



Defining Pussy Riot Musically: Performance and Authenticity in New Media

POLLY McMICHAEL

University of Nottingham

Abstract: The Pussy Riot phenomenon generated vast amounts of commentary, but little serious analysis of its musical aspects. The group was either accepted unquestioningly as a ‘Russian punk group’, or seen as another kind of project entirely: one which drew on punk aesthetics but was ultimately inauthentic as punk, engaging instead with discourses of protest and performance. This essay seeks to reinstate the centrality of music to the Pussy Riot project, in order to establish what it was about Pussy Riot’s aural and visual representation that invited doubt about its musical credentials, and even, subsequently, its authenticity in relation to its political agenda. The essay argues that in constructing Pussy Riot as a product for dissemination on the internet, the group’s recording and performance activities laid bare the stages of construction and mediation that are inherent in the production of music, undermining the ideology of musical authenticity.

Keywords: Pussy Riot, punk, music, Runet, sound recording, music video, liveness, performance, authenticity.

Numerous commentators and scholars have asserted that music occupies a subordinate position in the Pussy Riot project (see for example Gapova 2012; Gradskova et al 2013; Idov 2012; Steinholt 2013a), and according to interviews the group itself would not take issue with this interpretation – its members, after all, have consistently stated that it is the sincerity and urgency of Pussy Riot’s message that is central. The designation ‘Russian punk group’ favoured by Anglophone media at the time of the trial of Mariia Alekhina, Ekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova is without a doubt a simplification which fits the truncated, attention-grabbing form of the news headline. Imagining a showdown between Putin, whose perceived macho self-presentation and disregard for freedom of speech and human rights generate much gleeful and appalled traffic in social media outside Russia, and a small group of female musicians, who used punk’s distorted chords, shouted vocals and outré poses to challenge authoritarianism and patriarchy, was highly seductive and drew global

audiences into a narrative of politicised music and state oppression. It was left to those with a deeper understanding of the Russian punk scene to outline something of the complexity of Pussy Riot's relationships to punk and to music. Steinholt and Gololobov are clear in explaining that the group is not a punk group in the sense that the headlines might have had us believe: the project had its origins in the art activist collective Voina, and Pussy Riot had no connection with any of the existing punk scenes in Russia (Steinholt 2013a; Gololobov and Steinholt 2013). The story of Pussy Riot's origins, membership, affiliations, aims and economics is convoluted, even murky. Yet at the heart of all this was a decision to use music as the starting point for the project, to base it around sounds and images of a punk group and to use songs as a primary mode of expression. It seems clear that ignoring the musical aspects of the project risks perpetuating the gulf between global popular understanding of Pussy Riot and its scholarly interpretation, as well as that between Russian popular opinion and the prevailing representation of the group in the rest of the world. Leaving aside the music means failing to engage with a fundamental aspect of the way in which the project made meaning, which was by playing upon the image and ideology of punk in order to construct these local and worldwide reactions.

Pussy Riot's presentation of its musical products and creation of the image of the depersonalized figures within the group was largely achieved via *LiveJournal* posts and YouTube uploads, the nature of which is discussed below. These means of publication and dissemination served, at one level, to reinforce the group's apparent authenticity, in that such forums promote amateur or DIY creative activity, publishing and republishing, allowing the dissemination of material without the aid of commercial support, all of which are key tenets in Pussy Riot's stated political and artistic credo. In another sense, though, the shift in location of the encounter between Pussy Riot and their audiences from concert or record to the screen of a computer or smartphone signified an engagement with musical products that smacked of *inauthenticity* – that is to say the separate recording and dubbing together of audio and visual tracks, the suggestion of interference from unseen agents, and, above all, a sense of dislocation between sounds, performer and listener. Although these production practices were at least as old as rock and roll itself, and the consumption of music online was hardly new, in the Pussy Riot project their juxtaposition with the claim that the sounds themselves contained spontaneous anger and the spirit of punk as protest was regarded as problematic at best.

The ways in which listeners heard Pussy Riot as they watched the YouTube uploads (whether in Russia or elsewhere) were predicated on the expectations that frame our encounters with music. Politically oppositional, disruptive, loud and confrontational, these were songs and performances that set out to challenge authority and shock listeners. The Pussy Riot project created music and made it manifest in a way that necessarily drew on Western rock music's pre-internet construction of its own history, as the creation of a 'difference', a delineation between entertainment and what appears as 'rock's inextricable tie to resistance, refusal, alienation, marginality, etc.' (Grossberg 1993: 201-202). In the age of new media the borders separating incorporation into the mainstream from authentic difference have become multiple, and are multiply contested. In the context of post-Soviet Russia, moreover, this inheritance and the messy present-day situation are layered with other histories. Pussy Riot's activities and their consequences could easily be viewed through the lens of art as political

dissidence, the mythology of which intensified under Stagnation (Remnick 2012), and to which the defendants' statements at the trial referred explicitly.¹ More fundamentally, the group's flash concerts were reminiscent of a great deal of what was difficult about performing rock and punk rock in the Soviet Union, when singers also delivered challenges to authoritative discourse in sneering or violent tones, profane language and confrontational posturing, all of which might sometimes be complicated by a straightfaced over-identification with dominant discourses known as '*steb*' (Yurchak 2006: 250). But Pussy Riot did not align itself with the nationally focused identity of self-abasement that became characteristic of Russian punk (Steinholt 2013; Gololobov 2013). Instead, the group self-consciously assumed the identity of non-commercial, activist outsiders, purveyors of the aggressively shouted critique, of protest as performance; their version of punk was recognisable as such to the global audience, especially when members affirmed in collective interviews the influence of 'Oi' punk and Riot Grrrl on their style and message (e.g. Del'finov 2011; Langston 2012).² Pussy Riot also operated in a context in which the concepts of authorship and agency (and profit and loss) had long struggled against various kinds of self-publishing and piracy (from samizdat to torrents). The group interpreted and performed an idea of punk rock and of musical authorship as inherited from both sides of the old Cold War divide, placing it in a new context of activism catalyzed by the global financial crisis and protests that were aided and disseminated by new media. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the meanings attached to the group in and beyond Russia and by different internet communities revealed extremely complicated clusters of discussion and completely polarised understandings of what Pussy Riot actually meant.

