

“They’ve got a bomb”: sounding anti-nuclearism in the anarcho-punk movement in Britain, 1978-84

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Who can say how much [the Bomb] changed all of us,... our music,... our art...?

Crass (“Nagasaki nightmare” sleeve notes)

This article explores the energetic links, contradictions and tensions in Britain between a musical subculture at its height of innovation and creative energy— anarcho-punk from around 1978 to 1984—and the anti-nuclear movement, including the social movement organization the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), during these same years when CND was at the second peak of its national and international prominence (its first having been in the late 1950s and early 1960s). It identifies and interrogates the anti-nuclear elements of the musical package of anarcho-punk, looking at its leading band, Crass. Anarcho-punk was notable by its insistent political focus on war and the threat of nuclear destruction, and it presented a relentless cultural critique that drew on apocalyptic realities and drew post-apocalyptic imaginaries. The article offers a critical discussion of the often rich lyrical, visual, and performative texts Crass made, and explores key ways in which anarcho-punk also interrogated links between the nuclear and music industries. At the article’s centre is an exploration of the neglected question of the *sounds* of Crass’s music and singing voice—my term is Crassonics—in the very specific context of anti-nuclearism: if the bomb changed music and art, what did the new music (of protest) sound like, in their portfolio? (How) could trying to articulate the inexpressible (nuclear horror) and express an adequate outrage at its possibility even produce a listenable popular music?

Punk rock, Crass and the bomb

The nuclear fascination of punk rock is first and most publicly articulated in the Sex Pistols’s 1977 chart-topping single “God save the Queen”, in which singer Johnny Rotten points to the ideological constraining of the British establishment: “They made you a moron / A potential H-bomb.” While it is not entirely clear what the function of Rotten’s H-bomb is—national defence or inarticulate self-destruction of society, possibly both—it is clear that the bomb is viewed as “moronic” in ideation, and that, while the H-bomb is qualified by the word “potential,” there will be, as the song lyric repeatedly states as well as fades out on, “no future” (Sex Pistols, “God save the Queen”). Punk’s eschatology is established more or less in its beginnings. As Jon Savage has written, of these two lines from this one song, “[i]n these phrases you can hear the struggle of post-war youth culture, reacting against those whose world

view was shaped before the event which broke the history of the twentieth century in half: the Hiroshima atom bomb” (354). (See Alex Ogg for a survey of instances in which punk more broadly drew on cultures of war, despite its apparent “avowed suspicion and rejection of war and the military”: 302.)

The nuclear-tinged eschatology of punk opened up a great deal of new space. In late 1970s and early 1980s Britain, punk’s politics were complex and contradictory, managing to embrace both far left (see Worley, “Shot by both sides”) and, if to a much smaller extent, far right (see Shaffer). And then there came anarcho-punk, which said that it sought to position itself outside such a, in its view, restricting binary (as Crass sang: “Left wing, right wing, you can stuff the lot”: “White punks”). This last fact is significant in the context of anti-nuclearism especially, for “[t]he anti-nuclear movement ... was [itself] one instance of ‘popular politics’—... outside formal (parliamentary) channels, often with a complicated relationship to the political ‘left’ and ‘right’” (Tompkins 4). Anarcho-punk was an aggressive, earnest, even puritanical “dissident movement within punk: one which aimed to reassert the primacy of punk as an agency of political subversion [via which] punk rock itself might yet be refashioned into a revolutionary weapon” (Cross, “There is no authority” 2). So, while the Sex Pistols, in punk’s most incandescent year, 1977, had proclaimed “no future”, in fact a post-punk movement very quickly developed that saw one of its roles as articulating a future, or a soundtrack to one, at least. That articulation became, effectively, also the defence of the very idea of a future. A sustained and radical pacifist profile within anarcho-punk was established with the release of a record called *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* by the influential English band and collective Crass in 1978. According to Savage in *England’s Dreaming*, Crass “sowed the ground for the return of serious anarchism and the popularity of CND in the early 1980s” (584). Matt Worley extends the radical influence and legacy of Crass (see Figure 1), which

served as a nexus for a range of political movements that included anarchism, feminism, anti-militarism, animal rights activism and the early 1980s Stop the City campaigns that fed into the anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. (“Shot by both sides” 334-35; see also Cross, “Stop the City”)

Figure 1. G20 protestors, London 2009: the legacy of the Crass brand in later anti-capitalism. Photograph by Chris Beckett

The popular history film, *The Day the Country Died*, argues that anarcho-punk was “fuelled by the very real evils of Thatcherism, economic depression, and the nuclear threat that hung over the UK like a funeral pall” (Wallace). Whether one agrees with the interpretation of these features as “very real evils” or not—others might view them as some of the complex necessities of contemporary existence—one can acknowledge that, after thirty years of broad parliamentary consensus since the end of the Second World War, in 1979 a newly-elected right-wing government pursued a radical agenda at home, while internationally there was a nuclear-driven Cold War

as well as in 1982 a sea and land war between Britain and Argentina, over the Falklands Islands. In Worley's view, "[b]y 1982-1983, as plans to deploy Cruise, Pershing and SS20 nuclear missiles across Europe combined with a war fever stirred up by the Falklands conflict, so impending nuclear devastation moved to the top of many a punk band's agenda" ("One nation", 72). From an anarcho-punk perspective, the social and political shift was dizzying, as Crass guitarist Phil Free remembered.

