"Gimme Gimme This, Gimme Gimme That": Confused Sexualities and Genres in Cooper and Mayerson's *Horror Hospital Unplugged*

By James Newlin

The title of this paper is taken from the lyrics to "Lexicon Devil," a song by the Los Angeles-based punk band The Germs. One of the earliest of the West Coast punk rock bands, the Germs performed and recorded sporadically from 1977 until the suicide of their lead singer, Darby Crash (real name Jan Paul Beam), in December of 1980. Though the band's entire recorded outfit amounts to one album and a handful of singles, their legacy has been much more fruitful. Since Darby Crash's death, the band's discography has been repackaged and released on CD, a star-packed tribute album called *A Small Circle of Friends* was released by Grass Records, an oral history (*Lexicon Devil*) was published by Crash's friends Don Bolles and Brendan Mullen, and a Darby Crash biopic was completed last year. Similarly, the Germs' influence is noticeable in better-known bands like Nirvana, who recruited the Germs' guitarist Pat Smear for their *In Utero* album and subsequent tour. Darby Crash also has prominent fans in underground fiction, inspiring Kief Hillsbery's *What We Do Is Secret* (titled after a Germs song) and transgressive laureate Dennis Cooper, whose short story "Introducing Horror Hospital" alludes to Crash's persona and music, and which in turn provided the inspiration for the graphic novel *Horror Hospital Unplugged*. Interest in the band and the upcoming film (also titled *What We Do Is Secret*, though not related to the Hillsbery novel) has led to a brief reunion tour featuring the surviving members and actor Shane West, who portrays Darby Crash in the film.

Though Darby Crash was a talented lyricist and songwriter, his cult of appreciation is no doubt a result of the same kind of rock and roll martyrdom that defines the appeal of live-fast-die-young antiheroes like Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix or Johnny Thunders. The "gimme gimme this" chorus to "Lexicon Devil" paraphrases Crash's catchphrase regarding his impulsive consumption of drugs and alcohol. But the posthumous mythologizing of Darby Crash may have less to do with his lyrics – which are indebted to and sometimes plagiarize Nietzsche, detective novels, and Scientology – than with the question of his sexual identity. Though there were a number of out homosexuals in the Southern California punk rock scene in the early eighties (in fact, club owner and scene anthologist Brendan Mullen estimates that the scene was thirty to thirty-five percent gay), there was a widely perceived sense of homophobia as well, which Darby Crash's survivors blame for his intentional overdose on December 7, 1980 (qtd. in Spitz and Mullen 162). As friend Tony Montesion puts it, "I don't think he could live with being a punk rocker and being gay" (qtd. in Bolles et al. 259).

Dennis Cooper, who is perhaps best known for his visceral George Miles novel cycle, was involved with underground art and poetry circles in the Los Angeles area during the heyday of the Germs, and worked and collaborated with other punk rockers. Starting in 1976, Cooper was the coordinator of the Beyond Baroque literary center and editor of its *Little Caesar* journal, a literary publication that influenced the local zine culture (Lafreri 58). At Beyond...
Baroque, Cooper led a poetry workshop that was attended by punk luminaries like Exene Cervenka and John Doe, and the venue also hosted bands and performance artists (Lafreniere 62). Still, the punk scene’s perceived attitude toward queer lifestyles was very different by the time Cooper published excerpts of "Introducing Horror Hospital" in JDs, a queer oriented punk zine begun in 1985.

