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The Image of Siouxsie Sioux: Punk and the Politics of Gender

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In this essay, I attempt a reading of the 'identity' projected by Siouxsie Sioux, lead singer of the popular English punk/pop band Siouxsie and the Banshees. This is not to imply that Siouxsie Sioux's public identity is univalent, for if she intended to project an image of herself as a self-sufficient, talented woman, the patriarchal structures within which this projection is attempted would interfere with, and even alter the reception of the image. Siouxsie's 'original' intention is conditioned by the patriarchal ideologies of gender representation.

The following analysis is based primarily on the image of this performer because she is recognized as a visual artist (she 'means' visually, as well as aurally). More important, in pop music, the image of the female performer is constructed as the site/sight, or the boundary at which the audience's knowledge of the performer begins and ends; this is particularly apparent in pop music journalism. Siouxsie, and many other female punk performers realized this and tried to subvert the image and the signs of women in pop music. Excerpts from interviews, reviews, and song lyrics will be included as supporting evidence. I hope that through the analysis of the photographs of Siouxsie and the Banshees, the complexity of women's roles in punk music, the methods by which these roles are and were maintained, the possibility for subversion of these roles, and the possibilities for projecting positive images of women in punk music will be made a little clearer.

Siouxsie has traditionally been tied to history in much the same way as 'Woman'; i.e., Woman, we are told, has remained the same throughout history and we can only know her by her history in Man's world. Within this prison of circularity, Siouxsie has always been introduced/constructed as a groupie, a fan who made it—not unlike the story of the discovery of Lana Turner in a soda shop on Hollywood and Vine. Siouxsie is made a woman on the (punk) past and that past is male: The Sex Pistols. The tale goes: "Calm down and reflect on a bewildering reputation. It's now 15 months [October, 1976] since the Banshees in a spirited, impulsive shot of audience participation, went on stage at the 100 Club . . . ,", "when almost on the spur of the moment they formed a
band featuring Steve on bass and Siouxsie on vocals, with McLaren [the manager of the Sex Pistols and credited with the invention of the punk movement] alumnus Marco on guitar.6 The Banshees went "skiffing through a cacophonous 20 minutes at the 100 Club that official New Wave week in the summer of '76."7

In the summer of 1977, The Sex Pistols were marauding the complacent English countryside when Janet Brommard, a 17-year-old waitress from Bromley, started following them on their 'tour.' Joining her were other Bromleyites like Steve Severin who would become the bassist for the Banshees, and Bill Broad (a.k.a. Billy Idol) who would never be tied to, or so insistently defined by his(story) as Siouxsie was and still is.8 On one memorable night (made so by the journalists), Siouxsie and Steve took the stage with Sid Vicious as their drummer, and performed a version of The Lord's Prayer replete with added excerpts from "Tomorrow Belongs To Me," and "The Lonely Goatherd." They intended to play this song until they were thrown off the stage. They never were. The band finally quit in exhaustion after fifteen minutes before an enthusiastic audience.

There is more to the 'story,' but the patriarchal insistence on re-presenting Siouxsie as a daughter/neophyte is aptly demonstrated in the above montage of journalistic introductory his(stories), authored by both male and female writers. From the beginning, the press attempted to frame Siouxsie within a male defined space (The Sex Pistols milieu) after, and only after which they could feel secure in applauding her efforts.9 Siouxsie made it clear at least two early interviews that she was tired of being asked about her participation in the Bromley contingent or, in other words, her secondary role in the his(story) of punk.10

The punk movement attempted to expose and destroy the ideological structures of everything, including gender. The women of punk discovered the possibilities available to them and took an active role in constructing the punk identities. Journalists wanted to maintain traditional structures, like gendered histories, which, they presumed, made the knowledge of bands more easily accessible to the public. Journalists (re)construct the (his)story of Siouxsie's 'big break' by overemphasizing the 100 Club concert. However, her participation in the punk movement, and her subsequent popularity as a performer/icon are due to the public image she created by her attire, demeanor, music and lyrics.11 Following the logic of patriarchy, successful female musicians are generally pigeonholed in this manner to prevent them from threatening the masculine privileges of musicianship, creativity, talent, genius: Hazel O'Connor and Amanda Lear tied to David Bowie, Nina Hagen tied to a dissident East German poet, Kate Bush tied to David Gilmour, Courtney Love tied to Kurt Cobain, ad infinitum. Female performers are restricted to the roles of chanteuse or dancer. The intellectual properties of music, like playing instruments and composing music and lyrics are set apart from the 'image' of music as (re)presented by woman. In a sense, the female performer is made what Teresa de Lauretis has termed "the boundary" of music, both the excuse for and, yet, outside of popular music.12 The audience can only access the music 'through' the spectacle of the female singer, dancer, model. The singer stands before the band in performances and becomes the seductive emblem of the band in advertisements.