Pussy Riot's carefully orchestrated raid on global public consciousness was enacted primarily in spaces provided by new media, but its activities were gradually picked up by traditional media, from the *Guardian* to Russia's Channel One. Each stage of the group's public confrontation of the Putin state was a multimedia event par excellence: the group's members layered references to their artistic, theoretical, political and musical influences and their revolutionary, political objectives in a synthesis of sound-bites, photographs, manifesto-blogs, videos and interviews, all of which were curated and archived in the *LiveJournal* account pussy_riot. The detail, immediacy and quantity of this documentation (in the form of written narrative as well as edited videos) and the group's concerted effort to produce for itself a distinctive visual representation all gave an impression of legibility. Yet throughout its period of intensive activity and escalating fame, Pussy Riot's status as the originator of musical events and texts was problematized by the multiple ways in which its product was mediated and by the nature of digital media. From the outset the group's adoption of an ethos of anonymity and collectivism served to complicate its relationships with audiences. Until members of the group were arrested, no names of individuals were publically associated with the Pussy

¹ Particularly notable were Alekhina's references to Vladimir Bukovskii and Joseph Brodsky and Tolokonnikova's comparison of the trial with the persecution of writers such as the Oberiuty in the 1930s, as well as her quotations from Solzhenitsyn. The statements by all three defendants were transcribed in Kostiuhenko (2012).

² 'Oi' punk developed out of the British punk music scene in the late 1970s, when groups including the Angelic Upstarts and Sham-69 cultivated a style of performance that celebrated British working-class identity. Riot Grrrl was founded in Washington DC in 1991 and centred around all-female feminist punk groups, including Bikini Kill.

Riot project. The group ensured this by appearing in public only in the guise of brightly-clad '(female) superheroes' [supergeroini] (Zagvozdina 2012), with balaclavas covering their faces. This use of anonymity was defiant and a question of control. In statements that recalled women in punk 'play[ing] with our curiosity and refus[ing] to submit to our gaze' (Hebdige 1983: 84), the group outlined their mission as a refusal to enter into the process of commodification of individuals that made music sell (Gladin 2012) and as an open invitation to other women to become part of the Pussy Riot project (Zagvozdina 2012).³ Pussy Riot's encounters with viewers and listeners and statements about their intentions and goals brought the question of the processes of construction and mediation into the open – small wonder, then, that the suggestion was floated that 'Pussy Riot' was a nod to PR in its more commonly encountered 21st century definition (Gradszkova et al 2013), as if in its initials the group were hinting at a clever marketing move for an as-yet-unreleased product. Pussy Riot's skill in self-promotion placed the music overtly in the context of commodity culture, even while the group's members repeated that their ethos was one profoundly opposed to commercialism. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the project emerged against the backdrop of Russia's oppositional political scene, a complex conglomeration in which claims and counterclaims of corruption were never far from the agenda, and the spectre of *kompromat* [evidence, real or falsified, employed to compromise individuals' reputations to further political ends] loomed large. In a context where the stakes were unusually high and the implications unusually vivid, the Pussy Riot project raised fundamental questions about authorship, the nature of liveness and the authenticity of musical events.

This essay is an attempt to listen to Pussy Riot and to capture what they meant musically by tracing what it was we heard, and of how we came to hear the sounds that emanated from the project as the group's activities became ubiquitous in new and then old media – how they were disseminated to us, and what musical expectations we brought to bear on our listening experiences. This is significant, I believe, in enabling us to understand the different audiences which Pussy Riot constructed: broadly speaking, audiences globally were more willing to accept the group as a manifestation of some kind of punk, while for those observing Pussy Riot from a Russian-centred perspective the group's claim to punk and even to music seemed inherently false. My approach is to analyse the recordings, performances and associated texts of the Pussy Riot project in the primary context in which they were disseminated, namely the *pussy_riot LiveJournal* account and the linked YouTube channel, in order to identify what it was in the music and the online environment in which it was heard that created this duality of response. Section 1 deals with the musical output of the project over October 2011 to August 2012, barely fifteen minutes of audio in all, which is available to listen to and watch via the *pussy_riot LiveJournal* and on YouTube. I argue that this musical output, while constituting a vehicle for Pussy Riot's political feminist agenda, channels meanings associated with punk by employing shock-effects and projection of a notion of participation but ultimately frus-

³ Examining the reaction to Pussy Riot as a musical phenomenon in light of references to the gender or sexuality of the group's members falls outside the scope of this essay. It is probably enough to point out that references to both were widespread, including in dismissive comments from the generation of rock musicians that established itself during Stagnation and perestroika. Boris Grebenshchikov, leader of the group Akvarium, described them as 'little fools [durochki]' who had done something 'nasty and stupid [protivno i glupo]' that did not deserve harsh punishment, or in fact any attention at all (2012).

trates its listener/viewer's desire to experience and fix the live musical event – because, arguably, the only live musical moment was the moment at which the videos were uploaded. Section 2 then looks at the way in which new media framed Pussy Riot's musical utterances, a framing which became the impetus for a complicated set of representations and reactions, including those that were articulated during the trial itself. This section concludes with a close reading of the relationship between sound and video in the dissemination of the so-called 'punk-prayer' [pank-moleben] in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, and the competing narratives about authenticity that came to light in the context of the group members' arrest and prosecution. I suggest that it was precisely in this tension between an ideology of spontaneity, shock and sound and the meticulous and apparently traceable process of visible and verbal construction revealed in digital media that, from the outset, Pussy Riot had the potential to be defined simultaneously as authentic/inauthentic and punks/not punks.

