

*Green Day's Jesus of  
Suburbia: (De)constructing  
identities in the land of  
make believe*

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**Abstract** | In 2004, when Green Day released their album *American Idiot*, the long-term effects of 9/11 were still unfolding across America and the world at large. With the prevailing discourse of the war on terror serving the purposes of implementing a culture of fear and constraining the possibilities of voices of dissent being heard, the main musical response, as far as mainstream genres are concerned, was unsurprisingly one of deference, much more so than critique. Green Day, however, summoned up the conception of punk rock as a genre that has always privileged rebellious and confrontational stances and recorded an album conceived as a rock-opera that chronicles the life and times of a disaffected youth in post-9/11 America through the ventures of a protagonist named Jesus of Suburbia. Through a close reading of the song “Jesus of Suburbia”, and tackling such concepts as Bauman’s postmodern wanderer, Augé’s non-places of supermodernity and Soja’s postmetropolis, this paper analyses how the narrative of *American Idiot* depicts life in the contemporary cityspace.

**Keywords** | Green Day, 9/11, punk rock, genre, identity, suburbia

## **Terror, hysteria and the *American Idiot***

Don't want to be an American idiot  
Don't want a nation under the new mania  
Can you hear the sound of hysteria?  
...  
Now everybody do the propaganda.  
And sing along to the age of paranoia.  
  
(Green Day, "American Idiot")

When Green Day re-emerged in the global musical scene in the year 2004, after a considerably long period of relative frailty in terms of commercial success and public acclaim, the United States of America, and indeed the world at large, were still under the effect of the manifold geo-political, economic, social and cultural consequences that had arisen from the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. In this context, and at the very same time that President George W. Bush was repeatedly insisting on the idea that freedom and democracy had been attacked and they would be defended, supporting with his rhetoric the mythical vision of America as the privileged land of the free (Bush, 2001), most of the immediate measures taken in the wake of the tragic events were directed at increasing means of control and surveillance and imposing considerable limitations upon individual and civil liberties<sup>1</sup>. The soon established dominant discourse of the "war on terror", which ultimately carried a strong psychological and emotional depth, called, at least in the short term, for an affective, more than ideological, response from a significant part of the American people, providing the immediate basis of acceptance needed by the government to implement most of the practical measures it sought to adopt in the name of an alleged improvement in security.

The rhetoric of the war on terror, which was meant to designate, simultaneously, a war against the possibility of further terrorist acts and a war against

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, just a month later, on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the USA Patriot Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush. This controversial Act of Congress aimed at strengthening security controls by allowing such measures as indefinite detentions of individuals suspected of terrorist links, particularly immigrants; searches of houses or business facilities without prior consent or knowledge of their owners or occupants; increased surveillance of all electronic communications without court orders, and unrestrained access to business records to investigate activities suspected of facilitating money laundering and financing terrorism (USA Patriot Act, 2001). A significant number of the Act's provisions have been deemed unconstitutional by Federal courts. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, some parts of the Patriot Act expired, but the following day, with the approval of the USA Freedom Act, they were restored and renewed for four more years.

the condition of living in terror, of being terrified in the face of dangers resulting from pervasive and undetermined threats, growingly complex and global in their reach, was crucial to the purpose of sustaining the emotional dimension of the trauma and the re-inscription of feelings of fear and insecurity as instruments at the state's disposal to conduct its own policies. As Massumi noted, "Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government" (Massumi, 2005: 32). In fact, the emphasis placed on the negative emotions of fear and terror sustained the production of a politically and discursively grounded culture of fear<sup>2</sup>. Fear, as one of the most powerful emotions of the human psyche, became the means through which the government sought to impose in uncontested manner its domestic and international policies, employing visions of terror and ominous threats<sup>3</sup> to implement increasingly exclusionary practices, namely restricting immigration policies and constraining individual liberties with a set of new laws and security measures<sup>4</sup>.

The discourses that were articulated at the time sought to reinforce the production of a general consensus around a renewed conception of uncontested national identity, as if within it all differences, including different political perceptions of the recent events, could be erased. This conception was, naturally, misleading, for national identity, apart from being an elaborated and permanent construct consistently subject to change and transformation, is also a multidimensional concept where the national is provided as a source of collective identification but one that is constantly open to competing claims as to what is meant and implicated in its references to territory and ancestry, history and myths, and particularly its intersection with ethnic identities and class struggles. Anthony D. Smith (1993) has noted that behind the single notion of a nation as a specific form of collective identity lies the assumption that its

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<sup>2</sup> Linke and Taana Smith have claimed that "an emergent cultural system of fear cannot be understood solely as a byproduct of violence or as an inevitable symptom of war. Forms of terror are artifacts of history, society and global politics. Cultures of fear and states of terror are affective tools of government that come into being as a modus of population management deployed by military, political, and administrative actors" (Linke and Taana Smith, 2009: 4-5).