The female singer's abilities are socially constructed as 'god-given' whereas writing music and lyrics or playing instruments are constructed as talents requiring skill. Witness, for example, the music industry's constant emphasis on Prince's and Michael Jackson's roles as composers and lyricists. Likewise, 'musicianship' is a collective (masculine) activity from which the singer is excluded; consider the differentiation implied by the words 'band' and 'vocalist'—as in the "Big Band featuring the vocal stylings of . . .," or the way vocal tracks are applied over the integrated whole of the drums, bass, guitar and keyboard. While the music is culturally valued, the woman-as-star is made (by journalists as just one of many capillary agents of dominant culture) the emblem and applied feature of, but not a constitutive part of the music. As a female singer, Siouxsie should be perceived as a mere performer of music rather than a creator.

However, 'punk' music was, and probably still is not 'pop' music. Its primary goal has always been to undermine the safety of the mainstream, i.e., the rules and ideologies on which pop music is based. As a punk performer, Siouxsie has tried to disrupt the popular idea of woman's limited role as performer by emphasizing her own band's unity, the inconsequentiality of the Banshees' (his)story, her ability to play guitar, and her role as a lyricist, all of which are not unusual abilities for female performers within marginal genres of music, but which, nevertheless, threaten the pop music ideological apparatus.

When Siouxsie has objected to being made a mere emblem of the band, the journalists attempt to muffle her protestations within (his)stories and descriptions of her actions (dancing) and image (clothing and demeanor) in order to reinscribe her within the culturally determined role of female-as-spectacle. However, Siouxsie's 'spectacular' image disrupts the patriarchal structuring of the female-as-star that the journalists and photographers try to impose on her.

The descriptions of Siouxsie display a lack of comprehension on the part of
journalists which leave holes in their narratives, discrepancies in otherwise structured accounts of her performances, while photographs capture her calculated actions. The discrepancies between literary and photographic descriptions will soon become clear; the former requires the reader to believe in the journalist's ability to recount accurately, while the photograph is usually accepted as an exact reproduction of an event.

The journalists' inability to account for Siouxsie's demeanor is evident in descriptions of her live performances or, rather, her refusal to choreograph her movements; to do so would contribute to, and validate the social 'truth' of woman-as-spectacle. In popular music, female performers are expected to dance, skip, and gyrate in contrast to male performers who run and jump. The differences are obvious: women perform and men act; even Bowie and Jagger, who 'perform,' are perceived as 'acting.' Women imitate and are 'instinctively' tied to music, while men act on and create it. For this reason, the journalist need only describe or judge the woman's dance performance using female choreographic models or levels of seductiveness in order to recuperate dissident female performance styles.

In pop/disco music, the choreographic mode is used since structured, rehearsed dances are esteemed by the audience and, ultimately, by the ideology of the genre. Some would contend that women join this type of band precisely because dance music is feminine, but I believe it's just as possible that women are culturally limited to performing in dance bands since dancing and an emphasis on display are intrinsically bound to the social construction of the feminine. In rock music, where the ability to dance is unimportant, the female performer is expected to exude 'sexuality' through the gyration of the hips, the exaggerated tossing of hair, the "professional pout" (to quote The Banshees' Red Light lyrics), and an overdetermined catwalk gait. In both cases—pop/disco and rock—the female costume is expected to be both seductive and complementary to the actions of the performer. Siouxsie's actions and costumes, however, were enigmatic and indefinable within the pop music structure of knowledge of the feminine.

On-stage, Siouxsie wore shorts and old macs for comfort, contra the pop music requirement that women move yet be physically constrained by clothing. Likewise, her usual gyrations were inexplicable. This did not stop the journalists from describing her movements. Journalists could only 'describe' Siouxsie's actions as "instinctive bodily maneuvering, . . . harsh, asexual [sic]." "It is she of the braces and piercing eyes who provides any necessary bansheeing, strutton stage and wailing like some demented Streisand." "Siouxsie swings and pivots in 90 degree arcs, legs and arms scything. Stylised, angular, full of latent violence." "Siouxsie herself limits her vocalisations to a varied wail and her choreography to four precise movements. Movement one is to bang her fist on the side of her head as if she's forgotten quite what she's doing here; movement two is a diagonal chopping strike with both hands as if she's taking an axe to the crowd; movement three is a rapid pint-pulling gesture with the mike stand as if she's extremely thirsty; movement four sums it all up: vigorous jerking on an imaginary chain."

Following the punk penchant for subverting all things (rock) iconic, Siouxsie adopted a stage demeanor that put into question the very idea of female performance. To describe her actions was to describe the unprecedented. This disrupted the journalistic structuring process of 'description = knowledge and understanding.' Of course, making ridiculous the expectations of the audience was the norm in punk performance, but as previously stated, this norm was inevitably tied to a male base: The Sex Pistols. By appropriating and expanding the subversive techniques established by the male McLaren and the Pistols, Siouxsie put into question the whole notion of female stage presentation as well as gender differentiation in performance style.