"Introducing Horror Hospital," a short story about an eighteen-year old punk rock singer named Trevor Machine, whose affected nihilism and anti-romantic stage act is discredited by his affair with a young fan named Tim, explicitly invokes Darby Crash. The titular band opens for Crash in the story's first scene. But even without this marker, Cooper's initial audience reading the story in either JDs or the chapbook He Cried would probably have been savvy enough to notice similarities between Darby Crash's biography and Trevor Machine's. Both are scrawny, blue-haired punk singers who go by their "nasty and clever" pseudonyms even off-stage, and both are extremely erratic performers who deliberately sabotage their own performances (Cooper 44). And Trevor, like Crash, is a closet homosexual: both mask their sexual identity not with an affected hetero lifestyle, but with an unconvincing claim of abstinence and nihilism. Darby Crash's friend Michelle Bell, aka Gerber, recalls that Crash claimed to be abstinent and "above" sex, and only admitted his homosexuality to her when he was uninhibited by LSD (qtd. in Spitz and Mullen 164). Similarly, Trevor Machine's Horror Hospital bandmates reproach him for being "completely obsessed with sex" and "betraying [his] own beliefs" by having a boyfriend; he feebly corrects them by insisting, "Tim's just, like, my personal manager in a way. It's hard to explain..." (Cooper 52-3).

The story's ironic climax – a moment of sentimentality that is far less abstract than one normally finds in Cooper's fiction – occurs in the wrenching final scene, where just after hearing of Tim's death in a car crash, Trevor takes the stage and berates the audience and himself: "I just heard some bad news and I hate all you fucking shits! You're just fucking nothing!" and so forth (Cooper 57-8).[1] The bored, desensitized audience cannot tell the difference between this temper tantrum and Trevor's earlier, staged Darby Crash-like outbursts, when Trevor dubbed them "dumb assholes" who "don't give a fuck about anything" (Cooper 50). As Trevor collapses and his words "deteriorated in sobs," his band-mates shrug and play what "could have been a new song or the first one again," and a record executive in the audience dismisses the performance-cum-meltdown as amusing but unimpressive: "How to get it on vinyl? See, that's the question. You'd lose all their humor, I think. And unfortunately the music's bullshit." The story ends with Trevor bellowing "I want to die" over and over again, implying that, like his doppelganger Darby Crash, he is doomed to be just another rock and roll casualty (Cooper 58).

"Introducing Horror Hospital" is a minor work by Cooper, focused on outing superficiality (of the punk scene, of record industry lowlifes, of bad teenage poets) rather than on examining spiritual alienation, violence, and sexual desire, as he does in the superb George Miles Cycle. "Introducing" is also a relatively sloppy work, full of anachronisms (Trevor buys a single by the Chicago band Big Black a few days after opening for Darby Crash, despite the fact that Big Black's first single was released two years after Crash's suicide). Still, the story lays the groundwork for the later devices and obsessions of Cooper's work; namely, capturing the essence of young, sexually confused boys who speak with a kind of poetic inarticulateness. Mark Storey describes Cooper's prose as "awkward, full of et ceteras and ums and ers […] a smudged and grubby style that" suggests a "new world [that] is somehow incommunicable, existing outside of the capacity of language" (Storey 68). Though a number of critics are unimpressed by Cooper's prose, declaring it vacant; others (like the late Kathy Acker) have detected a sense of the sublime. Cooper himself has indicated that he tries to use the "messed
up" fluidity of American English to capture a sense of "trying to reach a transcendent state" (qtd. in Boddy 108, 110). This inclination towards spiritual transcendence is not explored in the original short story "Introducing Horror Hospital," but it is evident in Cooper's revision of the story, *Horror Hospital Unplugged*, a graphic novel written in collaboration with visual artist Keith Mayerson.

