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Nihilistic Creation: From Ramones to the Early American Hardcore Punk in an Age of Diminishing Expectations

Sangheon Lee
University of Huddersfield
sangheonlee76@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores hardcore punk as a form of *nihilistic creation*—an approach that goes far beyond its usual characterisation as simply a faster, harder form of punk rock. From an existential perspective, the hardcore punk movement embodies the nihilism of its time, notably in the temporal structure of the songs, thereby forging a singular aesthetic. While the radical simplification introduced by the Ramones paved the way, it was through bands such as Black Flag, Circle Jerks, Bad Brains and D.R.I. that the phenomenon took a more definite shape, using condensed temporality, rhythmic breaks and lack of progression, while maintaining a basic pop-song structure—thus simultaneously calling into question the very idea of innovation. This nihilism gave rise to an aesthetic of urgency, in which temporality became a vehicle for protest. This article therefore proposes a re-reading of nihilism as a paradoxical form of creation, redefining the link between music and meaning.

Keywords: hardcore punk, Ramones, nihilism, urgency, United States, 1970s-1980s

Introduction[1]

Since the turn of the century, numerous books or films—monographs, biographies or autobiographies—have been published or released on the subject of 1980s American hardcore punk. Like its predecessor, 1970s punk rock (Laing 2015 [1985]), hardcore punk culture developed around a variety of musical practices: composition, recording, production, live performance, and more. However, what

lies behind our approach is precisely the observation that the musical specificity of hardcore punk has often been pushed to the side in favour of its sociocultural and political dimension, despite the fact that music is undeniably at the heart of the phenomenon. While hardcore punk advocates—researchers, critics, fans and even musicians—have often framed the movement through its external aspects, highlighting its significance beyond music, often employing the now-familiar phrase 'more than music,' this external emphasis often appears to serve as an excuse for the supposed musical poverty of the genre. Meanwhile, the music itself has often been summed up in the tired, imprecise cliché: 'harder, louder, faster'—to which 'shorter' is sometimes added. Yet, this paper argues that hardcore punk music has a singular aesthetic that should be reassessed. While I do not ignore the importance of its sociopolitical aspects, I believe that a philosophical dimension must also be brought into the conversation. This is what gives my approach a radically different orientation to those commonly used by musicologists and theorists when defining and assessing the authenticity and specificity of a certain musical style or its practitioners. I will approach hardcore punk as a form of 'nihilistic creation'.

I believe that current musicological studies of hardcore punk—such as those by Budde (1997), Waksman (2009), Easley (2011), Steinbrecher (2016) and Pearson (2019)—show their limitations by neglecting the concept of nihilism. While some of these works expose the limitations of a statistical approach, which often overlook the specificities of individual tracks, few attempt to interrogate the deeper philosophical underpinnings of the music. By taking a fresh look at the concept of nihilism—understood here in its existential philosophical sense, which goes beyond the simple idea of unconditional destruction of oneself or others—and by grounding it in the historical and social context of the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I will analyse how this concept, together with that of urgency, sheds light on the unique character of hardcore punk music. I will do this by focusing on a few particularly representative songs.

Certainly, this musical specificity can only be fully understood when it is articulated explicitly alongside this social dimension. In this article, I ask how this socio-political and, more broadly, cultural dimension is rendered in musical terms. The nihilism and urgency that sum up hardcore punk are modulated by factors of class, gender, ethnicity and location. I am not claiming to be exhaustive here. Rather, my approach is to refine and redefine what has already been said by others and link it much more closely to hardcore punk's musical materiality in order to integrate these reflections into a study that connects the internal and external aspects of the music. In doing so, I want to try to show that hardcore punk music is not simply 'a reflection' of its historical context, but rather a sort of musical incarnation—*a revelatory force* ("un révélateur", Hennion 2007: 81)—of the particular type of nihilism of the era.

'Existential nihilism'

Although its lyrics seek to subvert established social and political norms, punk rock does not completely depart from earlier musical styles and material. It thus incorporates elements borrowed from rock and roll, hard rock, and even blues and

folk, while preserving conventional musical structures (Laing 2015 [1985]; Pirenne 2011; Rapport 2014; Dale 2020). Similarly, despite its frenetic pace and simplicity, 1980s hardcore punk retains the verse-chorus structure in most of its songs, with sections that remain distinct and easy to recognise, and very much play their part within the song. From an organological point of view, all the bands consist of the same four instruments—voice, guitar, bass, and drums—an even more rigid configuration than that of 1950s rock and roll or 1970s punk rock. In contrast to the diversity, eclecticism and experimentation that characterise the productions of bands from the "post-punk vanguard," as Simon Reynolds (2006: xix) puts it, hardcore punk does not seem to overturn old musical conventions, despite its rebellious attitude. Can we conclude, then, that hardcore punk is nothing more than a faster, louder version of punk rock, itself often described as a return to rock and roll or a 'back to basics'?

This is where the notion of nihilism comes into play. Widely used in the late 19th century, as it is today, the term's meaning was at the time largely influenced by Russian writers such as Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevsky, followed by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Russian nihilism, as observed by these writers, focused on the negation of existing social, political, and aesthetic orders, while Nietzsche's interpretation was founded in the denial of meaning in the world or in human existence itself (Lovell 1998: 5). In a note from 1887, Nietzsche (1980: 9[35]) writes: "*Nihilism—a normal condition*. *Nihilism*: the goal is lacking; the answer to the 'why?' is lacking. What does nihilism mean? —*That the highest values devalue themselves*".[(2)] Martin Heidegger (1991: 4), for his part, adds his own perspective: "Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the 'transcendent' becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning". The negation of higher values is followed, according to Gilles Deleuze (1965: 26), by their "replacement by human values—too human (morality replaces religion; utility, progress, even history itself replaces divine values)".[(3)] However, this substitution is itself liable to collapse at any time.