After [*Feeding*] was out, Thatcher came in. We played a gig in Stoke and two policemen came in to make sure the kids were alright. There was a kitchen we were using and we made them tea and started chatting with them. One of them said, "If Thatcher gets in, I'm leaving because there'll be a police state in a few years." It was extraordinary. Then two years later, we were actually at war, and nuclear missiles were being sited in England. (qtd. in Berger 251)

Even in the midst of punk's vibrant, noisy and contumacious experimentation, *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* managed high levels of sonic and visual shock, innovation and appeal. In musical terms alone, it "sounded like no other punk record before it had—the signature military drum-beat; the skittery power-buzz of the two guitars; the relentless lyric-chewing vocal; the shift without pause from one song to another; the lack of rock pretensions" (Cross, "Now Wear Black" 2). Anarcho-punk, as effectively invented by Crass with this record, developed a rich multimedia and cross-cultural scene, with music at its heart: music recording, production and distribution, live performance and promotion, recorded sound, film and video experimentation, clothing and style, visual art and design, graffiti and street art, logo design and branding but also subvertising, typography, alternative organization networks and grassroots touring circuit, lifestyle and domestic arrangements from eating to collective living, fundraising for campaigns, *détournements* and pranksterism—all of these featured in an ambitious and encompassing extension of DIY practice. Much of this happened from a small group of people living together in a farm on the edge of Epping Forest, Essex, 15 miles from central London. It was a remarkable cottage industry.

While Crass and the anarcho-punk movement have begun to receive significant attention from academic and independent researchers and curators in recent years (sustained studies include Berger, Cross's range of work, Glasper, Dines and Worley, Shukaitis) as well as to tell their own stories (Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*; Ignorant, Lake), it is still not always easy accurately to substantiate and evaluate the achievement and influence of the movement. Though the amount of documentation has increased, there remains something of a tendency to celebrate rather than critique, authors are often (ex-)fans and advocates, and band members may have their own justificatory agendas. Any and all of these could contribute to what Worley politely calls the movement's "distorted sense of its own importance" ("One nation" 78), then as now. It is not even that easy to *see* Crass in action: surprisingly, for a multi-media ensemble with a resident artist and a resident film-maker, the visual impact of Crass live shows in particular is almost impossible to experience:

there are relatively few concert photographs (Figure 2), while only one short video clip of the band proper playing live from 1979 seems to exist (“Crass-video-live”), and this lacks live audio. More broadly, anarchist bands and autonomous record labels did not always use legal contracts with each other, concert venues were unconventional and non-commercial, gigs were predominantly informal benefits for local campaign groups, record sales including through independent distribution networks rarely featured in the official chart figures. Yet from their first gig at Huntley Street squat in London in 1977 to their final one, a benefit for South Wales miners in Aberdare in 1984, Crass alone played around 300 concerts (Rimbaud, *Shibboleth* 277) up and down the country, and some internationally—the vast majority of them fund-raisers for local and grassroots activist and campaign groups. They recorded and released eight albums and 11 singles of their own work—most for below market price and some for free—as well as over 30 records in various formats by other bands on their own label, Crass Records (see Berger 287-290). They confirm John Street’s observation that “[m]usic was not just a bearer of political values; it was also a form of organization” (94). Anarcho-punk quickly became remarkably popular for an underground music scene, achieved with relatively little coverage in the mainstream music press, no advertising, no television appearances or music videos, and little radio coverage or interest. It is estimated that Crass alone sold two million records during the band’s productive existence (Rimbaud, *Shibboleth* 277); “[t]heoretically,” wrote one English music magazine retrospectively of their “phenomenal record sales”, “their walls should be covered in gold disks” (qtd. in Thompson, *Punk Productions* 99; see also Worley, “One nation” 79 n.4).

Figure 2. Crass, live 1984. L-R Pete Wright, Steve Ignorant, N.A. Palmer. Photograph by Trunt, via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0. Black and white, cropped

In his autobiography, *Shibboleth*, drummer and leading light Penny Rimbaud explained the band’s activist and autonomous strategy of performance and touring, and championed their political legacy:

Hundreds of people would travel to join us in scout-huts, church halls and sports centres to celebrate our mutual sense of freedom. We shared our music, films, literature, conversation, food and tea... [O]ur efforts on the road slowly brought CND back to life. We were responsible for introducing it to thousands of people who would later become the backbone of its revival. (126, 109)

While “celebrating a mutual sense of freedom” and sharing tea at a musical culture event in a church hall sounds possibly rather lovely, even quaintly English, it sometimes—perhaps increasingly often as the scene developed—translated into audience violence, as subcultural rivals heard in the music’s considered dehumanizing aggression an invitation rather than an alienation effect. Arguably this was in punk’s tradition of “a largely consensual violence [whereby] Sex Pistols’

concerts brought the state of exception of Altamont into a permanent condition” (Hegarty 96), but the Crass concert was supposed to be about *peace*. The sound and stance of Crass encouraged extreme reactions and a not-always-healthy radical dialogic: PEACE on the stage banner, fighting on the venue floor and outside (see Lohman and Worley). Local anti-nuclear and grassroots groups who thought they would be benefiting from a fund- and consciousness-raising event by a well-known band on their own patch could be bewildered and intimidated by the temporary socio-cultural experiment, presentation and exploration of contradiction, and interrogation of consensual assumptions of what peace, or music, might be, that was a Crass gig.