It is not surprising that Mayerson and Cooper would be drawn to each other's work. Keith Mayerson's paintings are generally read as a synthesis of high and low art, and may present anyone from Keanu Reeves to John Lennon to Harry Potter to Spiderman in a style that's indebted to the thick-layered Bad Painting of the 1970s and the cartoonish portraiture of Raymond Pettibon (all artists, it should be noted, with roots in punk rock scenes) (Ammirati 175, Smith). Like Cooper, Mayerson's work reconfigures extra-textual influences in order to present a unique, personal understanding of homosexual desire, spiritual alienation and sense of mortality, all presented with a pitch-black sense of humor. Mayerson's breakthrough was a painting series called "Pinocchio the Big Fag" that appeared at the Drawing Center in New York in 1993 (Cotter). The "Pinocchio" images were presented as a kind of comic strip, with exclamatory captions like "Beware Patriarchy! Pinocchio the Big Fag is here!" Though *Horror Hospital Unplugged* is Mayerson's only work in the graphic novel medium, his shows are primarily narrative based, such as the recent *Hamlet 1999* exhibit (Smith). So it is no surprise that *Horror Hospital Unplugged* often reads and handles less like a coherent comic book narrative than a gallery catalog: it lacks page numbers, it is slightly oversized at eight and a half by eleven inches (compared to comic books' usual 7 1/8" X 10"), and it is made up of a dizzying, almost schizophrenically diverse collection of drawing styles. *Horror Hospital Unplugged* updates and expands on Cooper's initial narrative resetting the action from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Again, some possible anachronisms make it difficult to pinpoint the exact date, but this is still a narrative about and based in an underground rock scene. It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what exactly a punk rock scene is. Dick Hebdige's seminal reading of subcultures presented punk scenes as a group manifestation of resistance against parental culture; studies since have focused on the individual scenes' crises of defining these rituals of resistance. Jude Davies calls this punk's "problematization of consensus," and quotes Ted Castle: "anything anybody writes about [punk] is wrong" (8, 3). The subculture inevitably splinters into other subcultures, and nowhere more so than in Los Angeles, where the punk movement was begun in opposition not to the kind of political strife that incensed British acts like the Clash and Sex Pistols, but instead as a refusal of suburban angst and boredom. Daniel Traber, one of the few academics whose study of punk's subculture is less than fawning, puts it this way: LA punk's common discourse was about "privatized issues" like "feelings of personal alienation or repelling conservative attempts to control individual consciousness" (37). Or, as Darby Crash put it twenty-three years earlier, "What We Do Is Secret."

The problem, according to Traber, is that the L.A. punks positioned rebellion as a way of declaring themselves a "self-imposed minority," emphasizing individualism so much that they left no possibility for collective action (30). In the end, punks identify themselves not by politics, aesthetics, or common philosophy, but by the most conservative of identities: one based on geographical location. So, despite all the rhetoric about the acceptance found in the community of "the scene," the L.A. scene was more often than not characterized by competition and demarcation. The spastic glamrock-influenced Germs from Hollywood were not like the skatepunk hardcore Black Flag from Huntington Beach who were not like the roots-rock-revivalist Blasters from Downey. These divisions are not just harmless bickering about genre distinctions: fights between the Hollywood punks and the Huntington Beach punks were...
often brutal and could turn into full-scale riots. And it is commonplace to blame the allegedly widespread homophobia that inspired Darby Crash’s suicide on the provocative, intentionally politically incorrect lyrics by Fear and the Mentors, who are sometimes pejoratively referred to as "proto-metal" rather than hardcore or punk rock in chronicles of the era.

An addition to the “problem of consensus,” was and is the problem of “selling out.” It’s important that Horror Hospital Unplugged takes place after the infamous ad for the Subaru Impreza (which excitedly proclaimed "this car is like punk rock!") or the punk rock episode of Quincey M.E. (which, incidentally, also alludes to the Germs) and other moments of mainstream culture misappropriating punk. But the mainstreaming of punk rock was not necessarily as simplistic or laughable as either of those lame characterizations: underground bands like Nirvana and Sonic Youth produced masterpieces for the major label Geffen Records, and whereas the independent label Slash Records nearly went bankrupt raising less then two hundred dollars for the Germs' "Lexicon Devil" single in 1978, the independent label Epitaph Records grossed sixty-four million dollars in 1994 alone (Crash qtd. in Bolles et al. 122, Mullen qtd. in Spitz and Mullen 282).

