation and recontextualization of images. It has clearly been shown in this essay that both groups of artists created and developed their work through a deep-rooted passion for art and a belief in the need to reclaim its meaning and how it could be used to express ideas in order to lead to change. The scope of this essay was however limited in terms of a more thorough discussion of the criticism that both movements received as a result of their work. In addition, further research might also benefit from a discussion not only of the future acceptance in society of both movements, but also of their impacts and long-standing influence on the art world and society at large.

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