At the national level, it appears that there also developed significant discomfort from within the established and newly-strengthened organization of CND itself to Crass’s uncompromising anarchist culture of peace, but then CND did have a track record of uncertainty about the youth and cultural protest within its ranks (McKay, “Subcultural innovations”). CND’s own ambivalence with the cultural space it was capable of opening up to youth, or of introducing to wider youth, had been evident even at the original Aldermaston Easter marches of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In his book about that period, *Bomb Culture*, Jeff Nuttall describes the effort by the campaign’s leadership to rein in the new subcultural energy of the carnivalesque. He writes of the “desolate puritanism” of the “official leaders” of CND that meant they “banned funny hats on the [Aldermaston] march and hired official bands to play instead of the old anarchic assemblies of banjos and punctured euphoniums” (49). Though Crass’s somewhat puritanical sartorial uniformity (black clothing for all, mostly) would never have permitted the wearing of “funny hats,” they too would claim to experience CND’s limiting of the carnivalesque at “the great rallies of the early eighties, rallies that CND were at pains to point out we were not welcome to play at.... CND felt that our presence at a rally would merely create trouble. They had a point, but nonetheless, it was one that we found galling” (Rimbaud, *Shibboleth* 109-10). Galling or not, part of the Crass identity was shaped around being marginalized or excluded, for this could illustrate the effectiveness of their interrogation of limits, especially the limits of freedom (thus an early song like “Banned from the Roxy” opens with the too-punk-for-punk irony of not being permitted to play again at a famous London punk club). According to Rimbaud, members of Crass paid “irregular visits to CND’s national office” to offer their services, and “were turned down [for a Trafalgar Square rally] and told not to bother again” (Rimbaud, personal correspondence, 2019). This is likely the October 1980 national rally, where quite avant-garde post-punk bands like Killing Joke and The Pop Group did in fact perform before a large (50-80,000 strong) crowd of protestors, with no trouble (see Fisher). Working with punk for peace would not always be so smooth for CND, though. At the 1983 Youth CND Festival for Peace in London’s Brockwell Park, the presence of punk band the Damned on the bill brought challenges, as co-organizer Chris Dalton remembers:

It was pretty scary, and a problem we misjudged.... What we didn’t plan for [on the day] was the march moving off late from the Embankment, [which

meant] the crowd that had come to see the Damned were a problem because most of them missed most of their set! (Dalton, personal correspondence, 2019)

The subsequent crowd trouble involved a mini-riot from some of the punks who wanted the Damned back on, dismantling safety barriers at the front of stage, throwing bottles and mud on to the stage, and temporary police intervention. “For about 15 minutes, we were not sure that we could continue [the music at the festival], but the security team asked the police to move back, and this took the tension down,” recalls Dalton. The complexity of punk’s relationship with peace culture and protest, then, is evident quite broadly across the range of Crass’s unofficial (Crass) and official (Trafalgar Square, Brockwell Park) activities.

Figure 3. *Toxic Graffiti* punk fanzine cover, 1979: Anarchy and Peace issue

In early 1979, interviewed in the punk fanzine *Toxic Graffiti*, members of Crass spoke of a more strategic motivation for, as they put it, “always play[ing] with the CND banner up.” (Figure 3 shows fanzine issue 4 from later the same year, its production supported by a London benefit gig by numerous anarcho-punk bands including Crass and Poison Girls.) Doing so was undoubtedly remarkable in the late 1970s (rather than early 1980s, say) because CND and the wider anti-nuclear movement were still in the doldrums then—major second-wave activities like Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp and Glastonbury CND Festival would not be organized until 1981, for instance. Crass had been criticized for the CND connection from the start: “they claim to be anarchists and hide behind CND badges—how relevant”, sneered one 1978 music press review, suspecting that the CND link was, like the vegetarianism and communal living, a throwback to the 1960s counterculture; that is, Crass were more hippie than punk (qtd. in Berger 124). But it is noteworthy also that one can sense the politically reflexive level of nuclear discussion and range of views within the group even in a short extract such as this.

ANDI: WE ALWAYS PLAY WITH THE C.N.D. BANNER UP.

G: IT’S A LOT OF PEOPLES BAISIC FEAR, I FIND IT SOMETHING HARD TO DIAGREE WITH,.

PHIL: WHEN YOU PLAY UNDER A BANNER LIKE THAT YOU CAN SAY WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT ANYONE, AND NOT BE ACCUSED OF POLITICAL BIAS.

ANDI: THE C.N.D. IS AS MUCH AN ESTABLISHMENT AS THE S[OCIALIST W[ORKERS’] P[ARTY] OR THE N[ATIONAL] F[RONT].

PHIL: WELL IT ISN’T AN ESTABLISHMENT ON IT’S OWN, AND IT DOES HAVE THIS ATMOSPHERE OF BEING POLITICALLY NEUTRAL.... (*Toxic Graffiti* 9; typography original)

The band’s anti-nuclearism hit an early peak with the 1980 double-A-sided single “Nagasaki nightmare” / “Big A little a”, on which both songs are critiques of the nuclear state, the former more directly. The paper record sleeve folds out into a