Since the middle of the 20th century, there have been a growing number of manifestations of nihilism, taking different forms, particularly as of the period often described as postmodern (Vattimo 1985; Woodward 2009; Iwauchi 2019). The postmodern era was marked by the widespread loss of higher values, the loss of all meaning and purpose, the collapse of metanarratives and ultimately "the impossibility of grounding transcendence, the principle of religion, in reason," with "the unprecedented devaluation and relativisation of all values" (Lemmens 2015: 3).[(4)]

In his famous 1979 work, American sociologist Daniel Bell describes the crisis of faith that marked this era:

> The real problem of *modernity* is the problem of belief. To use an unfashionable term, it is a spiritual crisis, since the new anchorage have proved illusory, and the old ones have become submerged. It is a situation which brings us back to nihilism; lacking a past or a future, there is only a void. Nihilism was once a heady philosophy, as it was for Bazarov, when there was something to destroy and something to put in its place. But today what is there left in the past to destroy, and who has the hope for a future to come? (Bell 1979: 28)

Bell thus highlights the transition from the nihilism of the time of Bazarov, the first character in literature described as a "nihilist," by Turgenev in *Fathers and Sons* (1861)— a time when constructive destruction remained conceivable—to a contemporary version, marked by a loss of bearings and lack of hope in the future. This observation sheds light on the evolution of modern nihilism, which now presents itself less as a philosophy of action than as a statement of impotence and emptiness. It resonates with the argument of the young Japanese philosopher Shotaro Iwauchi (2019: 25), who proposes a historical distinction between the "era of nihilism" and the "era of melancholy" which succeeds it. Nihilism is characterised by a progressive loss of meaning: once strong meaning becomes insignificant, which explains the aggressive frustration expressed by nihilists. On the other hand, melancholy marks a total inability to recover even this original meaning. This leads to an inertia of desire or an "estranged desire": "I don't want to do anything, but I don't want to do nothing either".(5)

In line with this perspective, simply associating nihilism with the idea of 'destruction' is a reductive, even caricatured, interpretation of the concept. This association comes from a popular and often simplistic use of the term 'nihilism'. One of the major sources of this simplification lies in the representations of 19th-century Russian materialist nihilists, such as Bakunin, as well as the literary character of Bazarov, who asserts that "First we've got to clear the ground" (Turgenev 2008: 50). These figures are often viewed too superficially—as in the case of Bell mentioned above—to fully grasp the complex dilemma of nihilism, which we will explore in more detail later.

In the contemporary imagination, nihilism in its most extreme form is often presented as a facet of the deeply disturbing consequences of totalitarianism, frequently associated with memories of Nazism and Auschwitz. This is in line with Hannah Arendt's description (1962: 440) of "the nihilistic principle that 'everything is permitted'", "nihilistic banalities" (442) or "nihilistic generalizations" (455), which assert that under totalitarian regimes, where individuality is suppressed and all men are treated in the same way, human beings are, in essence, nothing more than beasts, devoid of value or singularity.

This type of usage is also common in discourses on punk rock, whether by musicians or academics, highlighting the attitude and lifestyle of certain (self-)destructive punk figures, such as Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols.

> Punk rock started in nihilism and anarchy and shouting, "This place sucks!" but doing nothing about it. Sid Vicious dying of a heroin overdose set the tone as far as what people thought punk was all about. (Dave Smalley *in* Rettman 2017: 24)

> Moreover, punk's spirit of negation lacks a utopian counterpart, and as a consequence its aggressive nihilism occasionally expresses itself as an attack upon the powerless rather than the powerful. […] During that tour, which lasted only two weeks, but which was covered extensively by local media, the violent and mindless antics of the Sex Pistols' new bass player, Sid Vicious, were made to personify the nihilism of punk youth. (Moore 2004: 308; 315)

Thus, nihilism is often perceived as a worrying, even alarming, phenomenon, manifesting itself in the form of moral nihilism, where ideologies are devoid of any respect for morality or the intrinsic value of human beings. However, this approach, often reduced to a simplistic interpretation in aesthetic or sociological studies of punk, hinders a deeper understanding of both nihilism and punk rock. Many punk studies scholars thus adopt a narrative according to which, although punk's beginnings were marked by unconditional destruction, a rejection of the future and a nihilistic stance, the movement subsequently evolved towards alternative propositions and more or less positive orientations (Hanscomb 2020; Healy 2024). These approaches reveal that these researchers remain rooted in an ordinary, superficial conception of nihilism.

From the perspective of Nietzsche and existential philosophy, nihilism is the realisation that fundamental, transcendent values have irrevocably lost their meaning—a direct consequence of the 'death of God'. This loss leaves nihilists wandering, tormented by deep anguish, a feeling of emptiness, suffering and despair in the face of life, while constantly tempted to return to these lost values. Nihilism is also marked by the active rejection of these values, with the firm intention of never returning to them or being seduced by them again. If nihilism has a fundamental principle, it is that of never giving in to this temptation, of never going back.

The destruction of traditional values as an active desire or impulse—often symbolised by the slogan 'everything is permitted'—is, however, only a preliminary and somewhat adolescent phase of nihilism. In fact, if we follow the nihilistic way of thinking, we don't even know why we have to bring about destruction or what the point of it actually is, because destruction, like everything else, is devoid of purpose and justification. Nietzsche describes nihilism as a state that cannot answer the question 'why' or 'to what purpose'. Any attempt at destruction is thus condemned to encounter an insurmountable obstacle, a prohibitive one, within nihilism itself. Albert Camus (1982: 62-63) calls this asceticism, distinguishing the two aspects of nihilism: "In other words, with Nietzsche, revolt ends in asceticism. A profounder logic replaces the 'if nothing is true, everything is permitted' of Karamazov with 'if nothing is true, nothing is permitted'." This expresses the desire, or even the obsession, not to be attracted by these transcendent values any longer.