1. Seeking the live event

At the basis of Pussy Riot's campaign was its aural component: music and lyrics, tracks recorded in a studio, then performances given in Situationist inspired 'illegal' spaces and finally video 'trailers' [roliki] with audio soundtracks that were composites of video and audio footage from the live events combined with the pre-recorded music. Tracing these means trawling *LiveJournal* and YouTube in a search that, as I will explain, proves frustrating. The group was first heard and seen as 'Pussy Riot' in a public context on 7 November 2011 in a series of appearances in Moscow's public transport system. Prior to this, on 1 October 2011, as part of a lecture on 'punk feminism', Samutsevich and Tolokonnikova had played a recording of 'Ubei seksista' [Kill the Sexist], describing it as a new song by 'the Russian-language punk collective "Pis'ia Raiot"' (Brazhkina 2011).⁴ From November 2011 and August 2012 Pussy Riot followed 'Ubei seksista' with six further recorded tracks, five of which were presented in performances and videos: 'Osvobodi bruschatku' [Liberate the Cobblestones] (performed 7 November 2011), 'Kropotkin-vodka' (performed 1 December 2011), 'Smert' tiur'me, svobodu protestu' [Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest] (performed 14 December 2011), 'Putin zassal' [Putin Pissed Himself] (performed 20 January 2012), 'Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni!' [Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!] (performed 19 and 21 February 2012). The final track, 'Putin zazhigaet kostry' [Putin Ignites the Fires], was uploaded to YouTube on 17 August 2012, the day of the three women's sentencing.⁵

Lyricaly, these songs conform to a well-established interpretation of what constitutes a punk rock song (see Laing 1985: 63-76). They are denunciatory, containing addresses to the listener in the imperative which call for actions with transformative, sometimes violent, consequences. They direct insults at figures and symbols of authority. Each song, moreover, has

⁴ On 29 May 2009, before Tolokonnikova and her husband Petr Verzilov split (or were expelled) from Voina, they and Samutsevich were among participants in Voina's 'Khui v Ochko' 'punk concert' at the Taganskii District Court (plucer 29.05.09), an event that appears to have established the procedures and aesthetics that Pussy Riot went on to develop.

⁵ Dates of performances and uploads are as given in the pussy_riot *LiveJournal* account. The dates chosen were significant: see Steinholt (2013a: 122).

something of the quality of the political pamphlet, echoing the discourse of political opposition to Putin and referring to specific locations, events, people and campaigns. The songs' words act as reportage, foregrounding the idea that they are reactions to events as they unfold and with the potential to influence them further. Their references were derived from the context of the upcoming presidential elections mixed with global news stories, and exhorted protesters in Russia to recreate the spirit of the Arab Spring protests (to 'make Tahrir on Red Square' [sdelay Tahrir na Krasnoi ploshchadi] ('Liberate the Cobblestones': see pussy_riot 07.11.2011). Revolutionary action such as that of the Arab Spring is imagined as a purge of Russia's realpolitik and the combination of violence and cowardice around which its prevailing ideologies are revealed to centre. The songs' verbal texts also advance a feminist and gay rights agenda which they use to condemn the state, equating representatives of patriarchal power (state, police, the fashion industry and church) with heterosexual male bodies. The central hate figures, dubbed 'sexists fucking Putinists' [seksisty ebanye putinisty] in 'Kropotkin-vodka', are vividly imagined as sexually profligate, foul-smelling and afraid of women standing up to them. Pussy Riot's oeuvre is replete with what Laing calls the 'shock of the real', the importation of other, non-musical discourses, which preconditions the listener's reaction to the punk song (Laing 1985: 78).

The directness and apparent urgency of Pussy Riot's address increased during the series of protests in response to Putin's presidential campaign, which received significant media coverage worldwide. The song 'Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest' incorporated this discourse by addressing protesters who had been arrested in the 5 December demonstration. The group's account of the meaning of the text of 'Putin Pissed Himself' and its public performance reveals a view of the inseparability of the message and its mode of delivery: 'we are suggesting a scenario for revolt in Russia [stsenarii bunta v Rossii]: for this it is suggested that Russian citizens occupy key locations in the country and bring about political changes. Be braver than Putin, who has pissed himself in fear [zassavshii Putin], and his special services [spetssluzhby]' (pussy_riot 20.01.2012). The group implied that the lyrics would work as direct instructions to the listener, aimed at bringing together a broad spectrum of anti-authoritarian feeling and sparking revolution on the streets of Moscow. The songs should, in other words, simultaneously make a particular plan of action manifest to their listeners and arouse in them a desire to participate.

The call to take part and to replicate Pussy Riot that the group made in reference to anonymity was also implicit in the musical qualities of what they produced. Each Pussy Riot song is simple in terms of rhythm, harmony, melody, arrangement and vocal sound, as well as noticeably short (all are under two minutes in length). The arrangements are based on fast-paced non-syncopated drum tracks and fast-played electric guitar chords in straightforward harmonic relations to one another, underpinned by a driving distorted electric bass line. The characteristic vocal arrangement is the sequential use of solo voices taking turns to sing the lines of the verses; in such cases, unison voices are reserved for the chanted, sloganistic choruses. The musical simplicity and brevity of each track served a pragmatic purpose, in that it meant that flash performances could be brief and surprising with their musical element easily reproduced or mimed to. The rough-and-ready, technically basic approach was also fully in

keeping with the aesthetic of DIY,⁶ a reference to which the group drew our attention: '[punk] is the greatest possible splash of creative energy you can create without particular technique. We haven't all learned music, and the quality of performance has never been top priority for us' (Gladin 2012). Punk's dissolution of the implied barrier between performer and audience (Laing 1985: 78) was manifest in songs to which journalists could apply knowing descriptors such as 'shrieking' and 'shrill' (e.g. Ioffe 2012; Tayler 2012).