Horror Hospital Unplugged takes place after punk found prosperity; its title is no doubt a reference to the MTV series Unplugged that Nirvana appeared on shortly before Kurt Cobain’s suicide, and the band attends a lavish and hallucinatory party at David Geffen’s mansion (fig. 1). The artists imply that attitudes towards queer identity have progressed as well; though Trevor Machine begins the story saying, in trademark ineloquent Cooperese, "And I'm not sure I'm queer anyway, cause, uh, I'm an individual, you know, and not a, uh, category" and later tells two reporters for a queer fanzine that "love and sex are a lie" (fig. 2) and “fuck you, fags, you don't own me,” he also reads The Advocate when in bed with Tim (fig. 3), and carries a copy of the Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction to the recording studio while dressed foppishly and tossing dandelions in the air (fig. 4). And while the "Introducing Horror Hospital" version of Trevor vaguely tells the audience that, "I just heard some bad news," the Horror Hospital Unplugged Trevor elaborates: "Look, I just found out something I can't ... My boyfriend's dead" (Cooper 57, fig. 5).
Homosexuality and queerness are viable and acceptable identities for the Unplugged Trevor in a way they were not for the "Introducing" Trevor, but as with punk's marketability and success, this progressiveness is still problematic. It is suggested that Horror Hospital only gets their record deal because Trevor is David Geffen's "type" and, like with the dictates of punk and alternative music, Trevor finds that being gay is restrictive as well as liberating. Apologizing to Tim for cheating on him at the Geffen party, Trevor explains, "Being gay is sort of new to me. I didn't know that there were rules and everything."

This portrayal of Trevor Machine as an Advocate-reading, boyfriend-having, out-of-the-closet homo is not as celebratory as it may seem to those unfamiliar with Dennis Cooper's work. The extremely violent novel Frisk made him a pariah in many gay circles (even garnering some death threats), and he dismissed the need to belong to the "main structure of anything" – namely a collective gay identity – in an interview with Kim Nicolini. In Nicolini's estimation, Cooper does not "feel the least bit 'gay' (in both senses of the word)," and prefers to remain
outside, on the periphery, where his individual identity can remain fundamentally different. The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction and the copy of the Advocate and the Tori Amos CDs that Trevor acquire are merely accessories. Being the label “gay” has actually very little to do with his desires; using the terms and following “the rules” is as regurgitative as the “Introducing Horror Hospital” Trevor’s parroting of the nihilism of punk singers like Johnny Rotten and Darby Crash.

Mayerson and Cooper address this problem of the character’s sexual identification metonymically by the way Horror Hospital Unplugged resists genre identification. The work is ostensibly a “graphic novel,” but as I argued earlier, it handles more like a gallery catalog or collected volume. There are also elements of collage, where photographs and news clippings interact with the pen and ink drawings and watercolors (see figures 6 and 7). This cut-and-paste approach, as well as the subject matter, places Horror Hospital Unplugged in the tradition of zine publishing, which has always been intertwined with comics and graphic novels. In fact, Horror Hospital Unplugged was published by Juno Books, which co-publishes the Re/Search books and zines, and Unplugged boasts the trademark Re/Search logo on its front cover (fig. 8).
Legs McNeil and John Homstrom's Punk zine, which arguably originated the term, utilized comics and cartoons, soliciting illustrations by Robert Crumb and interviewing Harvey Kurtzman (McNeil and McCain 204, Lawley 104). Punk even included an "interview" with Sluggo from Ernie Bushmiller's Nancy comic strip in its first issue (fig. 9). The queercore zines JDs and Homocore also incorporated comics, and cartoonists as diverse as Matt Groening and the Hernandez brothers began in the zine culture (Lawley 106, 112). But even aside from these print influences, Horror Hospital Unplugged also takes on the characteristics of a record, named "unplugged" after the popular album series, and writing the acknowledgments as though they were the traditional "thanks" section of an album sleeve.