This dilemma is not only faced in Nietzschean existential nihilism. The character of Bazarov in *Fathers and sons* by Turgenev (2008) also embodies it. Often perceived as a radical destroyer, Bazarov ignores the objections of the 'fathers' who tell him that he will have to rebuild after destruction. At the same time, he also rejects his friend Arkady's idealistic speeches, which he considers to be disguised romanticism. For Bazarov, any form of idealisation, whether linked to tradition or to a collective vision ('people'), is unacceptable. So, although he advocates destruction, he finds himself in a dilemma: the very idea of reconstruction is inconceivable to him. This paradox reveals the ambiguous nature of destruction, which always seems to carry with it the expectation of something new. For nihilists, destruction itself becomes a step in the direction of an implicit idealism.[6]

I believe it is more appropriate to conceive of these two phases—the "negation impulse" or "aggressive frustration" on the one hand, and the "inertia of desire" on the other, to use Iwauchi's words—not as purely historical distinctions, but as stages that alternate or circulate within the mind of an individual or a group. This point of

view supports the idea of "cyclical increase of power" proposed by Heidegger (1991: 7) to interpret Nietzsche's fundamental, yet enigmatic, concepts—the Will to Power and the Eternal Return of the Same. This movement frees us from the temptation of the "supersensible" or the "transcendental" by placing these notions within a framework where the dynamics of becoming do not seek refuge in transcendent truths or values. Heidegger shows that this circular movement avoids the trap of metaphysical illusions while remaining rooted in a logic of repetition and constant renewal. This asceticism and circularity are manifested in hardcore punk, not so much in its sonic characteristics, but rather in its temporal form of the song.

Hardcore Punk and Nihilistic Creation

'Nihilistic creation' could be defined as an act based in the power of negation, hindered by an inertia that slows down its momentum, yet made possible by a circular movement, itself conditioned by a form of asceticism. The question that emerges then is: how does this nihilistic creation manifest itself in punk rock, and more specifically in hardcore punk, at the very heart of its musical structure?

It should first be noted that, in terms of segmented temporal structure by sections, hardcore punk bands, as well as certain precursor punk acts, do not venture into the experimental destruction of traditional forms, nor into a complex reconstruction of structures such as those of the verse-chorus or the rare but significant AABA form inherited from Tin Pan Alley. Rather they keep the main sections (verse, chorus), but remove or drastically reduce the accessory sections (intro, outro, solo, or bridge) by simplifying them or shortening them to the extreme. A primary compositional approach that Keith Morris, co-founder of Black Flag who sang on their first EP, describes in a self-deprecating way: "The short fast songs… trim all the fat. Later do the intro, later do the outro. Cut the bridge in half and get on with it" (Rachman 2006). Indeed, the identical verse-chorus formula can be repeated several times without any intermediate sections— sometimes even without changing the lyrics— before ending abruptly, without the slightest gesture to celebrate the song's finale. With no development or climax, no structural variety, it is a negation of conventional narrative, while also far from adventurous experimentation or innovation. It's as if no value were placed on artistic ambition.

In fact, the question is no longer *what* musical material to use, but *how* to engage with it. Music is not the result of something that musicians have coldly conceived beforehand, before producing a first physical sound, but rather it's simply a matter of taking up or accepting—or not—a result, namely the sound that comes back at us after it has been played without any premeditation. So this music is simply about carrying on, without grand phrases, but with a certain obstinacy.

This phenomenon can be seen in the extreme simplification of the music of the Ramones, pioneers of New York punk rock, who prefigured this singular musical trend. Nicholas Rombes (2005: 6) interprets the emergence of this iconic 1970s New York punk band as an "uneasy mix of nihilism and humor" and states that "The Ramones imbued this nothingness and rejection with a fierce humor that transported nihilism into the realm of pop culture". Punk humour also expresses a rejection of the "hippie sincerity" characteristic of 1960s counterculture.

As the American historian and social critic, Christopher Lasch (2013[1979]), observes, disillusionment, even anxiety, developed in American life in the wake of a series of events and situations that had destabilised—and even traumatised—the 1960s and early 1970s: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, then the fall of liberalism; growing disillusionment with politics, culminating in Watergate; the oil and energy crisis; the issue of the environment; a series of diplomatic errors.[(7)] In this context, society was marked by a loss of traditional reference points, disillusionment with progress, and growing scepticism towards institutions. According to Lasch, individuals in the 1970s compensated for this void by excessive introspection and self-preoccupation, seeking to find personal meaning in an environment where broad cultural values appeared to be in decline.

In contrast to the counterculture of the 1960s and its music—now perceived as meaningless—punk emerged from a profound sense of disenchantment and disillusionment. It did not seek to turn back the clock or offer any kind of alternative. For Rombes (2005: 24), the punk movement was not simply "a response to mid-1970s malaise" [(8)], but "embodied the very anxieties that characterized the era". If punk and its music did indeed embody the characteristic angst of that era, did that angst not manifest itself in the form of nihilism and humour, right down to the very structure of punk songs? The Ramones illustrate this compositional approach with a form of originality that is paradoxical in itself: i.e. a radical refusal to innovate.

This becomes particularly evident when comparing the horizontal structures of two iconic 1970s punk rock songs, each representing the British and American scenes respectively: "God Save the Queen" (1977) by the Sex Pistols and "Blitzkrieg Bop" (1976) by the Ramones. Both songs follow the typical AABA structure of the Tin Pan Alley style. However, whereas "God Save the Queen" features a more conventional progression with two solo sections and a coda interspersed between the AABA blocks," Blitzkrieg Bop" follows this pattern three times in a row, without any intervening sections (Table 1).