To protect journalism's knowledge structure from the threat posed by Siouxsie's indefinable performance style, journalists attempted to align the Banshees with previous bands fronted by fantastic women, most notably The Velvet Underground. The Nico/Siouxsie alignment was excessively iterated, to the point that some journalists castigated their colleagues for constantly aligning female with female. Siouxsie's un-feminine (because ambiguous) on-stage actions also prompted many journalists to emphasize her feline qualities, love of cats (like likes like), iciness, and her robotic movements (robots signifying 'inhuman' and tied to 'femininity'). All of this is, of course, a standard reactionary behavior of the male (journalist) when confronted with a 'female' who does not act as (patriarchy thinks) she should. Under patriarchy, women can be either virgin/mother or femme fatale. As Siouxsie was acting outside of, and against the gendered constrictions of pop performance, she was immediately placed into the femme fatale/ice Queen/bitch category so that she could be known and understood. Again, Siouxsie and the Banshees constantly protested against women=women equations, constructing Siouxsie as the emblem for the band, repetitions of (his)stories, and other gendered reportage. At all points, there was an attempt to recuperate the band's objections by labeling the band "elitist," "arty," "petty."
What the journalists emphasize conflicts with what Siouxsie and her audience must have been experiencing. This is an example of the variant meanings of the sign (Siouxsie). Siouxsie was promoting an image of woman-as-power, an alternative to the generic pop image of woman-as-star, while the majority of English music journalists were perceiving Siouxsie through their patriarchally-framed gender ideology.

As demonstrated, Siouxsie's unique performance style disrupted the journalistic structure of knowledge. The inclusion of her lyrics within journal and tabloid reviews further undermined the popular conception of the female performer furthered by journalists. *Suburban Relapse* (1977), a first-person narrative of a housewife's decline into insanity: "I was washing up the dishes/Minding my own business/When my string snapped/ I had a relapse ... a suburban relapse." *Red Light* (1980) indict fashion models whom Siouxsie labels "shuttersluts" and "kodak-whores." *Peek-A-Boo* (1988) condemns strip bars which "reek like a pigsty," and are patronized by men holding their "flaccid egos in [their] hands."

The inclusion of photographs within articles on the Banshees also disrupted the gender codes of pop music. The now infamous picture (fig. 1) of Siouxsie-as-Nazi-Dominatrix shows bare breasts, stiletto heels and make-up, traditional feminine signs. However, the viewer's gaze is framed by the angle of the photographic eye which is a reflection of the photographer's perception of Siouxsie. Siouxsie's fashion image partially enforces a particular mode of perception.

This photograph directs our gaze upwards so that Siouxsie dominates. The male gaze (the camera's eye), in particular, is placed in a crouching, submissive position. Though the photographer's placement in the audience initially determined the upward angle of the camera, the constant reproduction and fame of this particular photo of Siouxsie in Nazi garb, rather than the many others of her dressed in the same outfit indicates that this photograph became famous because it forced the (male) gaze into a servile position. The photographer's gaze, like that of the viewer, was forced into that position by the visual imperative of Siouxsie's outfit and demeanor. The man in the background bending over as if in readiness for corporal punishment reinforces the servile role of the (male) gaze and the power of Siouxsie.

The black-and-white-ness of the photo also endows the image with truth.
value. The Banshees, and other punk bands and journalists, used non-color photography for promotional photos to signify newsworthiness. The photograph also allowed Siouxsie and other female punk performers to present themselves as 'important,' whereas color photography would have connoted 'frivolity,' 'femininity.' Significantly, when color is used in Siouxsie's packaging, it is muted, blurred, surrealistically rendered, rupturing the socially constructed 'frivolity' of the medium. Such photographs undermine the hegemonic discourse of the journalists, rendering 'knowledge' of Siouxsie enigmatic. The ambiguity produced by the discordance of image and text demystifies hegemonic pop discourse, producing interstices within which the fan or consumer can access ideologies alternative to that offered by pop/disco/rock music. By (dis- and un)covering the imagistic meaning of Siouxsie, and by appropriating both her ideas and consumable signs, the consumer was/is empowered.

After signing with Polydor Records—of all the first-wave punk bands, the Banshees were the last to sign because they did not want to relinquish artistic control of either their music or packaging—the band gained full control over their visual presentation and promotion. Siouxsie dropped the Nazi dominatrix image and Ace Frehley eye star and adopted clothing and make up culturally constructed as 'feminine.' Yet, her make up, clothing, and demeanor were discordantly combined in order to subvert original 'feminine' signifieds, throwing the surface signs—by which we are able to 'know' women—into question.

In an early general advertisement for a Banshees single, a motif often used by the band is first employed: the mirror (fig. 2). Since at least the Middle Ages, the mirror has been a sign of female vanity. Generally, a woman or Venus figure is shown holding a mirror into which she gazes at herself. The emblematic mirror reflects the visible features of the viewer which reflect the interior or the soul. This emblem asserts knowledge of something through its appearance. It is an assertion the Banshees and much of the punk movement wanted to disprove. Witness this oft-quoted line from the Banshees' Mirage (1977): "The image is no images/It's not what it seems."