<sup>3</sup> As Massumi observes, "A threat is unknowable. If it were known in its specifics, it wouldn't be a threat. (...) The threat as such is nothing *yet* – just a looming. It is a form of futurity yet has the capacity to fill the present without presenting itself. Its future looming casts a present shadow, and that shadow is *fear*" (Massumi, 2005: 35).

<sup>4</sup> As Enders and Sandler have noted, "The events of 9/11 heightened anxiety worldwide and resulted in trade-offs in terms of accepting reduced freedom in return for greater security; society had not been willing to surrender as much freedom prior to 9/11. Society lost innocence on that fateful day that it will never regain. The threat of catastrophic terrorist events – though remote – is etched indelibly in everyone's mind" (Enders and Sandler, 2012: 2).

main features can be said to include a set of common traits, namely a homeland, which is a shared historic territory; a legacy of myths and memories; a mass public culture assured by the agencies of popular socialization such as educational institutions and the mass media; a series of legal rights and duties that are observed by all its members; and a common economical system with its own modes of production and division of labour that assure territorial mobility for its population. However, all of these common components which hold together within the concept of national identity the dimensions of the cultural and the political, the economic and the geographical, along with the ethnic, do not stand as fixed entities but are rather constantly challenged constructs, even more indeterminate and arbitrary in the era of globalization and multiple transnational networks operating at all levels, making it extremely difficult for individuals to locate themselves particularly within the borders of a nation or one unique consciousness of national identity.

In fact, there has never been one single commonly accepted definition of what it means to be American<sup>5</sup>, and that debate was intensely revived as both political and media discourses sought to strengthen the idea that the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> had been an attack on the very own idea of America, although it should be stressed that the choice of targets indicated more precisely an attack on America's sites of power, be them economic (the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre), political (the White House) or military (the Pentagon). Nonetheless, the national narrative was constantly deployed and enhanced through the public usage of symbols, namely the flag, which could suddenly be found on display in the backyard of every home, and the anthems, which could be heard constantly on the radio, TV, concerts and public gatherings, with the single purpose of exalting a sense of commonness, of belonging and identity, and promoting an irrevocable sense of unity in order to overcome the possible obstacles some different voices might come to generate. With the claim that the attacks had the whole of America and its very own soul as their target, it was requested of all Americans not only to incorporate the intruding trauma as their own, but mainly to contend with the causes and consequences of the events through the prism of a collective identity and an ideal of nationhood that would support and legitimate further actions the governmental institutions chose to pursue.

Under these specific circumstances, national narratives were highly exalted as to convey the message that each and every American should consider the national

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the construction of America's national identity and the challenges it currently faces, see Huntington (2009).

purpose above any individual purpose. This national purpose was, at this particular moment, largely anchored around the concept of homeland, which, as noted by Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert in their analysis of *Fear and the Familial in the US War on Terror* (2008), was somewhat contradictory in relation to what had usually been the most conveyed American national narrative, regularly developed along the notions of mobility and plurality portrayed around the term nation in particular, whereas the use of the concept of homeland appeals not only to a fixed alliance to a specific territory, but also to an emotional dimension that is implicated in its connotation of familial ties that refer to a commonness of origins in lineage, ancestry and birthplace. In this regard, they have argued that homeland «[...] is also enveloped in nostalgia for it regularly refers to a place and a past that has been lost and needs to be reclaimed; hence, the homeland is always elusive, its realisation always deferred into the future» (Cowen and Gilbert, 2008: 51). They have also pointed out that, although not portraying itself traditionally as a nation organised around birthrights or even ethno-nationalist principles, America has still had its fair share of internal conflicts and struggles based on racialised divides, which have never been definitively erased.

This unprecedented usage of the term homeland in American politics was able to privilege a vision of the country as “home”, thus reinforcing the emotional weight of the relations that are said to exist between all the members of the “family” that come to inhabit this extended home, and, simultaneously, generating an increasingly clear opposition to those that stand on the outside. According to Maskovsky and Susser

the discursive shift from ‘national defense’ to ‘homeland security’ was not without ideological significance. (...) In becoming a homeland, the United States was also ‘reethnicized’ in ways that built upon deeply racist and nativist attitudes but nevertheless underscored the nation as a population with a distinctive identity, history, values and way of life in contrast to others” (Maskovsky and Susser, 2009: 6).

This exclusionary practice was naturally designed, on the one hand, to reinforce the opposition towards otherness, which, being an almost imperative necessity to national identities, is then singled out not merely as different but as the potential enemy embodying the face of evil, and, on the other hand, to build up, more than loyalty to the nation, a sense of loyalty to the state. That was, in fact, the very centre of the tendency incorporated in the discourse of patriotism, which more than an appeal to an exacerbated love of the nation, consisted in an appeal to an unquestionable love of the state, with the purpose of granting accordance to its principles of action. This was a moment when America was in need, not only of the means to reconstruct what had been materially destroyed, but mainly of reconstructing itself ideologically and assert

its cohesion and unity as a nation where a rupture had unexpectedly been imposed from the outside, and for the accomplishment of such task, music, as an essential element of contemporary popular culture, was also summoned and employed in several different ways. National identity, however, cannot be forcefully imposed upon a population by artificial means, and music itself has always been a site where different, many times opposed, visions of a national identity can be played out, supported or contested; therefore, it was not at all expected that music would not soon also re-establish its position as a site where competing visions of the world are constantly put on display.