36x55 cm double-sided black and white poster, which we can think of as a *tour de force* of musical-cultural propaganda (Crass, “Nagasaki nightmare”). (Crass visual artist Gee Vaucher’s role in the design of record covers is discussed in McKay, “Vaucher’s punk painting”.) There is the Crass-branded front cover; the lyrics of both songs; a set of newspaper-style columns of tiny packed text outlining facts and details about nuclear power and weapons, as well as of the history of protest against them; individual images as artwork montages of smiling world leaders standing on nuclear corpses; grisly, grainy shots of burned bodies; a series of images in which the Queen’s face morphs into that of a Japanese nuclear victim; several phallus/missile juxtapositions visually emphasizing the gender critique stated in one of the columns, that “the biggest bang on earth ... [is] the climax of all prick-power”; Japanese calligraphy; an edge trim in the form of a cartoon about living in the nuclear age; everyday media violence via shots of cowboys, and a soldier on television; stencilled Crass slogans (FIGHT WAR NOT WARS); and surveillance. It is an Anti-Boom Manifesto for the punk generation.¹ The centrepiece of one side (Figure 4) is a map of Britain that shows the British state’s nuclear infrastructure, including reactors, missile and bomber bases, nuclear waste dumps, power stations, civil defence bunkers, nuclear weapons factories, national and international transport links for all the above, and more. One of the columns opens with a striking statement of what Crass viewed as the pervasive nature of nuclear culture, via a punk reference to the Sex Pistols, and tells us something important about what Noriko Manabe and Jessica Schwartz term nuclear music, too:

No future. Did there used to be a future? Who took it away from us? No-one much under fifty remembers what it was like before there was the Bomb. But it changed them too. Who can say how much it changed all of us, our music, our lovemaking, our art, our taste and smell? In the world of Things, the Bomb is everywhere.... Every time you turn on the light, there’s a Bomb behind the switch. (Crass, “Nagasaki nightmare” sleeve)

The reader/listener’s intended lightbulb moment rests in the recognition of the nuclear power and weapons connection, a mini-event of nuclear sublime in the everyday domestic sphere, experienced as one sits “at home in the global thanatocracy of the nuclear regime” (Lütticken 45). Crass’s audio-visual anti-nuclear project extended to other media too. A concert review in the music weekly *Sounds* from 1981 describes the use of moving image by the band in live performance, shown on screens each side of the stage. The multi-media texts to represent the nuclear sublime were produced by Crass’s experimental filmmaker Mick Duffield (see Duffield), and can be seen as a kind of “alternative media—an Alternative TV, to use [fanzine innovator] Mark Perry’s band as exemplar” (Worley, *No Future* 79). The italicized language illustrates the alienating effect the film had on the *Sounds* journalist, to the extent that the concert review is less focused on describing the band or their music, and more on capturing the feelings of the reviewer himself while watching the film.

The musical side is ... *disturbingly* illustrated with a graphic bombardment of

cutting room floor, film montage *bludgeoned* into your senses A taste of the full-blown horror of nuclear war hell is provided with footage showing ... the *sickening* atrocities committed at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.... Equally *chilling* is the tape-recorded selection of “count down” talk-overs.... All these effects are fitted together to form a *terrifying* portrait of what could happen tomorrow. (Pouncy, “Tea and anarchy”; emphases added)

Disturbing, sickening, chilling, terrifying ... these were the intended psychological outcomes of attending a Crass concert, prompted by the screenings of Duffield’s film edits of footage of nuclear destruction alongside the band as they played live nightly.

Fig 4. Crass, “Nagasaki nightmare”/“Big A little a” single sleeve fold-out poster, 1980: “a *tour de force* of musical-cultural propaganda”

Crassonics—“no reverb”: anger, violence, expressibility

... to what extent is the nuclear “sensible” at all? Its dangers can certainly be argued in writing, in the abstract and conceptual use of language—but is that enough? (Lütticken 51)

It’s not the words that do it, it’s the sound...

Leon Rosselson, on political song (qtd. in Irwin)

How have the recorded sounds of anarcho-punk—what I now tentatively term “Crassonics”—captured and articulated its self-styled “aesthetic of anger”? The sometimes complex aesthetic of anarcho-punk claimed to be predicated on “anger”, as Crass sloganized on the cover of 1983’s *Yes Sir, I Will*, as the band Omega Tribe put it with their 1982 EP release on Crass Records, *Angry Songs*, (as incidentally, punk itself would revisit with something like John Lydon’s second autobiography *Anger is an Energy* in 2014), and as a 2016 collection of academic and other writings on the topic maintains (Dines and Worley). Of course, there were other models of anger around anarchism—only a few years earlier in London, after all, the Angry Brigade of clandestine “urban guerrillas” and stark communiqués had employed political violence in the form of a bombing campaign aimed at engendering armed insurrection (see Carr). But what would be different about this new anarchist anger? It was musical and it had a specific sound. While earlier anti-nuclear protest music, such as that from the 1950s folk revival that was concurrent with the establishment of CND in the first place, might have relied on earnestness of vocal delivery, an acoustic and collective human-scale of music-making, and plaintive or defiant lyrics, this project differed (see Cline and Weiner for US folk and country; Titus and Simich for a survey of “the impact of the Atomic Age on [US] music”: 11). Crass claimed that music was “changed by the bomb,” and they sought to confirm this observation not only in lyric and text but with the very music they were making. Their music incorporated and created sounds of destruction, alienation and accusation, in a righteous and relentless assault on the new nuclear norm. But in the binary culture

of the (anti-)nuclear sublime, listenability and expressibility seemed polar opposites: for Crass, to express nuclear horror in music and capture the outrage around it, one had to interrogate the limits of what one would be willing to listen to. Stacy Thompson describes how, “as Crass’s sound matured, it shifted away from the commercial end of the late ’70s punk sound and tried to stake out an anticommercial antiaesthetic” (“Crass commodities” 312-3). Considering that Crass’s version of “the late ’70s punk sound” was already quite radical—as illustrated with the reception of *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, described above—that experimental shift and interrogation of listenability as the band matured was a considered aesthetic and political project.