The songs of Pussy Riot were heard, then, in two ways. First, the group gave flash concerts, at which its members 'occupied' public and central locations in Moscow and performed the short, basic songs that had been created with this purpose in mind. Where possible, the group chose elevated positions, such as a tower scaffold in the Otradnoe Metro Station,⁷ the tops of trolleybuses, on a glass case containing a promotional Mercedes Benz,⁸ the roof of a garage next to the detention centre in Chistye Prudy (while arrestees from the 5 December protests were being held there)⁹ and Lobnoe Mesto in front of St Basil's Cathedral. In one of the group's earlier interviews members were asked about the transgressive nature of the performances, and responded as follows:

During the performance you don't have time to get scared. You need to plug in the equipment, remember the words and sing. The funniest thing is that you only see the audience's reaction afterwards, on the recording. In reality you're so carried away by the performance that you don't look around. There's no fear, no particular contact (Del'finov 2011).

As Gololobov and Steinholt have suggested (2012: 250), the level of preparation that is described here ran counter to punk rock's privileging of the spontaneous. The statement about the lack of 'contact' is also significant as a challenge to this ideology in the presentation of the performers' relationship to their audience, given that the idealised imaginary of direct, unmediated communion, central to notions of music's authenticity, was fundamental to rock's ideological evolution in the scenes of the Stagnation era (McMichael 2005: 680-683). Most disturbing of all to the punk paradigm of authenticity versus non-authenticity was the implication that amid all this it might not even be possible to get the words out, or to produce the vocal tone associated with a song, or to get the guitars to produce a note.

Chronologically second, but far outstripping them in terms of impact, were the video clips constructed from footage created at these live events. They acted as apparently transparent traces of what Pussy Riot had actually done in front of their live audiences: after all, the accompanying *LiveJournal* posts seemed to document exactly the same actions and reactions. In fact these montages of footage recorded during Pussy Riot's performances, soundtracked by recorded versions of the songs, were highly opaque. It is the tension between the-

⁶ For a discussion of Pussy Riot as DIY media, please see Vlad Strukov's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

⁷ The series of performances in the Metro also took in Biblioteka imeni Lenina and Aeroport. See image 2.

⁸ The Mercedes Benz stunt was part of what they described as a 'tour', which took in expensive designer clothing boutiques in Stoleshnikov Pereulok. For a discussion of Pussy Riot as a 'fashion attack', please see Claire Shaw's essay in this cluster on Pussy Riot.

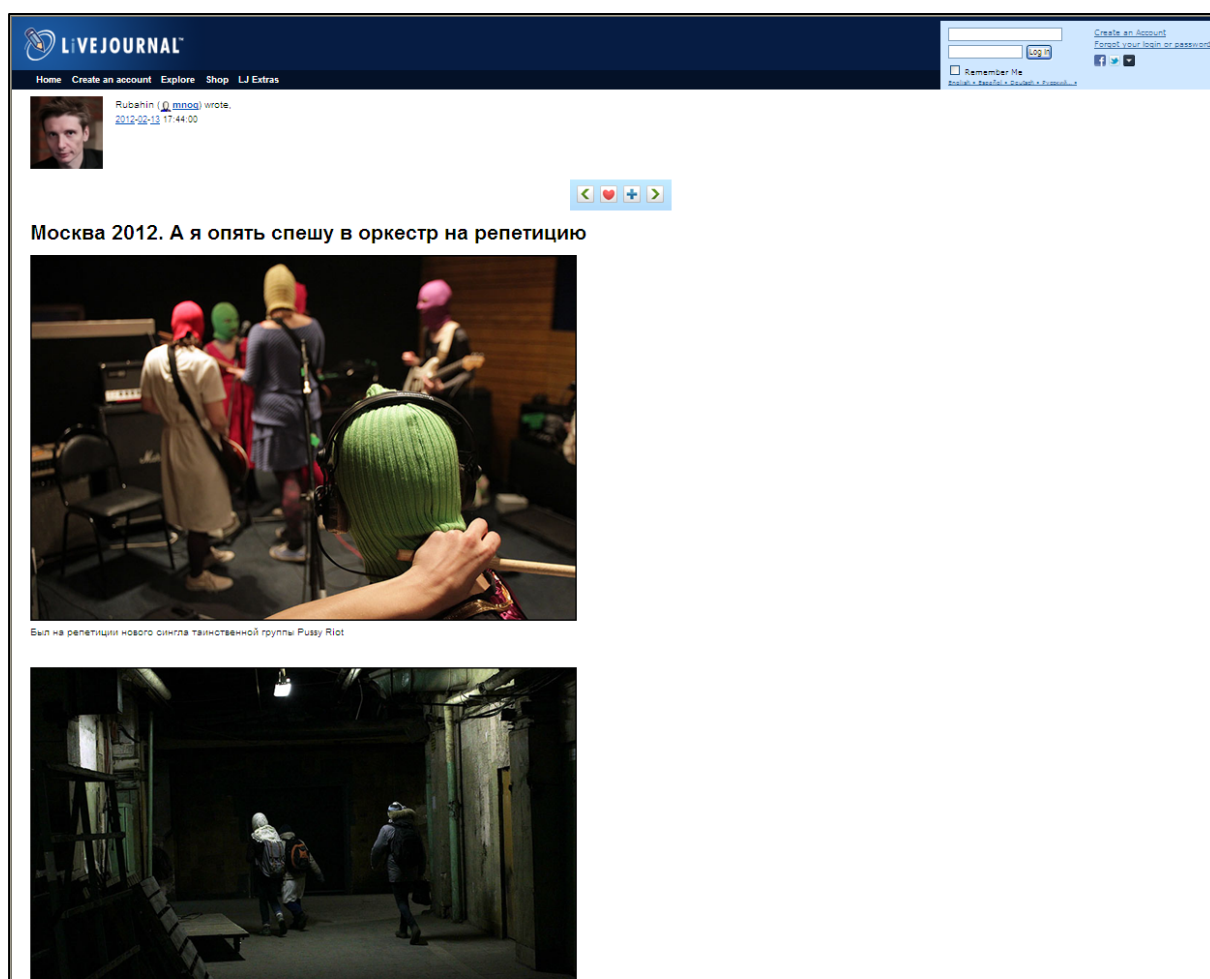
⁹ Beginning with a demonstration on Chistoprudnyi Bul'var, on 5-6 December 2011 an estimated 5,000-7,000 amassed to protest the results of the Duma elections as having been falsified. Official reports were that 300 people were arrested ('Oni sushchestvuiut' 2011).