In the context of war, which tends to spur the mobilization of national consciousness, patriotic discourses were spread out in order to reinforce the loyalty to the government. In fact, resuming the rhetoric that the newly found enemy was primarily against the idea of America, being against President George W. Bush's politics was censured just as if it implied being against America, and anyone who could be found publicly contesting government policies, particularly the war, was deemed un-American. The tension escalated severely in the months leading up to and particularly after the beginning of the war in Iraq, initiated in March 2003 by the United States military with the purpose of toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein, who presumably sustained connections with Al-Qaeda, and eliminating the risk posed by its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction – although both suspicions turned out to be false.

In this conjuncture, making the decision to release an album titled *American Idiot* was, to say the least, risky and possibly venturesome, particularly since Green Day's reputation had been far from solid or consistent in the previous years. However, that was clearly not a concern for the band, whose statement against a particular political and social climate was more than evident in the song that gave the album its name and was also its opener: "Now everybody do the propaganda! And sing along to the age of paranoia. Don't want to be an American Idiot, One nation controlled by the media, Information age of hysteria, Calling out to Idiot America" ("American Idiot", 2004). The message was clear from the onset, and the words simple enough not to be misleading. While patriotic discourses were being deployed on a daily basis by political powers and media corporations alike, Green Day set out not only to accuse both of promoting the sound of hysterical propaganda, but also to denounce the dangers of following blindly and unquestioningly such deceptive discourses, and the strength and substantiality of the statement they put forth at this particular moment of American

history was quite an unexpected turn of events for a band that had been on the brink of vanishing for some time.

In fact, a whole decade had passed since the release of *Dookie*, the album that had transformed Green Day from an underground punk rock cult group into a worldwide phenomenon in 1994. From a different perspective, and one that was shared by a multitude of earlier fans of the band, that was precisely the album that ended their career as a legitimate punk rock band, as it represented not only their move from an independent record company to a major label, but it also made them way too popular and definitely too rich to remain part of the punk culture. Since the records that followed were never able to match the impact and popularity that *Dookie* had achieved, Green Day had gone back to the roots of their underground following in the meantime, and that came to result in the same public discussion around their punk identity being held once again, ten years later, when *American Idiot* became a global success, in terms of record sales, show attendance, public visibility and critical acclaim.

## **Punk rock and the modern city**

I walk a lonely road  
The only one that I have ever known  
Don't know where it goes  
But it's home to me and I walk alone  
I walk this empty street  
On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams  
Where the city sleeps  
And I'm the only one and I walk alone

(Green Day, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams")

To be or not to be punk rock – the question is definitely not as simple as it may seem, for the very own definition of punk rock is far from definitive or unequivocal. Not merely a musical style, but a genre with its own embedded culture, its own practices and meanings, punk rock has come a long way since it made its first appearance in the 1970s, in terms of both its musical components and its associated processes of music production, circulation and consumption, and it is, therefore, necessary to look at all these simultaneously in order to understand what exactly are we referring to when we discuss the genre of punk rock.

The concept of genre has been consistently used as a crucial organizing element in the analysis of diverse popular culture texts, namely in the fields of literature and cinema, and also in music. It has acted as a tool that has structured the way we conceive and understand culture, and it has certainly established a series of formats according to which not only shared knowledge is presented and sustained, but also sets of expectations are constructed. This does not mean, however, that the taxonomies of genres operate in the field of culture as objective and rigid labels; on the contrary, they are fluid and changeable, subject to historical and social specificities as they travel both diachronically and synchronically, through time and space, through different academic, national and social contexts<sup>6</sup>.

In the popular music sphere, the definition of genre labels that enable the identification of a specific music piece as integrating a particular category of music that is distinct from other categories, has consistently assisted the organization of the processes of music production, music distribution and music listening. In each of these processes, involving the recording industry, the media and the audiences, the work of genre categories and the principles that lie at the basis of their emergence, their arrangement, coalescence, transformation or even disappearance, have frequently been the object of contestation and debate. In fact, genres may be an integral part of musical culture, of primary importance to all the experiences involved in musical practice, but to tackle the full complexity of their unstable nature has not been an easy or consensual task<sup>7</sup>.

In discourses of popular music, and in a similar manner to what has been common in discourses of literary and filmic studies, the concept of genre has been made to signify a site of specific cultural practices, since, as Fornäs has claimed, genres are not “autonomous objectivised systems – they only exist as ordered patterns in human practices of creating cultural works by the use of symbolic modes” (Fornäs, 1995: 178). In this sense, a music genre can be defined by the particular sounds, techniques, styles and language that it encompasses, but that is not all it relates to; on the contrary, it also includes the text, its themes, subjects and contents; it is dependent on a specific context, which may be more or less geographically situated; it refers to a

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<sup>6</sup> On the notion of travelling concepts and the importance of acknowledging how these have come to shape the field of the study of culture, see Neumann and Nünning (2012).