We can approach the sound of the music via the capture and manufacture of that sound. Recorded sound does not just happen: it needs capturing through the recording process, and much of the success here was down to the innovative approach of Southern Studios owner and engineer John Loder, sometimes called “the ninth member of Crass” (Ignorant 161). In Samantha Bennett’s view, Loder’s achievements would go on to read “like a ‘who’s who’ of 1980s and 1990s underground and alternative music, with a focus on punk, hardcore, post-hardcore, noisecore, grunge and industrial subgenres” (“Recording the musical underworld”; see also Sheppard). Assistant engineer Harvey Birrell has described Southern Studios’s sonic and technological achievement: “[t]hese bands made a terrifying noise and John captured that on record” (qtd. in Bennett, “Recording the musical underworld”). Rimbaud remembers the austere “spirit” or “studio vibe” of the recording space located in Loder’s north London house’s garage, where the aim was to produce “a very dodgy sound”: “John never attempted to make [the studio] comfortable. It was almost hostile and it wasn’t a nice place to work. It was not a good live room and there was no drum or vocal booth. No attempt to create atmosphere or presence” (qtd. in Bennett, “Songs about fucking” 8, 4). Bennett explains Loder’s approach:

taut and “up front,” Loder has brought the band’s lyrical anger and anarchist aesthetics under control. Significantly, the vocals are positioned quite low in the mix, enveloped by guitars and Rimbaud’s own relentless snare rolls. The most noticeable factor is the absence of any ambience, reverb or other time-based effects processing. Penny Rimbaud described this intended sonic characteristic as: “Rawness. [John and I] developed that sound together. The key instruction on *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* was ‘no reverb.’ We’re punks—we don’t have fucking reverb!” (Bennett “Recording the musical underworld”; see also “Songs about fucking”, 9)

In a 2011 interview, singer/“lead shouter” (Ignorant 271) Steve Ignorant would argue that Crassonics were both musically uninformed (“none of us were musicians”) *and* informed (“Rimbaud was into ... jazz”). The “ineptitude” (Hegarty ch. 6) that could perhaps make music be noise, and that was more widely part of punk’s anti-aesthetic practice, is only partially present here.

The Crass sound came from the fact that none of us were musicians.... [But] because (drummer) Penny Rimbaud was into avant-garde sort of jazz, he would say,... "I want an atmosphere of terror", so we'd come up with sounds like that. It was about the atmosphere. (Ignorant, qtd. in Kennedy)

But it was also about the singing voices, both male and female. In particular it was about Ignorant's voice, the expressibility of nuclear horror located in his voice's sound and content. In his band history of Crass, Berger states as much: "the anger was in the vocals—raw, unprecedented, primal" (116), as well as speedily garbled, relentless, often incomprehensible without the lyric sheet. One of Ignorant's signature sounds was a sustained, painful utterance—a cross between scream and vocal fry—sometimes on a single repeated word at the end or indeed start of a song (the "me" of "They've got a bomb", the word "mother" at the start of "Mother earth"), which could break down as the voice sought to transmit extreme outrage and panic, or lose meaning through repetition, or constitute a tortuous sort of what might just be melisma. Let us call that vocal stretch to the end of sound or the end of the world *malisma*.

One might think anarcho-punk a curious propaganda because one could often simply not comprehend its lyrics. Partly this was a conscious strategy worked out in the recording studio between Rimbaud and Loder, as Rimbaud has discussed: "the 'under-mixing' of words was a statement. We are not stars. If you want the words, read the book" (qtd. in Bennett, "Songs about fucking" 8). Crass songs in particular were so very wordy, yet words relegated to being sources of the sound of disgust, anger, outrage. We can say that Ignorant's was a nuclear voice; articulation and referentiality were secondary as language broke down in the effort to express the inexpressible, nuclear meaninglessness captured and presented in sonic form. What held it together—gave it some meaning; made it more than a Beckettian performance of existential crisis—was that it was always struck through with the righteous indignation of protest. The ideas and projects were transmitted through the quality of the singing voice and its delivery of words, and in the lyrics themselves, not least through the use of swearing. While some other punk bands self-censored their own swearing or taboo lyrics with polite substitutions for radio edit versions of what they hoped would be potentially hit songs (the Stranglers' "Peaches", the Jam's "This is the modern world"), or were sneaking in a swearword via utterly banal lyrics (the Sex Pistols' "Pretty vacant"—sung "vay-CUNT"), Crass were uncompromising. Teal Triggs has written of the wider movement's incorporation of "an explicit and violent use of language as part of a general shock tactic strategy meant to offend and draw attention to punk itself" (73), but with Crass the strategy was not only self-serving. It was intended as a lyrical and sonic effort to communicate the anger and outrage of modernity's "slaughterhouse of war", to lay bare and shatter the everyday experience of life in, as they saw it, the "reality asylum". Not all were attracted by Crass's fuck-laden expression of worldview; for artist David Tibet, an otherwise sympathetic erstwhile collaborator, "the excessive use of profanities ... made their work easy to overlook or dismiss as

merely foul-mouthed outrage for its own sake” (qtd. in Berger 121). Probably it did not help their case to be considered for large open-air free concerts for mixed audiences such as a CND national rally, say, either.