Table 1: Temporal structure of "Blitzkrieg Bop" by the Ramones

	Sections	Power chords	N° bars	Lyrics
0:00-0:22	Intro 1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	16	
0:22-0:32	Intro 2	(no chords) A / A / A / A	8	Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go
0:32-0:43	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going […] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
0:43-0:54	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating […] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop.
0:54-1:05	B	D / D / A / DE D / D / B / DE	8	Hey ho, let's go / Shoot'em in the back now What they want, I don't know / They're all revved up […]
1:05-1:16	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going […] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:16-1:26	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating […] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop.
1:26-1:37	B	D / D / A / DE D / D / B / DE	8	Hey ho, let's go / Shoot'em in the back now What they want, I don't know / They're all revved up […]
1:37-1:48	A1	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're forming in a straight line / They're going […] The kids are losing their minds / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:48-1:59	A2	A / DE / A / DE A / DE / AD / A	8	They're piling in the back seat / They're generating […] Pulsating to the back beat / The Blitzkrieg Bop
1:59-2:11	Outro	(no chords) A / A / A / A	8	Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go Hey ho, let's go / Hey ho, let's go

What is even more interesting is that this horizontal form, although it presents itself as an AABA, or A1-A2-B-A1 structure (A1 and A2 are distinguished only by the lyrics), is an immediate succession of AAB or A1-A2-B blocks. Indeed, the fourth A of the AABA block is not followed by a bridge section that would establish a narrative curve typical of this form, but rather by another A2 section, then followed by another B section. The song thus forms a large cyclical structure in which each AAB block (or A1-A2-B), with the same lyrics and instrumentation, is repeated three times: intro-AAB-AAB-AA-outro (the third B gives way to an outro almost identical to the intro, although shorter). The nihilistic structure of this song is therefore distinguished by a very particular combination of what could be called *urgency*—the fact of moving forward sections that would normally be played later—and a cynical humour.

Such cynicism manifests itself as a form of "self-deprecation," as Everett True (2022: 60) notes, in the horizontal structure of "Judy Is a Punk," another song from the Ramones' first album. Here again, the verse-chorus formula of the second passage is completely identical to that of the first. Just before the second verse, the singer makes a playful announcement: "Second verse, same as the first," borrowed from "I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am" (1965) by Herman's Hermits. While the British band delivers this line once, before repeating the chorus of the original music hall tune, the Ramones take the joke further. Just before the third verse, where the lyrics change slightly, the singer intervenes again with: "Third verse, different from the first". This deliberate self-mockery, which reflects an attitude of indifference towards all artistic sophistication, is embodied here in the very form of the song's temporal structure.[9]

However, it was in the evolution to hardcore punk that the technique became more all-encompassing, and the very essence of the music took form, integrating this increased urgency. From their first EP, *Nervous Breakdown*—widely considered one of the first records of American hardcore punk—Black Flag fully expresses these characteristics (Table 2). The four tracks on the album stand out not only for their shortness and fast tempo compared to classic punk tracks, but none of these pieces include a bridge or solo section either. They are limited to three repetitions of verse-chorus blocks. Additionally, for both "Fix Me" and "Wasted," the final chorus, which is commonly four bars long—marks the abrupt end of each track without any extension, thus creating an effect of urgency and accentuating the circularity of the song structure.

TABLE 2: Temporal structure of four songs from Black Flag's first EP

"Nervous Breakdown"	I(8) | V(8) | C(9) | L(4) | V(8) | C(9) | L(4) | V(8) | C(9) | L(12) | D(11)	176	2'7"	90
"Fix Me"	I(4) | V(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4)	182	55"	40
"I've Had It"	I(4) | V(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4+8)	174	1'20"	48
"Wasted"	I(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4) | V(8) | C(4)	184	51"	36

N.B. I=intro, V=verse, C=chorus, L=link (or re-intro), D=coda, B=bridge; tempo (BPM); duration (m's"); total number of bars.

With a typical verse-chorus structure and the insertion of melodic hooks—albeit simplistic and crude—in the chorus section, these songs do evoke the conventions of classic rock. However, from the perspective of temporal progression, the concept

of *development*—or of musical *adventure*, so central to 1960s and 1970s prog rock—is entirely rejected. In these songs, there was no return to the past therefore, or recovery of something lost ('back to basics'), but rather a negation of the very concept of progression, evolution, and historical growth. This approach reflects a disenchantment with, and even a rejection of 'romantic' expectations—in the broadest sense of the term. Thus, the slogan 'No Future' is manifested here purely in musical terms.

Bad Brains' debut single, "Pay to Cum" (1979)—often considered the first East Coast hardcore punk record—also adopts a similar horizontal structure: after an introduction, there are three repetitions of a verse-chorus block. A riff, identical in length and arrangement to the intro and outro, inserted between each block and between each verse and chorus, creates a circular structure reminiscent of the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop" (Table 3). In addition, the blazing speed (290 BPM), the short duration (1'26"), the dense sound, and the abrupt ending prevent the listener from 'settling' on a particular section, thus directing their attention towards the succession and circularity of the sections.