<sup>7</sup> This unstable nature of genres has been observed by Johan Fornäs, who claims that “Like symbolic modes and languages, genres are both static and dynamic structures. Compared to single works, they appear as relatively fixed systems. But, on the other hand, they continuously change and are redefined by new works that make use of them differently as well as by secondary (meta-)discourses that thematize them” (Fornäs, 1995: 177).

set of codes, values and practices that are shared by all those involved in the different stages of the music processes of production, distribution and consumption. A music genre is, therefore, constituted not just as a delimitation of a group of musical pieces, but within the specificities of a social space, where different agents are involved in its emergence and transformation.

The constant changing nature of music and the obvious complexity of the implications of it being immersed in a wider social context may be the most immediate reasons for the fact that it has not been possible to establish one single general framework of music genres, just as it has not been easy to find systematic theories of genre developed within the area of popular music studies. The Italian musicologist Franco Fabbri was among the first to offer a significant contribution to the understanding of the concept of music genres in a pioneering article published in the early 1980s, where he claimed that “A musical genre is 'a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules’” (Fabbri, 2004: 7). Fabbri noted that all the elements integrating this definition implied a certain amount of vagueness, from the very own concept of music to that of the event, the course or the rules. However, he was also adamant that, although not attempting to resolve the question of genre analysis in a definitive manner, appropriate theoretical tools were necessary to address, via an interdisciplinary approach, all the elements, musical or not, that integrated a genre. Hence, he went on to examine some of the rules determining the delimitation of genres, namely those referring specifically to the musical elements, but also those originating from the social, cultural and economic dimensions that play an important role in the expression of musical meaning. Fabbri (2004) pointed out some of the difficulties involved in understanding the constitution of what he designated as the structured communities that are typical of a genre to the point of integrating its range of rules, and analyzed some of the mechanisms that are set to work in the process of codification which lies at the basis of genres’ lives. Although at times complying with a very deterministic view where constraints and restrictions seem to assume a highly regulating function in the process of genre formation, he then concluded that “the life of genres has little or nothing in common with a Teutonic respect for rules and regulations, but rather that it is alimented by relationships between various laws, by transgressions against them and above all by ambiguities” (Fabbri, 2004: 18).

These same ambiguities were later addressed by Simon Frith (1998), who claimed that, although the use of generic categories in the organization of different forms of popular culture is inescapable, very often they may not be acknowledged or

noticed as such, and their implications may not either. One of Frith's main concerns regarding the use of labels in popular music was to understand how these have contributed to the organization of the sales process and how they have become determinant within the record industry's operating modes by facilitating the actions designed to turn music into a commodity. In this sense, he has argued that to understand the way genre labels are assembled and put to work is an equivalent to understanding how the music market works, given that "Genre is a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music" (Frith, 1998: 76). There are, however, a series of issues involved in this sort of categorization, which is never commonly agreed upon by all the different actors working within the industry and integrating what he calls the "genre worlds", including the record companies and the record retailers, the media journalists and critics, the radio stations, the concert promoters and organizers, managers and even musicians themselves. In fact, Frith has pointed out that "different media by necessity map their consumers in different ways" (Frith, 1998: 77) and organize their own distribution of labels according to those needs, resulting in unclear, inconsistent and very often redrawn labels. He has also noted that, although at the basis of these generic labels resides a musicological approach that assumes common musical elements among different artists and records, a genre distinction always refers to something other than mere sounds and instruments, namely means of production, attitudes, contents, meanings and the traits of the relationship that is established between the music and its listeners. There is, then, what Frith designates an ideological dimension in labels which is a significant part of genre discourse and depends on shared meanings, on a certain amount of shared knowledge and experience that allows for unstated rules and conventions to be understood by all those aware of genres categorization and boundaries. The specific origins of a particular genre are very likely to always remain unclear, in the same manner that the discussion of its limits and the very often turbulent coexistence with other genres may never be able to find a general consensus among different participants in the activities of music making, selling and listening, and that is the reason why Frith has argued that "the genre labelling process is better understood as something collusive than as something invented individually, as the result of a loose *agreement* among musicians and fans, writers and disc jockeys" (Frith, 1998: 88).

With particular emphasis also placed upon the culture-industry processes of musical production and the way music labelling and classification has mediated the listeners experience of music and the industry's attempts at formal organization, Keith Negus has acknowledged that "genres are often experienced as dynamic and changing

rather than rule-bound and static” (Negus, 1999: 26). He has claimed, however, that both the music industry and the larger social networks tend to operate towards the division and restriction of potential genre crossings which are constantly taking place via a multitude of transgressions and influences, through interacting and overlapping. Thus, he has argued in favour of a more transformative approach to the concept of genre, which should stress, rather than set rules and conventions, “the more common, routine and gradually changing life of existing genres” (Negus, 1999: 26). In the same sense, David Brackett has claimed that genres “may be understood as mediating the discursive web (spun between the media, consumers and industry personnel) in which musical meaning circulates and the objects to which these meanings are attached – the sonic materiality of specific performances and recordings” (Brackett, 2002: 67).