This photograph plays on the traditional rock group portrait which usually presents the members in an isophalic row. To the left is Kenny, the drummer, and to the right a person holds a mirror in front of her/his face which reflects the face of Kenny and John, the guitarist. Steve Severin stands in the middle, touching a mirror placed on a wicker chair which is itself placed atop a wooden crate. In this mirror we see a reflection of Siouxsie gazing at a mirror and holding something to the side of her face. What she is holding is in fact the
mirror that reflects Kenny, and John who is outside of the picture frame. Kenny's eyes are directed upwards and out of the picture, yet in his reflection, his eyes seem to stare up towards the hair behind the mirror's frame... Siouxsie's hair. Though Siouxsie is not seated on the central chair—meant to stand for a throne—her reflection is the focal point. Essentially, this photograph shows an enthroned reflection of Siouxsie (playing on the idea of the pedestal woman), disembodied from the real Siouxsie whose face is obscured by another reflecting device. Siouxsie-as-image-of-woman is merely a reflection, an image, whereas Siouxsie-as-subject is unknowable, simply a reflection of (male) Others. As in traditional rock photographs, Siouxsie is placed in the center like a female emblem of the band. However, only her reflection is placed on the throne, while she, like the other band members, stands outside of the reflecting center. The real Siouxsie is garbed in a plaid wool shirt and wool Mac, a masculine attire not unlike that of the band. However, only her reflection is placed on the throne, while she, like the other band members, stands outside of the reflecting center. The real Siouxsie is garbed in a plaid wool shirt and wool Mac, a masculine attire not unlike that worn by the rest of the band.32

In another photo from the same period, the isocephal portrait type again gives way to punk symmetrical asymmetry. Siouxsie is placed in the foreground, leaning on, and awkwardly grasping a vertical bar. Beside and behind her stand the other members of the band, all attired in black and black-and-white garments. The patches of black and white in their outfits serve as a background, and highlight Siouxsie's diagonally-striped tie, the focal point. The masculine tie along with the black-and-white outfit unites Siouxsie with the band, obscuring gender differentiation.

By the Banshees' fourth album, Siouxsie had changed her image, adopting what becomes her signature 'big hair,' overdetermined make up, and exotic clothing.33 The publicity photographs from this period depict a Siouxsie who is fit to inhabit the makeshift throne of the earlier photo. The "image is no images" has shifted to an image-of-all-images, a *bricolage* of the signs of historically constructed woman. The overdetermined style of this period is accompanied by a new concern with matching the theme of feminine representation to the theme of a particular album; each album reflects a different epoch or culture with Siouxsie's artifice as its complement. For example, on the fourth album *JuJu*, both the music and the lyrics attempted to evoke the 'darker,' supernatural aspects of primitivism.34 For this album, Siouxsie dons quasi-primitive clothing and adopts a teased, afro-textured hairstyle.

Without prior knowledge of the Banshees, the image might appear to present another emblematic seductress. On closer examination, Siouxsie's adoption of the primitive female look is divisive.35 On the back of the *JuJu* album cover, photographic portraits of the band members are set into a black frame. In her portrait, Siouxsie seems to be nude except for a swatch of black and burgundy satin in which she has wrapped herself. If we imagine another contemporary Top 40 star placed into this picture—like Kate Bush, who is also wrapped in drapery on her *Hounds of Love* cover—the intent and content is obvious. Siouxsie does not avert her glance in submission to the male gaze, but stares at the viewer. Indeed, her extraordinary eye make up and her almost erased lips emphasize her gaze. Her torso is turned to the side with her arms acting as obstructions to (male) sight. Her face is deadpan, eliciting nothing and denying the possibility of gratification.36

In a later picture for the *Iter 87* Tourbook, Siouxsie again adopts drapery as clothing in her simulation of an ancient Greek/Roman statue. In this photo, she is so well wrapped that she is more akin to an Egyptian mummy than an Aphrodite or Venus. Her head is averted, but since there is nothing (stimulating) to see, she need not meet the viewer's gaze. By re-presenting (herself as) an antique sculpture of feminine beauty without, however, offering the viewer the expected 'classic' exposed breasts, Siouxsie calls into question the tradition of depicting the female form in 'fine art.' As if to emphasize the impossibility of visual gratification, Siouxsie places her tense arm across her torso as both a sign of viewer inaccessibility and as protection from the male gaze. It is conceivable that in other instances, the bareness of her arm in contrast to her covered body might lead to fetishization. However, Siouxsie's arm is tense, unyielding, and in this respect is masculinized. This image again illustrates Siouxsie's divisive use of clothing and make up to re-present the historic woman naturalized by time and the history of art as powerful.