Crass could be thought of as exploring Greil Marcus’s observation that “[t]o make true political music, you have to say what decent people don’t want to hear” (qtd. in Street 155). While conventional enough in line-up—bass guitar and kit drum as rhythm section, two guitarists, lead singer and backing vocals—some avant-garde musical and sonic techniques were also employed to unsettle and disrupt. Silence figured mid-song as the non-sound of the end of the world (“They’ve got a bomb”), or as an entire track in lieu of a song which had been subject to censorship (“Asylum”). Extracts from radio and television news and entertainment were increasingly included in songs as sonic and verbal counterpoints, textures of everyday media discourse, and the laying bare of propaganda. Such media extracts could include the sounds of tuning or switching between channels—contrast and variety are added to the recording, of course, but the political point concerns the pervasive nature of media, its essential role in the construction of normal life and thought, and (in Crass’s view) the twinned illusions of choice and freedom of expression. As one mode of delivery male and female band singers used spoken voice which could be deceptively calm and seemingly dissociated counterpoints to the rest of a song’s storm or an urgent and righteous solo accompanied only by alienating sound effects. An ostentatious instrumental anti-technique was offered by one of the guitarists, N.A. Palmer AKA Hari Nana, consisting of limited barre chords played very fast with the fretting hand on the fingerboard from above rather than below. The drumming, by Penny Rimbaud, relied quite heavily on a military-style snare—more Rambo than Rimbaud—but with regular use of fermata structuring the rest of the song’s musical accompaniment, and endlessly disrupting musical flow and progression. The “terrifying noise” of anarcho-punk, Crass Records’ musical “atmosphere of terror”, and Southern Studios’s sonic signature which went beyond “even the hardest, most aggressive sounds in popular, rock and metal genre[s]” (Bennett “Songs about fucking”, 11), were what the bomb was up against; or, altogether less heroically, the noise and atmosphere of Crassonics were what anarcho-punk produced to oppose the nuclear state, were all it could produce to stand against the bomb.

The nuclear shadow became “a stain on our heart”: surviving the bomb

If they drop a bomb on us, we fucking deserve it.
We know we’ve got it coming, we fucking deserve it.
Crass, “Bumhooler”

For a band so fixed on ideas of peace and anti-nuclearism, the contradictorily paramilitary aspects of Crass were clearly evident in their black uniform clothing, the military buzz of the snare drumming, and the sound and scene of war woven

into their very music, art and media alike. As arguably with radical feminists involved in the concurrent Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (militarism as extended practice of patriarchy; see Roseneil, Feigenbaum), for anarchists like Crass nuclear technology—weapons *and* power—was a structural or systemic feature of society: “Contamination / Contains the nation”, they sang, after all (Crass, “Contaminational power”). In their view, nuclear weapons stood as the limit case of capital, religion, nation, and the (nuclear) family's foundational violence, but not exceptionally so: they were the product of the pervasive and inescapable logic of such macro- and micro-relations. Big A *and* little a, as the single put it—where the bomb is indeed behind the light switch in every British home. But, over the period of the band's existence, ending in 1984, the limits of anarcho-punk were sensed when “many fans seemed determined to languish only in the darkness of shrill denunciations of war, animal suffering and impending Armageddon” (Cross, “There is no authority” 17). Other fans and activists would grow weary as what Worley calls the “relentlessly bleak vision [of Crass's] hair-shirt politics” (*No Future* 168) became counter-productive. Within the band itself exhaustion and cultural despair, anarchy subsumed in apathy, the performative challenge of keeping on doing rage on stage, internal and external pressures, political tensions around non-violence, all took their toll.

Figure 5. “The music was becoming self-consuming, like the Crass circular tail-eating-head logo” itself (grey background image)

Their final single included the song “Nagasaki is yesterday's dog-end” (a dog-end is a colloquial term for a cigarette butt). The song consists of 11 fragments of music, with pauses, each one introduced by the repeated shouted instruction (with a drum beat for each syllable) “ATTENTION.” In the last, longer fragment the rhythm and music self-destruct, as the lyrics exhort the listener, “Choose your path. It's time to fucking act.... It's time to fucking act” (Crass, “Dog-end”). It is the end of the band, playing a song that ends with the sound of a band falling apart; it is also a desperate-sounding acknowledgement of both the fading power and the limits of propagandist influence through something as apparently ephemeral as popular music. A male voice barks “Attention!” like an officer to new recruits—who would have thought, six years earlier, that that would be how Crass would end up trying to make the anarchists, punks, and anti-war activists stand in line (“Choose your path”) in opposition to the “slaughter games” of the nuclear apocalypse? The aesthetic of anger almost seemed to be turning against the band's fans here, for somehow not being sufficiently radical or disciplined. That is why “we fucking deserve it” “if they drop a bomb on us”: we stopped listening, we stopped believing, and we were simply not uncompromisingly activist enough (for Crass) anyway. As Richard Cross explains that lyric: “abstention from ... [the peace and anti-nuclear] struggle is an untenable act of surrender” (“There is no authority”, 10). Crass's intermittent hectoring tendency (“Don't just stand there,” they had instructed listeners on 1978s “Women” (Crass), sounding like an irritated schoolteacher—perhaps here betraying band members' age gap from many of their school-age punk fans) was now over-dominant. Also, though, there was a high degree—too high, it seems—of

internalization, as the images, imaginings and sounds of the bomb and war had indeed changed the members of the band as people: the “shadow” cast by “the violence and terror of the nuclear age” had become “a stain on our hearts”, they would explain (Crass, “In which Crass”). (And, we should remember here the wise words of the Sex Pistols from 1977: “They made you ... a potential H-bomb”.) “In the end,” recalled singer Ignorant,

it just burnt me out.... I stopped going to gigs. I got fed up with seeing people wearing raggedy black clothes. I got fed up with hearing songs about nuclear war. I got fed up with hearing, at the end of a track, the *BOOM!* of a nuclear explosion. (186)