More recently, Fabian Holt (2007) has looked in particular depth at the concept of genre in popular music and its theorization as a site of cultural practice, offering an understanding of music genres as they are constructed in the totality of social space. He has contended that, despite its common usage, in fact genres have known little systematic codification, due to a variety of reasons which include the rapidly evolving nature of music itself and the complex character of its significations; the diversity of sites of musical production and consumption, with both taking place within the contemporary system of global market capitalism and its flows of international exchanges and synergies; the difficulties faced by the academy in controlling musical terminology, which is not only imposed by the industry itself but also deployed in everyday language; and the dialectical relation that the regulations of record companies marketing strategies and the hype phenomena generated by music magazines are able to establish with local communities. With such complexity in mind, Holt has suggested the concept of “genre culture” as “a concept for the overall identity of the cultural formations in which a genre is constituted” (Holt, 2007: 19).

Genres are, therefore, constituted in specific places and moments, within particular historical processes, and they travel then, through the practices of production, distribution, consumption, representation and regulation, across a series of dialectical relations with various social contexts. In the initial stage of their foundation (and codification), popular music genres involve what Holt has designated as a “centre community” of specialists (musicians, listeners, venues...), a social network that is built by people who have shared a set of codes, values and practices for defining a particular kind of music. After this initial stage, genres go through a process of constant negotiation (re-codification) involving other cultural spheres with which the centre communities interact. Different popular music genres have exhibited different

networks in terms of size, organization and power, but they all encompass intersecting musical and social practices, conditioned by the dominant values and codes, as well as the technological means, of the vast complexity of the broader social reality.

The social reality that witnessed the original birth of punk was that of the New York and London city streets in the 1970s<sup>8</sup>, where the New York Dolls and the Ramones, on one side of the Atlantic, and the Sex Pistols, on the other, first made their appearance and established what would soon become the main elements of the punk rock culture – the fast and distorted sound, very simple at its core and often practised by unskilled musicians; the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethos, which empowered a community of people to create their own fashion and style and develop their own infrastructures, promoting the emergence of specialized fanzines, clubs and independent labels; the rebellious attitude and a set of philosophical principles which included individual freedom, non-conformity, antiauthoritarianism, chaos and anarchy<sup>9</sup>; the valorisation of self-expression and self-realization against a dominant bourgeois mode of living dependant on consumption and material well-being; and a solid close relationship between the whole community that was said to be involved in the punk culture, thus seeking to eliminate the traditional barriers between audience and performers, namely during concerts where stage antics were violent and chaotic, but also beyond them<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The origins of punk have been the subject of many debates and the issue is still disputable nowadays, to such an extent that questioning its own definition has become an integral component of the genre's identity. Jon Savage contends that punk rock only emerged in its full uncontested shape with the Sex Pistols in London, although he acknowledges there were prior influences that have to be reckoned (Savage, 1992). Greil Marcus recognizes these influences and argues that the origins of punk should be sought in several art movements of the early twentieth century, such as Dadaism and Surrealism, and also the Situationist International and the Parisian revolts of May 1968 (Marcus, 1990). Whatever the case, it seems uncontested that the origins of punk must be traced back to a multitude of bands operating at the same time in different parts of the world. As Michael Bracewell has stated, "punk's history is an open narrative" (Bracewell, 2012: xii).

<sup>9</sup> In his notorious analysis of the emergence of this subculture, Dick Hebdige argued that punk was able to combine musical, visual, stylistic and performative elements that were meant to signify chaos at a multitude of levels: "The punks wore clothes which were the sartorial equivalent of swear words, and they swore as they dressed – with calculated effect, lacing obscenities into record notes and publicity releases, interviews and love songs. Clothed in chaos, they produced Noise in the calmly orchestrated Crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s" (Hebdige, 2005: 128).

<sup>10</sup> Dave Laing has asserted that "In particular, the very small-scale 'do it yourself' world of small labels but especially of home-made taped music represented the virtual dissolution of the barrier between performer and audience that was part of the ethos of much punk activity" (Laing, 2005: 456). He has also noted that punk rock's particular use of language involved, simultaneously, the shock of the new, namely the constant referring to obscenity and politics now incorporated into popular music, and the shock of the real, given the fact that punk clearly asserted that this was the reality of life in the streets.

It was against the background of the modern city that punk's oppositional stance came to life, offering an alternative domain where those that did not quietly fit in the city's dominant main structures, spatially organized to satisfy the needs of commodity capitalism, were able to use its space as their own stage, one upon which they had the opportunity to create and perform an alternative identity to be displayed for the public eye. In fact, modern cities have been the privileged stage where new subjects, relations and meanings can be produced: "The cityscape – its streets and sidewalks, its public space, the ebb and flow of its crowd, its infrastructure of transportation – has served as the setting for dynamic encounters and experiences. A great deal of modern literature, art and cinema would be unthinkable without the modern city" (Prakash, 2008: 1). And, it should be stressed, a great deal of modern music, too.