TABLE 3: Temporal structure of "Pay to Cum" by Bad Brains

Section	Intro	Verse	Re-intro	Verse	Re-intro	Chorus	Re-intro	Verse	Re-intro	Verse	Re-intro	Chorus	Re-intro
N° bars	4+8	4	8	4	8	16	8	4	8	4	8	16	8
	4=guitar only												Outro

The first album by the Texas band D.R.I. aka Dirty Rotten Imbeciles, recorded in 1982 and released in 1983 before their move to San Francisco, also features this nihilistic repetition, often characterised by an entirely cyclical form.[10] In songs like "Blockhead," "Dennis's Problem," "Busted," "Balance of Terror," and "Why," the verse-chorus pattern repeats itself, in most cases, without ever reaching a climax in either the middle or at the end of the song. We also note the identical repetition of sections, with an instrumental section replacing the verse and its function, notably in "Who Am I" and "Reaganomics" (see Table 4, duration: 40 seconds).

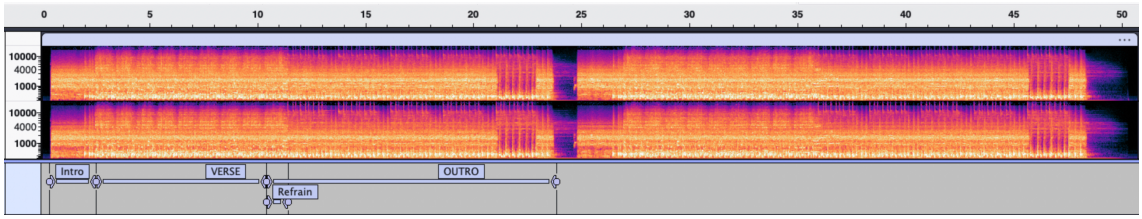
TABLE 4: Temporal structure of "Reaganomics" by D.R.I.

Section	Intro	(Verse)	Chorus	(Verse)	Chorus	Re-Intro	(Verse)	Chorus	(Verse)	Chorus	Re-Intro
N° bars	6	8	8	8	8	6	8	8	8	8	6
	¾	Inst.		Inst.		¾	Inst.		Inst.		¾
BPM	158	468				158	468				158

As for "Dennis's Problem," a 50-second track, after a short, fast intro, the verse kicks in at 492 BPM, followed by a fragment of the chorus and a slightly slower instrumental section (402 BPM) that ends the song in an unexpected way (Figure 1). What's more interesting is that, after a brief pause, the song starts again in the same way, repeating exactly the same elements as before and then stops again as if the band were ridiculing any artistic sophistication. The ending of this second part does not really seem like an end, because this indifferent repetition could be reproduced in its entirety if the musicians wished. This implies that what has happened will happen again, no matter how many times, and that there won't be any change in the future. But it also cast doubt on whether anything meaningful has ever happened at all—as the lyrics put it: "Living down under deep in never ending

waking sleep / When will this end / Or has it even begun".

FIGURE 1: Temporal structure (spectrogram) of "Dennis's Problem" by D.R.I.



Living in urgency

The cyclical structure is linked to a sense of urgency. The musical expression of hardcore punk is often condensed, consisting of very short words, sung and repeated almost obsessively, like slogans, targeting specific objectives that the songs attack or denounce. The negative formal approach mentioned above also contributes to this concentration effect, as do the brevity and speed of the songs. However, beyond these fundamental elements, many hardcore punk songs incorporate subtle manoeuvres that introduce temporal confusion, so that the horizontal form of the song itself embodies the definition of urgency.

According to the dictionary definition, urgency is a situation "the quality of needing to be dealt with or happen immediately".[11] In a retrospective interview with Eric Blair (2019), Kira Roessler, former Black Flag bassist, uses the word spontaneously to describe the band's need to create their own culture, a feeling that stemmed from her distaste for an institutionalised and conservative rock culture: "There was this sense of urgency to have something else because arena rock was all there was, y'know, and clubs were doing disco and, y'know, there was just no place for us misfits, so it was the musical revolution". This sense of urgency was shared not only by musicians, but also by other actors on the punk scene. Moreover, the word *urgency* is often used to reflect on an experience or observe a phenomenon, which means that it is generally more common in the discourse of fanzine writers or independent producers on the punk scene than in that of the musicians.[12]

In 1980, during an interview with *Ripper*—a fanzine founded in San Jose in 1979—the members of Black Flag voiced their frustration not only with mainstream culture, but also with the emerging punk establishment. Tim Tonooka, founder of the fanzine and author of the article, sums up this feeling in the introduction to the interview, writing: "Their songs are about urgent feelings that any punk can relate to".

Steven Blush, a longtime hardcore punk fan and founder of *Seconds Magazine*, includes several interview excerpts that highlight the word *urgency* in the *DIY* chapter of his oral history of 1980s American hardcore punk. Ian MacKaye, singer and lyricist of Minor Threat, co-founder of the Dischord Records label and spokesperson for the Washington DC punk scene at the time, emphasises the urgency that characterised their approach, as opposed to a punk more focused on appearance: "We weren't into the fashion as much as we were into the approach and intensity and urgency" (Blush 2010: 151). Sal Canzonieri, another musician

and producer of the time, also uses this term to summarise the psychological motivations behind the beginnings of this musical and cultural genre:

> There was a strong sense of urgency, like there was gonna be no tomorrow so you had to give it all you got. That came from the 70s Punk scene, and thanks to the early 80s political climate, this sense became more dark and paranoid, because it really felt like there was not gonna be much of a future ahead. […] Black Flag, Circle Jerks, and the other bands really drove home the bleakness, and it made people want to "do something" in some small way — thus all the intensity to "make" things happen with the DIY eruption of flyers, fanzines, record labels, bands, shows, and so on (Blush 2010: 320).

From a DIY perspective, Blush's essay focuses on how hardcore punk marks itself out from traditional punk rock: "Punk gave lip service to 'Do It Yourself' and democratization of the Rock scene, but Hardcore transcended all commercial and corporate concerns" (2010: 320). Blush thus emphasises, through interview excerpts, that urgency is the basic driver of creative activity on the hardcore punk scene.