The same tourbook contains a portrait of Siouxsie united with the male members of the band. Set within a Greek key patterned frame and placed behind hot pink and purple tendrils (signifying 'psychedelic' and 'supernatural'), an emotionless, matter-of-fact Siouxsie meets the glance of the (male) spectator. The pouting lips, bedroom eyes, seductive pose, and giggling childishness expected of the female singer is, as always, denied by Siouxsie. Around her neck, she wears a purple scarf studded with rhinestone snakes. The snake is both a traditional sign of woman's evil (cause of the Fall) and a motif associated with Pompeian decor. The scarf, as worn by Siouxsie, like Siouxsie-as-ancient-sculpture, serves three purposes: (1) to allude to the theme of the tour (Ancient Pompeii); (2) to continue the exotic, romantic, mystical, decadent, and dark signification with which the band was popularly associated; (3) to recuperate (his)toric woman by appropriating and then displacing her signs—in this
case, the expressionless Siouxsie invests the snake emblem with a new associative power.

This process continues into the present with, for instance, Siouxsie's pairing of the prostitute with the dominatrix during the JuJu, A Kiss in the Dreamhouse, and Nocturne albums. She appropriated, and subsequently coupled the looks of the late nineteenth-century dance-hall girl and Theda Bara on the Hyaena album and tour. Most recently, she mixed the Muchaesque aesthetic woman with Louise Brooks and Emma Peel (The Avengers). It must be remembered that Siouxsie is not merely 'vamping,' for her aloof demeanor and her refusal to follow the norms of sexual projection disrupt expected behaviors associated with, for instance, Theda Bara.

On the fifth album, A Kiss in the Dreamhouse, Siouxsie took on the role of the fin-de-siècle aesthetic woman who is illusionistically presented as 'real,' yet is shrouded in artifice. On the verso of the album cover (fig. 3), Siouxsie is stripped nude and strikes one of her signature enigmatic poses as Klimt-esque decor swirls about. Gustav Klimt painted the female in a realistic, fleshly manner to which he applied ornamental decoration. Siouxsie subverts the original nineteenth-century 'artistic' representation of woman-as-decor by giving up control of the decorative elements. In Klimt's art, the decor forms around the figure of the woman implying a collusion, a reciprocal relationship between the two. By contrast, Siouxsie's decor swirls about of its own devise, even crossing the boundary of her face. The decor is shown for what it is: simply decor. It has absolutely nothing to do with the female (Siouxsie), but is just a sign that presumes to signify 'woman.' Siouxsie also wears a sickly white base make up which, tinctured as it is with blue light, creates a less than sexually inviting vision of death.

It is not accidental that the decorative gold circle and the gold triangle with the red tail in the lower right resembles an ovum and sperm, and that the sperm is denied access by the protruding bar at the center of the ovum. Three spermatozoaic motifs are placed by the three male heads on the front cover (fig. 4) just as another ovoid motif is placed in front of Siouxsie’s face(s).

The front of this album cover depicts a plethora of pyramidal shapes encapsulating stylized eyes—like the mirror, a major symbol in the Banshees’ iconography apparent in the early advertisement for the band—triangles, swirls, and scarabs within boxes. These decorative elements refer to the Egyptian Revival of the late nineteenth century. The decorative elements are scattered about the
picture plane to give the illusion of recession, like so many planets in the universe. In the back of this illusory space, the three faces of the sleeping male band members are placed in a circle, while in the center, two images of Siouxsie's face confront each other. The one's eyes are closed with lips pursed and ready for a kiss (in the Dreamhouse). The other gazes down dreamily at her double. The expression on her lips is ambiguous. The primacy of the mirror motif, used here as it was in one of the band's earliest photo advertisements, cannot be dismissed. The meaning of this photo illustration is likely contained in the lyrics of Kraftwerk's "Hall of Mirrors," a song which the Banshees subsequently covered on their eighth album Through the Looking Glass.38

"The Hall of Mirrors" is based on basic sociological ideas about the Self, specifically Cooley's well-known notion of the Looking Glass Self. We cannot assume that the Banshees were aware of the notions that inspired this song; however, the lyrics alone give enough information for the listener—particularly a listener who was so influenced by the song that she covered it—to grasp at least the fundamentals of Cooley's theory.

Within this context, a possible 'message' of the photo-illustration might be that Siouxsie's mirror image is looking at her even when her eyes are closed and that her mirror image is the image of the (symbolic and internalized) Other as represented by the male heads that occupy the cerebral area of her head, like thought-bubbles.

The emphasis on the 'act of looking' as an act of knowing and privilege is further demonstrated by the eye make up worn by Siouxsie during the Hyaena tour in which rhinestone eyes are placed on her closed lids. In this case, it is Siouxsie who is meeting—even staring down—the (male) spectator, even when her eyes are closed.

The mirror image of woman as represented by Siouxsie continued to play an important role in Banshees' publicity. The cover of the eighth album, Through the Looking Glass, displays a marbled background, swirling script associated with The Face magazine's calligraphic style, and peering eyes. The disembodied eyes of the band members gaze out through the disintegrating silver as if lurking behind the silvered reflection of the mirror. The eyes of the internal Other meet the gaze of the viewer.39 The album cover serves as a type of mirror, privileging the eyes and gaze of the Banshees over that of the viewer.