The impact of punk rock, first in the streets of New York and London, and later in the streets of many other cities around the world, mobilized groups of young people who became engaged in a set of new forms of cultural production. In their own way, they were claiming their 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968), whilst operating a critique of the commodification of urban space under the rigid socio-economic conditions of capitalism. In the underground spaces of the city, the punk community established its own collective initiatives and displayed its own unconventional behaviours and modes of expression, thus eluding the modern city's tendency towards rationalization and homogenization of its spaces and their usage<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, according to Harvey, the right to the city should be observed as something that goes well beyond the individual's right to access certain urban resources; it is, above all, "a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization" (Harvey, 2008: 23).

In the spatial context of the western modern city that tended to promote individualism, stratification and solitude, impoverishing the very own experience of everyday life in the process, punk rock emerged as an attempt to subvert the order of things and promote not only an erosion of social boundaries and dominant meanings of

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<sup>11</sup> As Prakash has noted, "As urban residents confront the experiences of the everyday, especially through the construction and consumption of public culture, such as cinema, media reports, and artistic expressions and popular music, they remake the city and their world in countless ways" (Prakash, 2008: 12).

space<sup>12</sup>, but also a new type of bond within a whole new found community. This community worked together towards the formation of its own networks of communication and cultural production, seeking alternative underground spaces in the most dilapidated parts of the city where they could engage in the transformation of the space itself, its meanings and social practices. What is more, punk celebrated, simultaneously, the chaotic elements of the urban environment and the viciousness of life in the streets, and negated the city's rigid organization and strict structures, acknowledging life's troubled obstacles and bleak hardships and revelling in them. With no limitations, visually and lyrically wise, punk rock provided a satire against any limitations or barriers the cityscape might try to impose upon its citizens when segregating its darkest and dirtiest secrets into confined spaces not prone to visibility or mixture. Punk rock performers and audience were both bored and angry, and they were not afraid of parodying themselves and their blatantly disaffected and disrespectful attitude. After all, there were no consequences – for punk, there really never was any future.

In the meantime, a few decades have gone by, and punk rock is still very much alive, even if its contours are not the same they were some thirty or forty years ago, just as the context where it moves, namely that of the urban landscape, is definitely not the same – assuredly, it could never be expected that punk would have remained static during the ensuing time period. As a music genre, punk rock has gone through a series of transformations, in terms of its musical style, its ethics and aesthetics, and its modes of production, circulation and consumption, but its foundational traits still remain at the core of its basic definition. As Leila El Bashir has claimed, “Genres change over time, but they do not completely abandon the ideas of the culture that produced them” (El Bashir, 2011: 73). In fact, as fluid and ever changing concepts, embedded into multiple cultural connotations, genres are never stagnant, and punk has not been an exception, with its boundaries being extended and its confines expanded into new territories over the past decades. At the beginning of the twenty first century, the album *American Idiot* has proven what punk rock can still be: creative, rebellious, assertive, challenging, political.

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed analysis of spatial practices and different strategies and tactics which can be deployed to subvert or elude the imposition of such dominant meanings of space, see Michel de Certeau's seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988).

## Jesus of Suburbia: a wanderer in the land of make believe

And there's nothing wrong with me  
This is how I'm supposed to be  
In a land of make believe  
That don't believe in me

(Green Day, *Jesus of Suburbia*)

Jesus of Suburbia<sup>13</sup> plays the role of the main character in Green Day's *American Idiot*, an album designed as a rock opera<sup>14</sup> which is not only musically complex and cohesive, but also makes a peculiar use of its lyrics to tell one single coherent story, with a set of characters and events taking place over the course of several months, and even something resembling a moral to end with<sup>15</sup>. The story it tells is that of a fictional character named Jesus of Suburbia, whose life can be said to represent the outcast youth of America, caught up in a modern metropolis where he does not quite fit in, which has been filled with the lies of a particular rhetoric of propaganda and subdued to the established dominant structures of corporate America. Jesus of Suburbia, like all of his "disciples" who are the unheard and cast out disenfranchised, feels as if he has been trapped by the hypocritical patterns and monotonous uniformity of the suburbia from where he longs to escape, yearning for more meaning than the boredom, angst and apathy of his suburban life seems to provide.