For Crass artist Vaucher, similarly, the end of the band was in part an aesthetic rejection of her own protest repertoire of visual shock material trying to capture the inexpressible: “I didn't want to paint another corpse, I didn't want to paint another effigy anymore” (qtd. in Unterberger; see also Shukaitis). The British radical punk version of the Anti-BOOM Manifesto was losing its critical and cultural power. It was not only that the bomb-changed music of Crass, as an interrogative political project of unlistenability somehow bolted on to one of gold-record commercial success, was becoming predictable. After all, by and large, pop does that, even experimental, political pop: few acts are capable of sustaining sonic innovation for *that* many years. But their music was sounding more joyless than ever, when perhaps what people needed now was to dance against the bomb, or even just dance for a while. The music was also becoming self-consuming, like the Crass circular tail-eating-head logo had always shown (Figure 5). Of course it is possible that the “endgame millenarianism” (Crass, “Take the toys” 119) of pieces like “Nagasaki is yesterday's dog-end” was actually more about the end of a band than the end of the world. In Stacy Thompson's view, the Crass project ended in or as a very particular kind of “failure”, one which “gestured” towards “possibility”:

the most instructive contestatory practices of punk lie neither in its ... scandal nor in its provocation..., but in its very failures using these aesthetic strategies.... [I]t is precisely in its failure that Crass gesture[d] toward the possibility of an aesthetic space within the cultural field of punk that economics do not determine or even significantly condition. (“Crass commodities” 311)

While DIY products and practices such as Crass's free flexidisks, 45 pence singles, and benefit gig touring circuits may seem altogether more comprehensible aesthetic challenges to economic certainties, for Thompson cultures like these remain inescapably fixed in the “commodity market”. But if failure—freighted word—is inevitable, it is also productive: Crass may indeed confirm the *impossibility* of an alternative and non-militaristic aesthetic; but it is in anarcho-punk's attempt, which was a sustained and disseminated socio-cultural gesture, that possibility is glimpsed and articulated.

Popular music, protest and the bomb

Bands in the scene were only too well aware of questions of complicity and resistance, and a strand of anarcho-punk's productivity was its self-reflexivity. One persistent strand of punk and anarcho-punk alike was its meta-analysis: songs about the industry or the scene or other bands, record covers explaining how to make a record, messages cut into the matrix space of the very vinyl itself, even pricing strategy as communication (every Crass single cover that stated "Do not pay more than 45p" was a tiny knock at pop's commercial priorities). Having discussed the cultural work, media products, and performance of anarcho-punk, and then Crassonics, in the context of its anti-nuclear music, I want now to consider how it turned its fierce social gaze closer to home. Two critical positions from anarcho-punk bands Crass and Poison Girls throw further light on the nature of nuclear music, or, to be more accurate, the nuclear music industry. As we have seen, when Crass started out in the late 1970s, "always play[ing] with the CND banner up", CND itself was in the doldrums. Yet within three or four years the campaign was riding an extraordinary wave of public support and expanding membership, and pop and punk musicians and festivals alike were championing the cause. So: a successfully developed mix of music, youth and politics? Not necessarily, in the eyes of Crass. In a long essay called "The last of the hippies" included with 1982's *Christ: The Album*, Rimbaud argued that

a very real danger to the long-term existence of CND and its allies is the current interest being shown in it by the music business. Peace has become a saleable commodity, a trendy product, and established record labels ... are now bending over backwards to be seen to be supporting the cause. (5; emphasis added)

For one measure of how popular anti-nuclear and anti-war music could be, note that in 1984 alone three songs containing anti-nuclear or anti-war sentiments topped the UK singles charts; together they held the cherished no. 1 spot for 14 weeks (Official Charts website).² That is, in 1984, for 25% of the year, the best-selling weekly single in Britain was a protest song, about war, the Cold War and nuclear weapons.³ As John Street has shown, such a hugely popular political period is almost unprecedented in British pop (46-48). But for Crass the musical commodification and sheer saleability of peace politics by other post-punk acts was profoundly problematic. In their view peace was an existential concept and revolutionary aim, unachievable through profit-based commercial exchange, and diminished by contact with such. While popular music could be propaganda (as theirs was), propaganda could not be product for pop (in their view). The difficulty of this position was that it made their radical criticality and autonomy (including of production, performance, distribution) isolating and ultimately even self-defeating, as they seemed unable or unwilling to recognise other popular music successes in or collaborations for political communication. Poison Girls, erstwhile fellow anarcho-punk agitators and labelmates, had a more interesting critical perspective on the music/military

industries crossover. Less fixed on glib accusations of “trendy product”-making, the critique of Poison Girls was situated in an economic reading of culture. In *No Nukes Music* fanzine in 1981 singer Vi Subversa discussed the situation of radical bands agreeing major label contracts:

if a band signs up to EMI or whoever it is, that’s actually putting their profits into weapons. I mean that company is part of the same parent company that’s actually making the electronic stuff in bombs. (qtd. in Cross, “Take the toys” 142)