In the Peepshow Tourbook, virtually all of the photographs are based on
the act of looking. From the incidental snapshot to the constructed collage strips of eyes, the viewer is forced to look at being looked at. It is not coincidental that even the snapshots are distorted, blurred, elongated or heavily shadowed for this emphasizes the Banshees' message that the 'image' is superficial. The image is not 'truth,' but just a sign, an Other that looks back at you because of social signifying practices. Sight is a political act that privileges the (male) looker.

The message conveyed by Siouxsie and the Banshees' often employed mirror and eye motifs in both publicity and lyrics is that we depend too much on images as sites of truth. When we see anything, we immediately presume knowledge of it as if its outward form were its totality. For the Banshees, the "image is no images," or, in other words, the 'truth' is only a superficial, socially constructed meaning attached to the object.

The band also promotes a view of the subject-as-Other. We look at the mirror (of truth) and believe that what is reflected is a truthful reflection. However, the reflection is in actuality our own (symbolic) sight doubling back on itself, telling us what our (internalized) society wants and forces us to 'know.' Hence, the mirror and eyes motifs symbolize sight as a (privileged) site of socially constructed 'truth.' "The image is no images" simply means we use images as alibis for the mystification of reality.

The mirror theme has even continued into their latest production, a 'limited edition' CD box entitled The Mirror Crack'd. On their latest album, Superstition, which the mirror package contains, the period theme is the Belle Epoch. The Mirror Crack'd (superficially) refers to the novel of the same name by the premier female mystery writer of that era, Agatha Christie. Yet, the packaging also serves the Banshees' personal symbolic theme of the mirror as "image is no images," or the-image-as-a-lie. In this case, the cracked mirror is but another 'punk' attempt to destroy the sign system that permits us to 'believe what we see,' to crack the reflection of 'truth.'

By emphasizing the politics of sight through their visual products, packaging, and lyrics, the Banshees have preached the punk doctrine of 'the anarchy of signs.' With the politics of sight as a proclaimed foundation in their raison d'être, the Banshees have consistently tried to expose the lies of images and, ultimately, the lies of 'realism' and 'illusion.' They have accomplished this lyrically by basing their songs on the unknowable and supernatural (the unexplained and ambiguous), the unexplained—because-outside of popular ideology, the anti-

bourgeois and the anti-fascist, and the abnormal. (Though the 'anti' stance may be traditional and, therefore, commodified in popular music culture, everything and everyone in our culture is commodified. We find meaning in products, find ourselves in products, and rebel through products). Visually, the band has constantly enveloped themselves within the distorted, blurred and hazy photographic medium and have chosen the 'mirror' and 'eye' as their emblems.

Siouxsie, in particular, has used these same methods to undermine and reconstruct the (his)toric feminine, to demonstrate that women can participate in male activities (with emphasis on unity) and even work within the patriarchally structured music business without, however, being reduced to the gender determined role of mere spectacle of, or emblem for a culturally privileged masculine band. As the (masculine) ideology of pop performance was in place long before Siouxsie's entrance into the business, she was forced to create a new, positive image of woman from within. The punk movement allowed her to do this because it was fundamentally opposed to pop structuralism. By following the punk tactics of subversion, Siouxsie was/able to maintain an accessible and consumable, yet positive image of an intelligent, artistic, self-sufficient and powerful woman.

Many journalists had/have attempted to delimit Siouxsie's accomplishments by naming her the "ice queen," "robot," or "feline," by tying her to the (his)story of The Sex Pistols, or by labeling her products "elitist" and "artsy." Such attempts to refuse a woman prominence in the masculine field of music have only succeeded in creating commentaries that are fragmented and, sometimes, overtly and painfully misogynistic. The same approaches have been used to put Nina Hagen, Joan Jett, Debbie Harry, and a multitude of others in their male-defined places. Like the aforementioned performers, Siouxsie has succeeded in communicating 'messages' in direct contradiction to those produced by her commentators, by her visual self-presentation, interviews, lyrics, and talents. These visual and textual images have created voids within patriarchy's commentary on Siouxsie through which an audience may access her 'messages.' The 'messages' offered to the audience are gender-decentered. One may gain a clearer understanding of the social construct of knowledge through Siouxsie's lyrics and 'mirror' imagery, as well as a knowledge of (his)toric woman alternative to that promoted by (his)story.

More importantly, women and men appropriate the sign of Siouxsie as a sign for themselves and, thus, communicate the many positive, empowering signifieds (originality, talent, intellect, and non-pop, alternative modes of physi-
cal attractiveness) of the performer as themselves. For youth who are pressured to adopt the highly commodified styles of pop performers as their own, Siouxsie's (and then Banshees') emphasis on originality and distinction through dress, rather than exposure of flesh, as well as a deconstructive view towards 'image,' are alternative to dominant social definitions of beauty.

Endnotes

1 For half a decade, Geffen Records has had American distribution rights over the Banshees' catalogue. Most of the promotional photos, posters, and album covers are not created by, but distributed by Geffen. However, some of the publicity for the Banshees' last album, Superstition—notably two videos and promo photos—were produced by Geffen. These materials appear to drastically undermine the feminist image Siouxsie created for herself over the previous decade. Since this change in image only occurred with the last album, it is too early to determine whether Geffen, Siouxsie, or both are responsible and whether or not this disturbing trend will continue.