![Horror Hospital Unplugged](image)

Then there is the book's dizzying collection of drawing styles. Tim and Trevor's love scenes are drawn in the manner of a Japanese manga and a scene where the band is interviewed for a fanzine is clearly modeled after Hergé's Tintin comics (figs. 3 and 10). Some pages are crammed with text and images, with tiny decorative narratives climbing the margins like Al Jaffe's work in Mad Magazine. Other pages, like when Trevor speaks with the ghost of River Phoenix, are impressionistic and minimal, with a handful of watercolor strokes over mainly white space (fig. 11). The zine writer and villain Doug is almost always represented as a morphed version of the worm figures Gerald Scharfe designed for Pink Floyd's album The Wall; another scene represents Trevor's face like the one of the cover of King Crimson's In the Court of the Crimson King album (fig. 12). The scene at Geffen's mansion merges the styles of Harold Gray and Ralph Steadman. Jerry the record executive is always drawn in the block-like style of Raymond Pettibon, which is itself a subversive revision of Jack Kirby (fig. 13). And so on.
So *Horror Hospital Unplugged* is a novel-length comic book interpretation of a short story by a poet and novelist in collaboration with a painter that also incorporates elements of zines and records and portrays a genre of music that is either “punk” or “alternative” or, in Jerry’s estimation, “novelty,” with a main character who only occasionally identifies as gay. Cooper and Mayerson never really attempt to distill these varying influences or labels and, again, one finds a perceived sloppiness or inarticulateness to the form: frames, when they are used at all, are rarely drawn with a straight-edge, words and images are crossed out rather than fully...
erased, smudges appear, etc. *Horror Hospital Unplugged* is about performance, but it eschews performativity: no genre or identity is stable enough to be reiterated often enough to become coherent. For Cooper and Mayerson, gay identity provides the same subcultural problem of consensus that the punks found: for the characters to be confused, the genre must be as well.

Notes

[1] In a blurb on the back of Cooper's first novel, and the first in the George Miles Cycle, *Closer*, Kathy Acker describes Cooper's language as "at first intense, nearly minimal, then suddenly, it ascends into vision." The "intense" and "minimal" qualities of Cooper's language are more often than not pornographic, and the "vision" that Acker mentions is the product of a projection away from the corporeality of pornographic writing towards impossible desires. Not surprisingly, Baudelaire and Sade are Cooper's two most cited influences. Cooper's voice is driven by the lesson learned by Eugenie, the student of debauchery and libertinage in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* "the more we desire to be moved violently, the more we must give rein to our imagination; we must bend it toward the inconceivable" (235). Cooper's characters' "inconceivable" desires often involve the rape, murder, and mutilation of adolescent boys, but these inconceivably awful (but physically possible) fantasies transfigure into physically inconceivable ones, all maintaining the same detached, matter-of-fact tone. From *Frisk*:

> Afterward I lay in bed putting Finn through hell in my thoughts. I tore up his body like it was a paper bag and pulled out dripping fistfuls of veins, organs, muscles, tubes. I made his voice as otherworldly as civil defense sirens had sounded to me as a kid. I drank his blood, piss, vomit. I shoved one hand down his throat, one hand up his ass, and shook hands with myself in the middle of his body, which sounds funny, but it wasn't (38).

As with Sade's, Cooper's work often seems to the reader as though it exists to be defended, rather than enjoyed. Still, Cooper's emotional range extends beyond horror and disgust. Try, the story of a queer, teenaged zine-writer named Ziggy who is sexually abused by his two adoptive fathers, is heartbreaking and darkly comic – sometimes simultaneously. "If you loved me," Ziggy "slugs" while rejecting one of his father's advances, "you wouldn't rim me while I'm crying" (149).

References


Gimme Gimme That”. Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons. José Esteban Muñoz. His often quoted demand for more, “Gimme gimme this, gimme gimme that,” is the semiarticulate demand for a world that is not the world of California in the late 1970s or the burgeoning reality of Ronald Reagan’s America. ••• Before I tell the story of the Germs and the place they occupy in the history of American punk rock, I want to. Darby Crash was a confused young man. His rhetoric would sometimes vector into the realm of incoherent anti-Semitism. I am not interested in making apologies for Crash’s discourse. Gimme! (A Man After Midnight). On this page you can download song Bloodsucking Zombies From Outer Space - Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight) in mp3 and listen online.

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