There are diverse factors that create a sense of urgency in hardcore punk, and they are manifested differently across bands and lyrics. In the case of Minor Threat—as with Black Flag—Ian MacKaye's lyrics, particularly in the songs of Minor Threat and Teen Idles, tend to be more personal, even "apolitical" (Tsitsos 1999). The urgency he expresses stems from his frustration with the young people around him, whom he perceives as lacking autonomy and influenced by ambient conformism, peer pressure and the remnants of hippie culture, such as drug use. However, we shouldn't ignore more explicitly political lyrics. For example, "California über Alles" (1979) by the Dead Kennedys describes a totalitarian future where political repression is omnipresent, articulating urgency in the face of the rise of authoritarian regimes. Similarly, "Holiday in Cambodia" (1980) attacks the privileges of the wealthy classes, contrasting their comfort with the brutality of Pol Pot's dictatorial regime. With the imminent threat of nuclear war hanging over the horizon, several songs by hardcore punk bands—such as Minutemen's "Paranoid Time" (1980), Bad Religion's "World War III" (1981) and TSOL's "World War III" (1981)—express deep anxiety about this threat. Furthermore, "Draft Me" (1982/83) by D.R.I., a band from Houston, Texas, exemplifies this temporal urgency: the song echoes the anxiety of American adolescents faced with the imminent prospect of conscription, a fear that resurfaced under Jimmy Carter in response to the war in Afghanistan and was stoked again under Ronald Reagan (Mattson 2020: 9; 127).

Moreover, these musicians were already aware of the precarious nature of their subcultural practices, which were constantly exposed to violence—whether between audience members, between musicians on stage and the audience, between punks and the police or between punks and hippies (MacLeod 2010). The manager of the club where a concert was taking place might unplug the amplifiers at any time, either on their own initiative or on the orders of the police, who might also intervene spontaneously. Rehearsal spaces were also liable to be closed at any time, on the pretext of security. For these reasons, they played, danced, and even launched projects "as if there was gonna be no tomorrow," to use Canzonieri's expression.

Ultimately, the term 'urgency', as used by Tonooka, tells us—perhaps even more clearly than the lyrics themselves—that Black Flag's music shares a musical affinity with that of these other bands, which expressed a critique of the political, social, cultural and economic state of their time. However, the mere use of this term is not sufficient to define the phenomenon of urgency. Nor does its use serve as proof of its presence. Indeed, the most vivid portrayal of the conditions and musical manifestations of urgency—despite the term itself never being used —can be found in the work of Greil Marcus:

> There is a feeling in the best punk 45s that what must be said must be said very fast, because the energy required to say what must be said, and the will to say it, can't be sustained. That energy is going to disappear, that will is going to shatter—the idea will go back in the ground, the audience will get up, put on their coats, and go home. Like its rhythm, the punk voice was always unnatural: speeded up past personality into anonymity, pinched, reduced, artificial. It called attention to its own artificiality for more than one reason: as a rejection of mainstream pop humanism in favor of resentment and dread; as a reflection of the fear of not being understood. But the voice was unnatural most of all out of its fear of losing the chance to speak—a chance, every good punk singer understood, that was not only certain to vanish but might not even be deserved (Marcus 2001: 76).

Hardcore punk distinguishes itself from earlier punk—except for a few pioneering exceptions—in the way it embodies this sense of urgency directly within its temporal structure. In what follows, we will briefly examine several representative examples that help illuminate how these characteristics are expressed musically through formal analysis.

Urgency in music

In analysing the rise of hardcore punk in American society in the late 1970s and 1980s, the term urgency can be used to highlight certain aspects, even if this word does not explicitly appear in the available lyrics, interviews, or other textual sources from the period. What is particularly interesting in the context of early American hardcore punk is that this notion of urgency, which encompasses most of the themes of hardcore punk songs, presents itself as an element distinct from the lyrics themselves, or even independent of the lyrics. Of course, this does not mean neglecting the sound characteristics: the raw and lo-fi sound suggests, through its rapid production, an immediacy that seems to speed up the conventional stages of music-making. This interpretation applies to hardcore punk, but also to its predecessors such as punk rock and garage rock. Here, however, we're interested in what distinguishes hardcore punk from these earlier genres, namely that, in hardcore punk, this urgency is expressed through the horizontal form of the music. The temporal sequence is condensed, sometimes sped up or rushed, thereby creating a structure that literally embodies urgency in the temporal flow of the music.

The term urgency is sometimes used in musicological analyses of rock, particularly with regard to the temporal sequence, without a clearly defined

concept being formulated. Headlam (1995: 338) and Cope (2010: 25) look at the production of a sense of urgency in the period when precursor groups of hard rock and heavy metal began to distance themselves from the blues tradition. Here an effect of urgency was achieved through a standardisation of the accents placed on the temporal sequence of musical events, as well as through the repetition—at short, regular intervals—of a tightly structured, clearly delineated musical unit, such as a rhythmic cell or short melodic phrase. For Laing (2015 [1985]: 80), this anti-syncopation tendency is also found in punk rock, reinforcing the sense of urgency generated by the voice and the lyrics. Easley (2011: 280), although evoking a sense of urgency in the performance of hardcore punk, simply attributes it to the frenetic pace of this music.