se two types of encounter between Pussy Riot and viewers/listeners, and their relationships to the parallel ideologies of documentary truth and punk rock authenticity, which provide the source of so much of the meaning galvanised by Pussy Riot when their musical products appeared online.

2. Framing Pussy Riot from new media to courtroom

The inevitably limited numbers of witnesses to Pussy Riot's 'occupation' of public spaces, a combination of those who observed the performance by chance and those invited by the group to film and photograph it, were supplemented by the seemingly limitless internet audiences that could view the uploaded videos that appeared on YouTube within a few hours of each event.

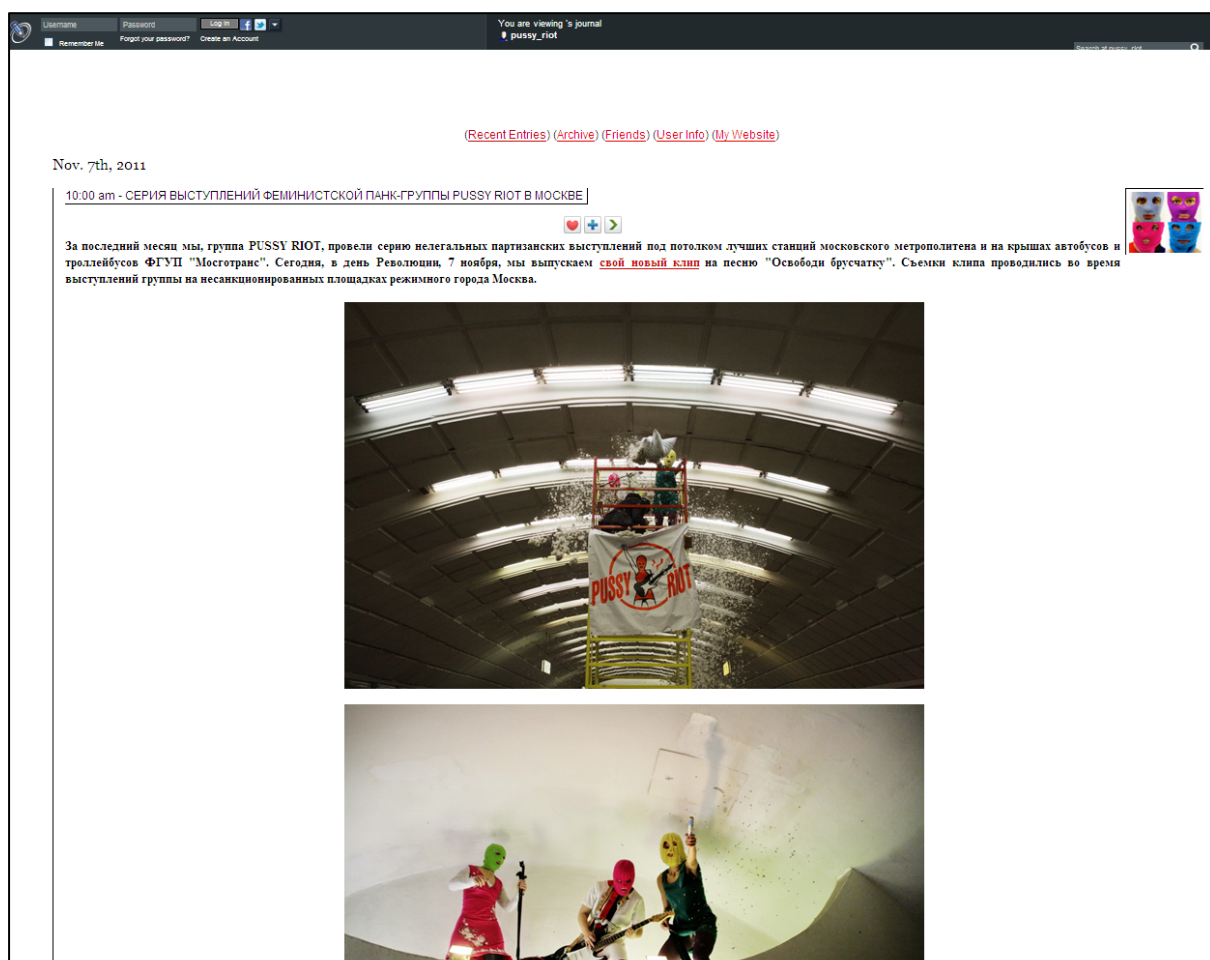
Image 1: Pussy Riot in the 'underground studio' [podpol'naia studiia]: the title and images opening rubahin's [Konstantin Rubakhin's] *LiveJournal* photo-essay (rubahin 31.02.2012)



Source: <http://mnog.livejournal.com/303305.html#cutid1> (accessed 22 April 2013).