2 That Siouxsie is considered a 'visual' artist is demonstrated by her inclusion in a London wax museum with other 'visual' rock personalities, like Elvis.


4 Women in punk music, like women in the history of art, can be placed on the teleological continuum and into the fine art canon, but only as inheritors of, and receptacles for male genius. The female artist or performer mimics the style of a male predecessor. By contrast, the male performer inherits and revises the style of his 'father.' Thus, the female merely copies and never bequeaths a style to succeeding generations.


6 Melody Maker (June 17, 1978).

7 New Music Express (July 29, 1978).

8 In the Peek-A-Boo press kit issued by the Banshees' American distributors, the history is reiterated: "Their first live appearance, at a punk festival at London's 100 Club in 1976, was a lengthy upturning of 'The Lord's Prayer,' complete with Sid Vicious on drums." Geffen Records, 9130 Sunset Blvd. L.A., CA. (Summer, 1991).

9 There were, of course, exceptions. Certain journalists noticed how prominent a role 'history' was playing in the coverage of the band. See, for instance: Sounds (June 24, 1978).

10 Sounds (June 24, 1978 and November 25, 1978).

11 Siouxsie's constant insistence that the band be treated as a collective enterprise was at odds with journalists who would, and perhaps could only perceive her as a 'star,' as the glittering object of desire.

12 Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 13. I am specifically referring to pop/rock music of the past thirty years, and even Big Band and Tin Pan Alley. In Blues, Jazz and Soul, I can think of only a handful of female performers who deboundaried themselves. However, these performers do/did not play instruments and usually sang (male) others' lyrics which might leave their 'free' positions tenuous. In 'bands,' the female lead singer is usually the visual sign of the band and the mouthpiece for the (male) lyric. Even those female performers who do not front a band are susceptible to immediate recuperation by the dominant ideology of gender. I am reminded of Paula Abdul and Madonna who sing acceptable (to patriarchal) lyrics—though Madonna's image, like Siouxsie's problematizes boundaries.

13 Pop/Disco music is for dancing. This is why there are so many frontwomen in these bands and why this genre is so very popular. In his One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), p. 89, Dave Laing remarks: "Like all punk's women singers, she [Siouxsie] eschewed the bump-and-grind routine of, say, Tina Turner. The angularity contradicts the 'natural' body movements expected of the mainstream female singer."

14 In One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock, p. 25, Dave Laing uses Sontag's definition of Camp: "Camp sensibility has a semi-permanent relation to the androgynous, to the blurring of the signs of gender difference ... (Camping) was emphasized occasionally by Siouxsie Sue [sic] in some of her early stage ensembles." While I think Laing makes a good point, I do not believe that 'Camp' was Siouxsie's sole intention. The belief that the Banshees are children of the Glamsters David Bowie and Marc Bolan and no more is what causes Laing and others to confuse the issue. Likewise, it mimics the journalistic (his)toricizing and frames Siouxsie's continuing political efforts in the "good old heyday" of punk.

15 New Musical Express (January 14, 1978). Though 'asexuality' was an im-
portant issue in the punk initiative to erase gender differences, and probably played an important part in Siouxsie's own initiative, the author of this quote is not simply stating an objective fact. He ties "asexuality" to "harsh" and predicates this by equating Siouxsie's "bodily maneuvering" with instinct, at once attempting to place her into the 'bad woman' category as an indefinable "harsh" asexual and attach her dancing to feminine instinct.

16 Sounds (September 4, 1978).

17 New Musical Express (September 23, 1978). The use of the words "scything" and "latent violence" provides an instance of ambiguity inherent to interpretations of Siouxsie's performances. The words could mean that Siouxsie is outside of the ideology of female performance standards and/or that she is 'outside,' so within, precisely because she is bad (violent) and castrating (scything).

18 Sounds (August 26, 1978).

19 That she was not merely copying The Sex Pistols is demonstrated by her coolness toward, rather than assault on her audiences, and her distaste for pogoing and spitting audiences.

The general consensus is that The Sex Pistols were thoroughly uninterested in the politics of gender, but that this became a major issue for their audience and, by consequence, with many of the punk bands that followed.

20 I am tempted to think that many of the journalists actually thought of Siouxsie and Nico as commensurate. Even Baudrillard writes of Nico as an androgyn, Seduction (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 13. It may be possible that many male minds have been so conditioned that anything that parodies femininity by excess is viewed as androgynous, asexual, i.e., neither male nor female and undesirable.

21 One journalist objected to the female=female alignment and, as a replacement, offered The Banshees=Pink Floyd, an all-male band. Small shock that the analogy was not made again.

22 The journalistic method of quickly dismissing anything that is not immediately understandable or recuperable has been generously treated by Roland Barthes in his essay "Blind and Dumb Criticism," in Mythologies (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 34-5.