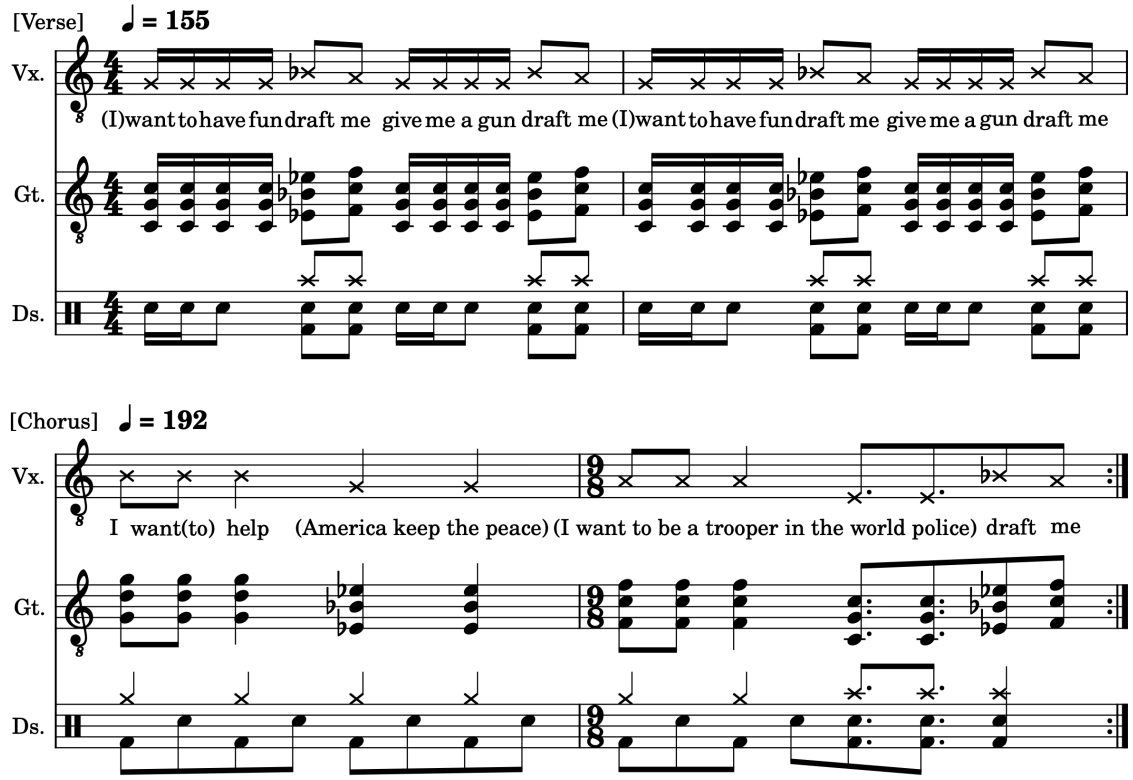
However, in hardcore punk, beyond the mere acceleration of the overall tempo or of specific sections, there exists another process that causes temporal confusion in the listener. The horizontal structure of "Red Tape" (1980) by the Circle Jerks, another Southern Californian band, generates this confusion precisely through its very simplicity (Table 5). The four-bar chorus ends with a fragmentary version of the refrain ("no more red tape"). This is when the seed of horizontal and temporal disorientation is planted, as this chorus fragment is followed directly by the second verse. This variation of the chorus therefore functions more as the beginning of the second verse than as the conclusion of the first chorus. In other words, at a certain point, it becomes difficult to distinguish which is the first part (or *call*) and which is the second (or *response*): the "red tape" line or the line "I can see, can't you see".

TABLE 5: Temporal structure of "Red Tape" by Circle Jerks

	Sections		Power chords	N° bars	Lyrics
	Intro			1/2	(Four drum stick shots)
0:00- 0:10	Verse 1	Verse 1	F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	8	Red tape / I can see, can't you see? Red tape / do it to you, do it to me Red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie Red tape / killing you killing me
0:10- 0:14	Chorus 1	Chorus 1	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A-	4	Tax this / tax that Tax this / tax that
		Verse 2	F#---	1	No more red tape
0:16- 0:24	Verse 2		B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	7	I can see, can't you see? Red tape / do it to you, do it to me Red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie Red tape / killing you killing me
0:24- 0:28	Chorus 2	Chorus 2	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A	4	Tax this / tax that Tax this / tax that
		Interlude	F#---	1	No more red tape
0:30- 0:38	Interlude		D--- / F#--- D--- / F#--- D--- / F#--- D---	7	(Guitar fills)
		Verse 3	F#---	1	Red tape
0:39- 0:48	Verse 3		B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A- F#--- / B-A-	7	I can see, can't you see? Red tape / do it to you, do it to me Red tape / bureaucracy & bourgeoisie Red tape / murdering you murdering me
0:48- 0:54	Chorus 3	Chorus 3	C#--- / B-A- C#--- / B-A	4	Tax this / tax that Tax this / tax that
			F#---	1	No more red tape!

In D.R.I.'s "Draft Me" (1982/83), mentioned earlier, a similar trick appears at the end of the chorus (Figure 2): the chorus fragment, consisting of two eighth notes ("draft me") marking the 2nd and 4th beats of the verse, also reappears at the end of the chorus. However, this time it falls on the last weak beat of the 4/4 measure, that is, on the last eighth note off beat, thereby extending this final bar by half a beat and momentarily creating an irregular 9/8 measure. This creates an impression that is both immediate and disorienting, as the final chorus fragment appears to mark the first beat of the following verse.

FIGURE 2: Verse and chorus of "Draft Me" by D.R.I.



It goes without saying that techniques of temporal confusion based on irregular meters feature in a much more complex fashion in genres such as progressive rock/metal. However, the specificity of hardcore punk and its subgenres lies not in the manipulation of time signatures, but rather in their tenacious attachment to an extremely simple—almost ascetic—temporal framework that seems to reject the ideals of complexity, progression, and even development. Maintaining this simplicity, these genres introduce approaches that create temporal breaks, along with extreme speed, raw sound, and slogans hammered out with almost obsessive regularity at short intervals, uniquely embodying both nihilism and urgency.