Jesus of Suburbia is, thus, running away – running away from the reality of his life and the constrained circumstances that result from living in contemporary America, from the many attempts of control and regulation that he believes the government and the media to exert over society and individuals, from an existence that does not offer him the opportunities, the meanings and the sense of authenticity he has

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<sup>13</sup> The choice of the name Jesus of Suburbia for the main character of the album may function as an obvious reference to a leader that is simultaneously religiously and politically conceived, but he may also be perceived as an incarnation of what Edward Soja (2000) has defined as the performance of human spatiality, that is, the way spaces and places are continuously produced by subjects, who are reciprocally shaped by their surroundings. As he observed, "On the one hand, our actions and thoughts shape the spaces around us, but at the same time the larger collectively or socially produced spaces and places within which we live also shape our actions and thoughts in ways that we are only beginning to understand" (Soja, 2000: 6).

<sup>14</sup> The rock opera format is commonly perceived to have been founded by the English rock band The Who – although they may not have been the first to actually record a rock opera, their album *Tommy* was the first to be publicly acknowledged as such.

<sup>15</sup> The storyline that unfolds throughout *American Idiot* was expanded and adapted into a stage musical in 2009, which followed the lives of three disenfranchised youths in the suburbs. The musical was set to the songs from the album and other Green Day tunes. The band itself was not included in the production, but singer Billie Joe Armstrong made a few occasional appearances.

long been searching for. He is struggling to find himself, his own voice and his own conscience, his own identity in a context that he perceives as hostile in its tensions and contradictions, grand and small, that strive to annihilate individuality. Jesus of Suburbia is on a journey, out of the limits of the suburbs and into the big space of the city, where he hopes to find all that he has not had in the confinements of the suburbia, but this may not be a story bound for a happy ending. From the era of the modern city to the age of the postmodern metropolis, cities have become no longer coherent entities with clear limits and well established structures, but rather porous spaces marked by multiplicity and disruption. The new challenges which have emerged as a consequence of the fast-paced movements of globalization, spatial transformations and urban expansion across the globe have meant the city can no longer be seen as a bounded space and, as a consequence, “The role of the suburb in the metropolis is not as clear as it once was. The edges between city and suburb, suburb and country, and between the core and periphery have become increasingly blurred in the polycentric city” (Walsh, 2005: 1). Over the past decades, and as a result of the multiple economic, social and spatial changes which have given rise to the complex postmetropolis (Soja, 2000), the suburbs have indeed acquired a different status also affected by the manifold consequences of detraditionalisation processes. Rupa Huq has claimed that traditional images of suburbia, including the dreary safety and tranquillity portrayed by the white fence, clipped hedges and embroidered curtains, have to be updated as they no longer represent twenty-first century suburbs, which are now “places of diaspora and in-betweenness” (Huq, 2007: 35). Concurrently, Walsh states that “The postmetropolis is inhabited by those who don’t like it elsewhere, but are on their way there anyway” (Walsh, 2005: 4), just like the character of Jesus of Suburbia seems to be, presumably aspiring to a higher degree of individualisation as he urges to escape from the perceived chains of suburban drudgery into the bright lights of the city.

This is precisely the story told in the song that bears his name, *Jesus of Suburbia*, which is a long way from punk rock’s main stylistic conventions, as it is not simple, short and fast; on the contrary, it is more than nine minutes long and encompasses a totality of five different movements, resembling the features and tone of a symphonic piece. The first part, “Jesus of Suburbia”, introduces the character himself and what his life is like at home, being a “son of rage and love” whose parents are always “away”, raised “on a steady diet of soda pop and Ritalin”, his days spent in front of the television in his living room, with “alcohol and cigarettes”, along with “someone else’s cocaine”, keeping him company. The second, “City of the Damned”, takes place between a 7/11 parking lot and a shopping mall, where he reflects upon the lies that

make up his life and finds himself “at the end of another lost highway”. “I Don’t Care”, the third part, is the inevitable follow-up, presenting Jesus of Suburbia as an outcast who rebels against the hypocrisy of his life in this “land of make believe” where he and his disciples have grown to become “the kids of war and peace / From Anaheim to the Middle East”. In “Dearly Beloved”, he reveals his own fragilities and insecurities, while in “Tales of Another Broken Home”, the fifth and last part, he decides it is definitely time to run away: “I lost my faith to this / This town that don’t exist / So I run, I run away / To the lights of masochists / And I leave behind / This hurricane of fucking lies”.

Jesus of Suburbia, reacting to the excesses and meaningless void of postmodern consumer society, denounces how he has come to inhabit placeless spaces, or the non-places of supermodernity as identified by Marc Augé (1995), those spaces that cannot foster a sense of identity or be defined as relational or historical; spaces that promote solitary individuality and offer nothing more than the provisional and the ephemeral; spaces that connect the subject with nothing but another image of himself and deny him both the memories of an experienced past and the possibilities of an envisioned future. Jesus of Suburbia lives in “the land of make believe”, but one that, as he is deeply aware, does not believe in him either. In the end, he knows, there is nowhere he can go, but still he runs away “to find what to believe”. The long-cultivated American suburban ideals of conformity, assimilation and affluence are those he wishes to resist and struggle against, embarking on a journey that seeks to protest an established status quo and find a different humanity, one not subdued to the propaganda instilled by the government, the media and even society as a whole. Jesus of Suburbia becomes, then, the wanderer of postmodernity<sup>16</sup> as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (1995), the individual who, lacking any cohesive and solid life strategy in a world too confusing and incoherent, can only spend his time wandering around aimlessly, moving towards nowhere, trying to find himself amidst strangers, collecting the episodes that make up his life as a series of fragments which do not amount to much. At times, he may even become the vagabond, the one who is always a stranger no matter where he goes; the one who has no place where to settle, not because he does not want to, but because places where to actually belong are in shortage in contemporary urban environments.