23 This photo is reminiscent of scenes from The Night Porter, a cinematic attempt at gender and sexual deconstruction.


25 The media employed the black-and-white photographic medium because they wished to make the punk movement appear 'newsworthy' and only because, for them, punk was repugnant and must be under 'constant surveillance'; the need to 'know' about everything so as to be prepared. The punks also used this medium for the same reason as well as its lower cost. Hebdige, Hiding in the Light, p. 21.

26 Hebdige, Hiding in the Light, pp. 33-4.

27 The Banshees did not sign a recording contract until they found a company that would give them complete control over packaging. In interviews, the band frequently state their belief that all packaging and musical decisions should be collectively made by the band. In a recent phone conversation with one of the guitarists, however, a complaint about Siouxsie's "having the last say" was made. This leads me to believe that Siouxsie might hold that privilege but publicly insists on the 'unity' of the band.

28 Albums, posters, etc. But not her image, which would lead to a possible masculine recuperation of the intended meaning since the mass commodification of her dress would simply reinscribe her bricolaged outfits into the patriarchal fashion system and lead to her own loss of control over the production of meaning. It is, after all, the lack of commodification that gave/punited punk its power. How long such power can be sustained depends on many factors, especially the movement's ability to shift to the unknown as society begins to grasp it. In Siouxsie's and Madonna's cases, the constant recreation of their images/selves stiles public knowledge of, and acclimation to the outward signs by which they are known.

29 What has gone unnoticed by Siouxsie's commentators is that she appropriated the star-over-the-eye motif from Kiss, one of the most sexist bands of this era.


31 I believe that Kenny was chosen by the band because of his startling resemblance to Siouxsie. He also resembles Marc Bolan, the androgynous leader of T-Rex, a premier band of the Glam movement and whom Siouxsie admits influenced her musical and visual styles.

32 Reviewers constantly complained about Siouxsie's lack of communication with, and distance from her audience. Her distance was maintained because she
Kevin Petty did not believe that she could 'know' the audience, nor could they 'know' her. Relating with an audience is also an activity mediated by gender ideology. Most people expect a female to be cheery friendliness and, to quote Dave Laing, "bump-and-grind" sexuality. Of course, Siouxsie would have none of that, though that is exactly what the reviewers 'desired.'

33 Laing, One Chord Wonders, p. 91. Laing believes that punk female performers wore overdetermined outfits and outlandish hairstyles for political reasons, i.e., to parody popular notions of beauty. Hebdige also sees the adoption of punk fashion as the ultimate anti-bourgeois statement: "such gestures are a public disavowal of the will to queue for work, throwing yourself away before They do it for you." Hiding in the Light, p. 32.

34 I will not argue that the band's belief in, and promotion of exotic primitivism is not ethnocentrism at its worst.

35 Her primitive look was limited to videos. While she retained the same 'primitive' hairstyle in photographs, her clothes were either the pure black fetish wear of pornography, or a long skirt paired with a black t-shirt with a large star of David emblazoned across the front. It is notable that at this time, her hairstyle and pornographic look were appropriated by Nikki Six of the ultra-misogynist Motley Cře. Boy George also adopted her hairstyle.

36 The same demeanor is reminiscent of her style of stage performance.

37 Once again, the subsequent appropriation of Siouxsie's dress style by Nikki Six of Motley Cře and Boy George dramatizes the costume's androgynous and masculine aspects.

38 The Banshees recorded this album of covers to acknowledge those bands who most influenced their music. By devoting an album to covers, the Banshees pay homage to David Bowie whose Pin Ups served the same purpose. One of the Banshees' first songs "Make Up to Break Up" was based on Kraftwerk's "Hall of Mirrors."

39 Simon Frith and Howard Horne have clearly demonstrated that the majority of successful English musicians since the Sixties have been graduates of polytechnic art schools and were very familiar with, and influenced by contemporary theory and avant-garde practices such as deconstruction (133), structuralism (144), feminism (121), situationism (131), and marxism (129). The original drummer for the Banshees as well as his replacement were polytechnic students. Art into Pop (New York: Methuen, 1987).

40 Siouxsie's use of the 'evil eye' and the 'enchanting stare' prompts many of her reviewers to label her "mechanical," "cold," "robotic," and akin to a "Balinese dancer." Laing has noted the prominence of the 'evil eye' in punk style.

41 Hebdige, Subculture, pp. 106-12.

42 Siouxsie's audience is similar to that of other 'Gothic' acts like The Sisters of Mercy, The Mission, and The Dammed. A noticeable portion of their fans dress in 'gothic' clothing, i.e., black clothing, somewhat Victorian in style and usually embellished with crosses, spider webs, skulls. Unlike other Gothic bands, Siouxsie's audience has a greater percentage of females. Since the early Eighties, when Siouxsie began dressing in costumes of historical Woman, she seems to have had a large gay and lesbian following.

43 Again, pop/disco performance is conditioned by masculine expectations of dance, music, lyric structures that support patriarchal hegemony. Though a few women have been able to manipulate the genre, manipulation is more easily recuperated than non-traditional genres.