Finally, another type of acceleration is used, one that is subtler and more nuanced. In the chorus of "Rat Patrol" (1980) by the Washington DC band the Untouchables, all the instruments and vocals repeatedly hammer out the song's title (Lee 2024a). There's a slight instantaneous acceleration with each articulation of the phrase, creating a distinct sense of urgency. A similar technique appears in "I Hate You," another of the band's contributions to the *Flex Your Head* compilation,

as well as in the title track of Teen Idles' *Minor Disturbance* EP (1981) and Minor Threat's "Screaming at a Wall" (1981). Typically, this type of acceleration would be seen as a sign of limited instrumental skill or a loss of control driven by an excess of emotion. Yet in hardcore punk, especially in its early days, this apparent, or at times intentional, lack of conventional musical proficiency became a deliberate artistic stance: a form of musical affirmation introduced as a singular means of expression.

Conclusion

Exploring hardcore punk as a form of *nihilistic creation* highlights the need for a musicological approach that is both appropriate and innovative—one that integrates both philosophical and sociological perspectives in analysing the genre's radical aesthetics. Beyond simply reflecting the nihilism of its time by honing certain traits, through habitual attitudes, actions, images, or lyrics, hardcore punk is also characterised—and more lastingly—by its capacity to embody this nihilism through the structural modifications it makes to the music itself. While the extreme simplification in the Ramones' music presaged this trend, it was truly with the emergence of hardcore punk—notably in the songs of Black Flag, Circle Jerks, Bad Brains, Untouchables, and D.R.I.—that the phenomenon crystallized, by operating a synthesis of the components of urgency: condensed temporality, subtle acceleration, rhythmic breaks, and lack of development, thus stubbornly refusing any innovation or progression.

This nihilism, which dominates entire songs, becomes, then, the fundamental framework, the condition of possibility for the emergence of a temporal confusion and a sense of urgency specific to hardcore punk. Furthermore, with a simplicity bordering on asceticism, it radically and knowingly rejects any ideal of complexity and originality. Thus, hardcore punk reinvents music in its own way by implementing an aesthetic of urgency—one in which temporality itself functions as a medium of protest, shaping the music's entire structure from beginning to end. Essentially then, this study of hardcore punk offers a rereading of nihilism—no longer as a simple negation, but as a form of creation. Through a temporality that excludes progression and its circular repetition, hardcore punk redefines the relationship between music and meaning, inviting us to rethink how music can communicate an existential message that goes beyond words or images.

Endnotes

(1) Drawing on my doctoral thesis (Lee 2022), this article specifically aims to clarify, deepen, and broaden the concept of nihilism—an objective I had only partially achieved in a previous article in French (Lee 2024a)—, namely as a necessary precondition for the emergence of an adequate expression of the sense of urgency that is characteristic of hardcore punk.

(2) Our translation of "Der Nihilism ein normaler Zustand. Nihilism: *es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die Antwort auf das „Warum?" was bedeutet Nihilism?*—daß die obersten Werthe sich entwerthen" (Nietzsche (1980: 9[35]).

(3) Our translation of "*remplacement par des valeurs humaines – trop humaines (la morale remplace la religion ; l'utilité, le progrès, l'histoire elle-même remplacent les valeurs divines)*" (Deleuze 1965: 26).
(4) Our translation of "*l'impossiblité de fonder en raison la transcendance, principe de la religion*" and "*la dévaluation et la relativisation sans précédent de toutes les valeurs*" (Lemmens 2015: 3). For a widespread and trivialized analysis of relativism and the questions it raises in the United States, see Bloom (1987).
(5) Our translation of "*奇妙な欲望*" and "*何をしたいわけでもないが、何もしたくないわけでもない*" (Iwauchi 2019: 25).
(6) Turgenev, who was part of the 'romantic generation' despised by the nihilists, nevertheless portrayed the radical generation of Russian nihilists with as much objectivity as he could. It was only later that this generation would be "demonized" by authors such as Dostoevsky (Riedel 1978: 401), before becoming the target of public opinion—first in Russia, and later in Europe—casting it in an increasingly negative light from the end of the 19th century onward. See Lee (2022) and Lee (2025), for a more detailed analysis of *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev.
(7) George Lipsitz (1990: ix) also discusses the "uncertainty and instability" that marked American life in the 1970s. For an in-depth reading and analysis of Lasch's work, we can refer to Lipovetsky (1983). Regarding the connection between conformity and extreme individualism, as described by Lasch, in suburban middle-class life and the particular spirit of hardcore punk emerging from that same milieu, see Lee (2024a; 2024b).
(8) This notion of a "malaise of the 1970s" is probably taken from Christopher Lasch's 1979 bestseller, or more precisely, from a televised address by President Jimmy Carter, who, after reading the book, inadvertently popularised the expression, eliciting mixed reactions from Americans.
(9) See also Lee (2022) for a detailed analysis of two other Ramones songs: "Beat on the Brat" (1976) and "Sheena Is a Punk Rocker" (1977).
(10) See Lee (2022) for an analysis of all twenty-two tracks on D.R.I.'s first record (Chapter XII).
(11) *Urgency*: (1) "the quality of needing to be dealt with or happen immediately"; (2) "the feeling or belief that something needs to be dealt with immediately". https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/urgency?q=urgency
(12) In his book on punk and British youth culture in the 1980s, Matthew Worley writes: "Punk appealed on one level because it was visually and aurally exciting; it injected a sense of youthful energy and urgency into pop music". On the back cover of the same book, Simon Reynolds adds: "the urgency of a period that felt at once like a terrifying crisis-time and the dawn of a new epoch delirious with radical possibilities".

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