As the acknowledged principal mode of dissemination for Pussy Riot (Del'finov 2011) these were therefore the primary product, predicated on the notion of a 'live' event that had both sound and visual dimensions but augmenting these beyond their original.¹⁰ Each video is visually highly charged: the women are shown breaking out into the unlikely Moscow locations, splashes of unexpected colour appearing as if from nowhere. Carrying guitars, mini-amps and microphones – visual signifiers of live performance – they dance, sing, strum the guitars and strike poses. But the audio we hear as we watch is the pre-recorded track. It is sometimes mixed with elements of apparently spontaneous ambient sound produced as the women give the performance: a Metro train can be heard at the close of 'Liberate the Cobblestones'; 'Kropotkin-Vodka' includes a police siren; 'Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest' is accompanied by a reaction of cheering and applause apparently from the nearby cells; 'Putin Pissed Himself' opens with the chimes from the Kremlin tower.

Image 2: Pussy Riot's flash concerts in the Metro, as presented in the pussy_riot *LiveJournal* account (pussy_riot 07.11.2011).



Source: <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/5497.html> (accessed 22 April 2013).

¹⁰ This all seems mimetic of the prevailing televisual techniques favoured by the Russian mainstream media under Putin, in which live events are replaced by pre-recorded representations of live events, especially in the broadcasting of current affairs. I am grateful to Vlad Strukov for this observation.

But despite these authenticating diegetic sounds, the liveness, the moment of origin of the musical product, is necessarily obscured. What we see is definitely not what we are hearing. Pussy Riot members stated that it was this audio-visual product that was most important to the project, and that it was acceptable for the images to be ‘set up’ [postanovochnye] (Del’finov 2011).¹¹

The video clip that accompanies ‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!’ was created in part from Pussy Riot’s (to date) final flash performance, and it crystallised these issues. The footage that was edited to create this clip was filmed during two separate events, one on 19 February 2012 in the Bogoiavlenskii Cathedral, followed by the now-notorious appearance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012. It is evident that on both occasions the group had electric guitars and microphones with them, but unclear as to how these were used beyond their visible presence. The brief excerpts from the first performance show guitars being strummed by two of the figures dancing in front of the altar (an electric cable is visible leading from one of them). In the footage taken during the second occasion, we see four figures high-kicking and air-punching, as well as crossing themselves and bowing to the ground – the video opens with this gesture, which is paired with the quasi-choral segment of the soundtrack – before being dragged away from the altar in turn. What we do not see in the shots from the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is anyone even posing with a guitar. The pre-recorded track included an approximation of Orthodox choral singing in a section that borrowed from Rakhmaninov’s setting of the prayer to the Mother of God in the Vespers.¹² Pussy Riot’s voices sing this, to keyboard accompaniment, in harmony and tones appropriate to such an appeal (Steinholt 2013a: 123), thereby raising the possibility of *steb* – that is, the straight-faced adoption of authoritative discourse in order to undermine it. The melodically delivered ‘prayer’, which opens the song, is invaded by the electric bass and then guitars, a gradual encroachment of the punk sound familiar from the group’s previous tracks, presaging a transition from supplication to critique and to the anger-laden tonalities of the sequential solo voices which enter. The audio track, therefore, can be heard as laying down the scenario for what took place when the members of Pussy Riot set out to perform the song in a church; the juxtaposition of meek appeal and threatened violence, of prayer and punk, was prefigured in the musical text itself.

The question of whether Pussy Riot’s actions in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour had or had not constituted a performance of their song became central to debate during the run-up to the trial of Alekhina, Samutsevich and Tolokonnikova. The forty-second performance was taken apart, analysed and retold in a variety of ways.¹³ Amnesty International made the designation of the women as prisoners of conscience rest on the conclusion that they had not performed the song. The head of Amnesty’s Moscow office, Sergei Nikitin, interviewed for a special insert on Pussy Riot broadcast as part of Channel One’s *Special Correspondent* on 24 April 2012, repeated that ‘the action [...] was a pantomime, it was all laid down [nalozhen-

¹¹ In this November 2011 interview the creation of videos that were *postanovochnye* was referred to as something Pussy Riot had not excluded, rather than being a practice the group conceded to using already. Nevertheless, this description seems apt to apply to each of the existing video clips.

¹² Sergei Rakhmaninov, *Vsenoshchnoe bdenie / All-Night Vigil*, op. 37 (1915).

¹³ For discussion of interpretations of the Pussy Riot performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as a criminal act and an instance of blasphemy, please see Olga G. Voronina’s essay in this cluster.

noe] without sound [...] there was no sound recording [...] or amplification equipment' (interviewed in Mamontov 2012). The film countered this by slowing down and enlarging frames of what it titled 'the original video' [original'naia zapis'], claiming that they showed amplification equipment. In the trial itself the logic of this clash of interpretations played out with a focus, again, on sound, amplification and equipment. Prosecution witnesses were called as victims of the 'moral damage' [moral'nyi usherb] the three were accused of having inflicted and asked to testify about what they had experienced and how it had offended their religious sensibilities. One, the cathedral's cleaner, Zhukova, was especially adamant on the question of what she had heard, prompting the following exchange with two of the defendants' lawyers, Nikolai Polozov and Violetta Volkova:

Polozov: Tell us please: you said that you heard music playing in the cathedral?

Zhukova: [The music] was plugged in [ona podkliuchalas']. The microphone was plugged in, the music was switched on [vkliuchalas'], and it was then that the girls were dancing.