Subversa’s accusation contains a reasonable and accurate observation: two years earlier the leading record company EMI had been acquired by Thorn Electrical Industries to produce a new organization, Thorn EMI, one of Britain’s largest companies. Thorn EMI had four core areas of business, which included music, and defence (Grace’s Guide). EMI Records were involved in the new punk music of the 1970s: the company’s roster of bands included the Sex Pistols (briefly) and X-Ray Spex, as well as even overtly political groups like the Tom Robinson Band and Gang of Four. Subversa’s argument continues: “once a band signs to one of the major labels” they are politically compromised. “They might be an anti-war band, or a Marxist band,... but they’re cashing in” (qtd. in Cross, “Take the toys” 142). The latter accusation (cashing in, selling out) was a familiar part of punk discourse, though it did carry particular potency when a band was publicly political (see Hesmondhalgh on “selling out” and “burning out” in punk and post-punk). But it is the first part of her argument that bears most weight, for it is here that we see anti-nuclear and anti-war music’s radical critique zoning in on music itself, the entire wider popular music ecology. As both Crass and Poison Girls exemplify, in thought and practice alike anarcho-punk confirms Manabe’s observation that “[p]rotest music has always been a largely DIY or participatory endeavour” (“Responses to Manuel”). While many “early Punk groups seem to have been fantastically naïve about the industry” (Savage 304), for both Crass and, more substantively, Poison Girls here the nuclear music of commercial pop—even or especially that which might state an anti-war or anti-nuclear position—was a dangerously entwined industry, in which every time you put on a record, there’s a bomb behind the needle.

Conclusion

CND it don’t fool me
I don’t want to live in a weak country.
Special Duties, “CND (Campaign for Nuclear Destruction)”

Penny Rimbaud has sometimes been susceptible to making grand claims for Crass and that movement (for instance, Crass were “one of the most influential bands in the history of British rock”: *Shibboleth* 110; or Crass were “more powerful than ... Dada”: qtd. in Solomons 41), so caution is required with a statement from him such as Crass “slowly brought CND back to life” (see above). Richard Cross has challenged

the view of Rimbaud here and of Jon Savage in *England's Dreaming* (584) that anarcho-punk “sowed the ground for ... the popularity of CND” in the 1980s, while Worley has noted that Crass’s claims of influence “should not be overstated” (“One nation” 78). For Cross, the revival of the anti-nuclear movement then was a response to Europe-wide concerns about a new arms race, Cruise and Pershing first-strike and US-controlled missiles. Even so, he argues, “Crass and anarcho-punk *can* quite legitimately claim ... to have convinced a substantial number of radical youth to commit their energies to the most militant anti-militarist wings of the disarmament movement” (Cross, “Now Wear Black” 13; emphasis added). Chris Dalton, the Youth CND worker who had helped organise the 1983 Festival of Peace concert in Brockwell Park, when the punks rioted for the Damned, articulates a more inclusive narrative of political influence, which draws from across contemporary popular music broadly—but which *does* recognize anarcho-punk’s place in that landscape.

I was definitely but indirectly influenced by the music and records of Crass as a 15/16-year-old in the period 1978-79.... [T]heir music was remarkable for how it sounded (and still is for its production) and for what it said.... But I wouldn’t say that Crass brought CND back to life. These things are always more about plate tectonics than a single volcano, however distinctive the eruption.... When it came to youth culture and music etc., Youth CND went with wherever our musical tastes met with musicians who were happy to support the cause.... It was Paul Weller, Madness, and a fair number of commercially well-known artists, as well as people such as Billy Bragg. We were teenagers! (Dalton)

Even if a very small number of other punk bands sought to embrace the bomb, either as symbol of nihilistic existence—“the ultimate No Future” (Worley, *No Future* 242; see also Worley, “One nation” 75)—or in support of the west’s nuclear deterrent in the context of the Cold War—as with Special Duties, above—it remains more powerfully the case that punk, and its more radical offshoot anarcho-punk, could contribute “forms of aesthetic activism that challenge[d] the reigning thanatocracy” (Lütticken 39), and could do so with urgency and timeliness in an era of international crisis. Sven Lütticken (41) has most positively noted about nuclear opposition that “it takes a planetary threat to create global unity” (this is surely also a resonant and important observation for climate emergency activists today). “Terrifying” Crassonics and anarcho-punk’s related music and media formed a sustained and popular radical cultural response in Britain which, despite its limits and flaws, bannings and “failures”, disseminated widely in sound and influence.

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¹ The original Manifesto BUM ("boom") is a 1952 painting by Italian avant-garde artist Enrico Baj for an exhibition of what was newly-termed "Nuclear Art" in Milan, which figures visual imagery (a mushroom cloud) overlaid by slogans and fragments of nuclear text.

² The 1984 singles were, in chronological order: Paul McCartney's "Pipes of peace" (two weeks), Nena's "99 red balloons" (three weeks), and Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two tribes" (nine weeks). According to John Street (2012), whose survey of political no. 1s ends at 2001, only 1969 comes near, also with three chart-toppers: "The ballad of John and Yoko" by the Beatles, Thunderclap Newman's "Something in the air", and Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad moon rising." But in 1969 the combined weeks at no. 1 totalled only nine (three for each).

³ Such commercial acceptance of nuclear politics in music is not always the case. For example, Noriko Manabe has shown how, in the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement in Japan, in fact few popular musicians are involved: "most artists on major labels (with some notable exceptions) have not spoken out publicly against nuclear power, and much of the music of the antinuclear protest movement thus far has been from independent artists" (Manabe, "No Nukes 2012 concert"). "Furthermore", she notes, "musicians airing such views can see a reduction in bookings".