In fact, Bauman has noted that the strategies of life in postmodernity, encompassing the wanderer and the vagabond, along with the tourist and the gambler,

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<sup>16</sup> Bauman develops his own theory of different life strategies in postmodernity departing from the concept of the *flâneur* as discussed by Walter Benjamin in his seminal *The Arcades Project* (1990).

which frequently overlap and intersect, have in common a tendency towards the fragmentation and discontinuity of human relationships, favouring instead the distancing between the individual and the Other, the stranger, simultaneously acknowledging his existence but avoiding the possible dangers he might represent. In this sense, the urban planning of modern cities was designed and conceived precisely to suppress the element of strangeness from its space, organizing it according to patterns of uniformity and repetition. However, in the era of globalization, where the intricacy of the flows of population, alongside the growing complexity of issues of identity, geography and economy, have restructured and fragmented the social mosaic of the city and brought about a whole new set of challenges for urban planning and development, the boundaries of the city have definitely become more pervious, and even the role of the suburbs is not as straightforward as it once was.

In his seminal study of urban geographies, Edward Soja (2000) noted that the postwar period in the US and Europe witnessed the emergence of a specific cityspace which he identified as the “Fordist regional metropolis”, characterised by a double personality which was “simultaneously yet separately urban and suburban” (2000: 115). As a result of the substantial growth of mass production processes and mass consumption tendencies, and the inherent growing need for space, peripheral suburbanism was developed significantly as both an escape to the problems of urbanism and also an opportunity to provide a distinctive way of life to its inhabitants. However, over the past 30 years, new urbanization processes have restructured and reshaped urban spaces and ways of life around the globe, resulting in a complex transition into the contemporary postmetropolitan geography, which still relies on the logics of capitalist accumulation as one of the foundational structures for generating and understanding urban phenomena, whilst rejecting its formerly assumed deterministic nature. In fact, the cityspace of the postmetropolis era can no longer be bounded solely to the geographical features of industrial urbanism, but has to take into account a plurality of factors such as the new geographies of power and the resulting worldwide complex interconnections; the impact of information and technological economies on redesigning the urban-industrial space economy; the flux of demographic changes and social restructuring, and subsequent challenges for ethnic and multicultural geographies; the governmental policing of public spaces, security concerns and surveillance practices; and the all-encompassing effects of globalization at large. As Edward Soja has noted, the postmetropolis has witnessed “a simultaneous implosion and explosion in the scale of cities, an extraordinary far-reaching turning of cityspace both inside-out and outside-in” (Soja, 2000: 152). At the same time that the

whole world seems to become urbanized, each urban space also seems to be able to contain within itself the whole world – the local becomes global and the global becomes local.

In this new era, the suburbia have given way to post-suburbia, with new settlements<sup>17</sup> redefining a space that has grown and changed at an impressive rate accompanying the movements of migration of capital and labour, as well as culture, at a global scale. This socio-spatial dialectic evinces how the social shapes the spatial just as much as the spatial shapes the social. The once clear edges between the city and the suburbs have become blurred, with the traditional core city losing some of its primary status, as it comes to represent just one of the many parts of the metropolitan area. Today, the postmetropolis is participating, simultaneously, in the economies and cultures of the whole world, and, with this global restructuring, new forms of economic organization, active citizenship and cultural identity have emerged. However, it is not clear yet the extension of the effects they might be generating, namely in terms of the political and ideological organization of space, as well as the redefinition of the concepts and practices of citizenship and politics of identity and representation (Soja, 2000).

For Jesus of Suburbia, venturing out from the suburbia into the city does not result in finding a new place to call home – the solitude and the frailty are one and the same. “Of this full world”, as Bauman would claim, “we are all insiders and permanent residents with nowhere else to go” (Bauman, 2002: 12). Indeed, the bright lights of the city that Jesus of Suburbia might have been searching for end up proving to be nothing more than the myth or the tale, the site of ruins that is the metropolis described by Chambers (1990), with nothing new on the horizon other than the absence of direction and belonging. He could be there or he could be anywhere:

The motto was just a lie  
It says ‘home is where your heart is’  
But what a shame  
‘cause everyone’s heart doesn’t beat the same  
We’re beating out of time  
City of the dead  
At the end of another lost highway  
Signs misleading to nowhere  
City of the damned  
Lost children with dirty faces today  
No one really seems to care.

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<sup>17</sup> Different designations have been used for these settlements, ranging from “exopolis” to “edge cities” or “technoburbs” (Hutchinson, 2010).

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