Polozov: Can you clarify what kind of music it was? Classical music? Jazz? Dance music?

Zhukova: Not classical and not Orthodox.

Polozov: What instruments did it have? Trumpets?

Zhukova: Before that I saw a person come in with a long case that had an instrument in it. I didn't ask him because we don't ask people questions when they come in. And after that I didn't see the instruments. Because I was paying attention to the masks and to the situation, and this seemed to me to be indecent [nepristoinoe].

Volkova: And what did this instrument sound like?

Zhukova: I don't know, I'm not going to make a comparison. But it wasn't Orthodox.

Volkova: And what sounds are Orthodox?

Zhukova: Well, the sounds of prayer. And then there's also classical music – you know perfectly well what I mean. Why are you asking me these questions?

(Kichanova 2012)

Pussy Riot's supporters used the tactic of claiming the invalidity of the performance, and their accusers responded that they had indeed experienced its shock effects. This was a tactic that brought about an unusual reversal, with the innocence of Alekhina, Samutsevich and Tolokonnikova located in their musical inauthenticity. Some put forward the reading that this performance had constituted a genuine prayer (Epshtein 2012), an explanation that appeared to reclaim the sincerity of the project while shifting it quite radically from its revolutionary origins. The conviction and sentencing upheld the interpretation of the morally offended, that these had been truly shocking scenes and sounds – no one ever really doubted this outcome. The trial and its coverage cast lasting doubt on the extent to which Pussy Riot could be regarded as 'real' punks if they were creating composites of sound and visuals, brandishing guitars but not plugging them in and lip-synching but not actually singing. Yet a certain circularity of argument emerges in the suspicion that Pussy Riot might in fact be cynical manipulators of both message and medium, lending them the possibility of being 'real' punks after all. Ultimately, whether or not dancing and gesturing in front of the altar and chanting

words could constitute delivery of a song remained open to question, but the overriding impression was that none of this had been real, that we had somehow been tricked.

3. Conclusions

The modes of listening that Pussy Riot inspired and that their performances and framing drew upon need to be understood in the context of the workings of ideology in music, never more complicated than in the Russian context. Soviet-era rock music, and punk in its wake, responded to what fans and musicians knew of the ideology of Anglophone rock and punk, but also transformed it for the local contexts in which they operated. The reading of punk Pussy Riot chose to adopt needs to be contextualised in terms of its relation to the kinds of meaning that evolved in Russian music. One factor in the differences between Pussy Riot's reception within Russia and outside Russia must be the highly self-conscious way in which these musical ideologies developed in the late Soviet context. Russian adaptations of the punk form rendered punk unrecognisable to those versed in 'classic' Anglophone punk poses and sounds (Steinholt 2012: 404; Steinholt 2013b: 270), and, more widely, the ideology of Russian rock superficially mirrored that of the West, but contained meanings that had developed in relation to an entirely different set of assumptions about the place of culture in relation to economic, social and political relations. Pussy Riot's flash concerts and videos, non-conformist and shocking, built around less than praiseworthy musical technique and under constant threat of disruption, certainly channelled some of the central mythology of rock and punk in the Soviet Union. But this was only an echo, and only one facet of the array of meanings that became attached to the project as it gained attention. More overt was the group's self-conscious adoption of the tropes of punk that made perfect sense to a global audience, boiling it down to words, actions and tonalities that signified a kind of essence of punk. As avid followers of global protest movements, careful readers of the Western media's construction of the Putin regime and, I would venture to suggest, competent scholars of punk and post-punk music, Pussy Riot's members made themselves legible precisely as embodiments of punk that made sense for Putin's Russia, as viewed from afar. Furthermore, they constructed a product that was ideally pitched for digital media and practices of online sharing, representing the musical product with short, visually arresting bursts of brightly coloured action. Pussy Riot could therefore negotiate cultural and linguistic borders with ease.

The trial brought about something that the group had resisted from the outset, namely the association of the actions, images and sounds of the project with identifiable individuals rather than anonymous superheroes. As images from the courtroom reached internet feeds and television screens, the processes and interests behind Pussy Riot and the agency behind its musical utterances became at once more evident and, tantalisingly, more problematic. Viewers and listeners sought to see Alekhina, Samutsevich and Tolokonnikova in the videos, to work out what their specific musical contributions had been, to identify the voices with the onscreen object. Speculation about the motivation behind and ultimate responsibility for the project spiralled and its musical authenticity unravelled. The definition 'Russian punk' became meaningless – or rather, it had from the outset been symbolic in different ways to dif-

ferent audiences. Pussy Riot laid bare the gap between sound, which we imagine as real, pure and eternal, and the visual, which is inherently constructed, teaching us some of the ways in which internet dissemination intervenes in the authenticity/inauthenticity paradigm. The project generated and provoked a mess of competing, shifting and conditional narratives about creativity, the intentions behind music and the possible emotional responses to it, all of which revealed something about just how complicated listening can be.

References

- ‘Boris Grebenshchikov: Delo Pussy Riot napravleno na sverzhenie Patriarkha’ (2012, October 2). *Novyi Region*. www.nr2.ru/society.406234.html (accessed 13 April 2013).
- Brazhkina, Anna (2012). ‘Pussi Raiot, pank-gruppa’, *artprotest.org*. http://artprotest.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4412&chtoto=2012-05-05-10-56-18&catid=1&catpresledru=&ordering2=1&Itemid=4 (accessed 13 April 2013).
- Del’finov, Aleksandr (2011, 15 November). ‘Feministskaia gruppa Pussy Riot: “My nikogo ne budem ubivat”’, *Deutsche Welle*. <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15533424,00.html?maca=rus-rss-ru-all-1126-rdf> (accessed 3 April 2013).
- Epshtein, Alek D. (2012). ‘Mobilizirovannaia Bogoroditsa: Pank-moleben gruppy “Pussy Riot” v Khrame Khrista Spasitelia’, *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 3. <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2012/3/e10-pr.html> (accessed 9 April 2013).
- Gapova, Elena (2012). ‘Delo “Pussy Riot”: Feministskii protest v kontekste klassovoi bor’by’, *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 5. <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2012/5/g2.html> (accessed 9 April 2013).
- Gladin, Evgenii (2012, 24 January). ““My ne khotim torgovat’ zhenskimi litsami””, *Moskovskie novosti*. http://mn.ru/moscow_people/20120124/310329193.html (accessed 5 April 2013).
- Gololobov, Ivan (2013). ‘There are no Atheists in Trenches under Fire: Orthodox Christianity in Russian Punk’, *Punk and Post-Punk*, 1(3): 305-321.
- Gololobov, Ivan and Yngvar B. Steinholt (2013). ‘The Elephant in the Room? “Post-Socialist Punk” and the Pussy Riot Phenomenon’, *Punk and Post-Punk*, 1(3): 249-251.
- Gradskova, Yulia, Irina Sandomirskaja and Nadezda Petrusenko (2013, 20 February). ‘Pussy Riot: Reflections on Receptions. Some Questions Concerning Public Reactions in Russia to the Pussy Riot’s Intervention and Trial’, *Baltic Worlds*. <http://balticworlds.com/reflections-on-receptions> (accessed 9 April 2013).
- Grossberg, Lawrence (1993). ‘Culture: Cinema, Post-Modernity and Authenticity’ in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, edited by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Routledge, 185-209.
- Hebdige, Dick (1983). ‘Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display’, *SubStance*, 11(4)-12 (1): 37-38: A Special Issue from the Center for Twentieth Century Studies: 68-88.

- Idov, Michael (2012, 7 August). 'Putin v. the Punk Rockers', *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/opinion/on-trial-putin-v-pussy-riot.html?_r=0 (accessed 13 April 2013).
- Ioffe, Julia (2012, 6 August). 'Pussy Riot v. Putin: A Front Row Seat at a Russian Dark Comedy', *New Republic*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/105846/how-punk-rock-show-trial-became-russias-greatest-gonzo-artwork> (accessed 13 April 2013).
- Kichanova, Vera (2012, 13 August). "'Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni!' Den' chetvertyi", *Slon*. http://slon.ru/russia/bogoroditsa_putina_progoni_den_chetvertyi-818711.xhtml (accessed 3 April 2013).
- Kostiuchenko, Elena (2012, 9 August). "'Tak nazyvaemyi protsess": Poslednee slovo Nadezhdy Tolokonnikovoi, Marii Alekhinnoi i Ekateriny Samutsevich', *Novaia gazeta*. <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/53903.html> (accessed 22 April 2013).
- Laing, Dave (1985). *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Langston, Henry (2012, March). 'Meeting Pussy Riot', *VICE*. <http://m.vice.com/read/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot> (accessed 14 April 2013).
- Mamontov, Arkadii; dir. (2012, 24 April). *Provokatory*. 26 mins. Novaia Kompaniia for VGTRK. Channel One.
- McMichael, Polly (2005). "'After All, You're a Rock and Roll Star (At Least, That's What They Say)": Roksi and the Creation of the Soviet Rock Musician', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 83(4): 664-684.
- 'Oni sushchestvuiut' (2011, 6 December). *Lenta.ru*. <http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/12/06/protest/> (accessed 22 April 2013).
- plucer [Aleksi Plutser-Sarno]. (2009, 29 May). 'Novaia aktsiia Voiny "Khui v Ochko". Pank-kontsert v zale Taganskogo suda. Pesnia "Vse menty – ubliudki!"', *LiveJournal*. <http://plucer.livejournal.com/157798.html> (accessed 14 April 2013).
- pussy_riot. Various posts, *LiveJournal*. <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com> (accessed 3 April 2013).
- Remnick, David (2012, 11 August). 'The Pussy Riot Scandal', *New Yorker*. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/08/the-pussy-riot-scandal.html> (accessed 14 April 2013).
- rubahin [Konstantin Rubakhin]. (2012, 13 February). 'A ia opiat' speshu v orkestr na repetitsiui', *LiveJournal*. <http://mnog.livejournal.com/303305.html#cutid1> (accessed 14 April 2013).
- Steinholt, Yngvar B. (2012). 'Siberian Punk Shall Emerge Here: Egor Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona', *Popular Music*, 31(3): 401-415.
- Steinholt, Yngvar B. (2013a). 'Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer', *Popular Music and Society*, 36 (1): 120-124.
- Steinholt, Yngvar B. (2013b). 'Punk is Punk But By No Means Punk: Definition, Genre Evasion and the Quest for an Authentic Voice in Contemporary Russia', *Punk and Post-Punk*, 1(3): 267-284.

- Taylor, Jeffrey (2012, 8 November). 'What Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer" Really Said', *The Atlantic*. <http://m.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562> (accessed 13 April 2013).
- Yurchak, Alexei (2006). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zagvozdina, Dar'ia (2012, 27 February). "'My vyshli zahvatyvat' ulitsy'", *Gazeta.Ru*. <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2012/02/27/4013957.shtml> (accessed 14 April 2013).

POLLY MCMICHAEL is a lecturer in Russian in the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Nottingham, where she teaches Russian language, literature and popular culture. Her PhD (University of Cambridge, 2007) was on the Leningrad rock scene of the 1970s and 1980s and in particular songs, recordings and performances by the rock groups Akvarium and Zoo-park. Her wider research interests encompass ideologies of popular music in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, and her current major project is a study of the origins and manifestations of rock stardom in the period 1968 to 1991.