

Searching for a Younger Self: Time, Music and Ageing Masculinities in the Novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

Zdenko Zeman
Marija Geiger Zeman

ABSTRACT

The idea that literature matters for an understanding of socio-cultural processes and phenomena is confirmed in Jennifer Egan's inspiring novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Four decades since the appearance of punk rock music and culture it has become necessary to incorporate issues concerning ageing in the analysis of musical subcultures (Bennet, 2018, Jennings, 2015). The contrasts of past and present, youth and ageing, older and young generations suggest that time is the most important category as an almost invisible, silent, relentless and invincible driving force. This emphasized temporal perspective shows the inevitability and incessancy of changes not only in human lives but also in the ageist world of the music industry.

KEYWORDS

time, punk rock, ageing, subculture, music industry, masculinity, identity, Jennifer Egan

Introduction

Time, as an tremendously complex and multidimensional phenomenon that pervades every aspect of personal and social life,¹ has long been contemplated within the focus of science as well as artistic and everyday reflection. "The enigma of time" is a persistent source of human frustration and fascination because "life is lived in time. Without time there is no life. But each one lives in his own time. No two men living *at* the same time live *in* the same time," as Elliott Jaques puts it.² Joshua Homme, frontman of the American band Queens of the Stone Age, also refers to this overwhelming power of time and its personal meanings for him, at the beginning and the end of the documentary *American Valhalla*:³

Time is not your friend. Goes no matter what you say. No matter what I think they won't wait for me...
No matter I wish it would slow down, it won't listen to me. Just makes me ride... No drive, just ride...

But time as an invisible, silent, relentless and invincible driving force, on one side, and music, on the other side, are not impressively intertwined only in iconic collaborations like the one made by Joshua Homme and Iggy Pop, the godfather of punk rock music, featured in *American Valhalla*. Punk rock and time are also ingeniously entangled in the award-winning novel *A Visit*

1 Jiří Šubrt, "The Problem of Time from the Perspective of Social Sciences," *Czech Sociological Review* 9, no. 2 (2001): 212.

2 Elliott Jaques, "The Enigma of Time," in *The Sociology of Time*, ed. John Hassard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 21.

3 *American Valhalla* (2017), directed by Andreas Neumann and Joshua Homme (<http://www.americanvalhallamovie.com/>; <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6875564/>). The documentary was broadcast on the Croatian National Radiotelevision (HRT 2) on June 17, 2019.

from *the Goon Squad* (first published 2010 by the Knopf Publishing Group, New York) written by American novelist and journalist Jennifer Egan.⁴

Egan has commented that “the novel was inspired by two sources: Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and HBO’s *The Sopranos*.”⁵ In a book review published in *The Guardian*, Sarah Churchwell notes: “*Goon Squad* is a book about memory and kinship, time and narrative, continuity and disconnection, in which relationships shift and recombine kaleidoscopically.”⁶ The novel contains a very complex structure and plot, which is why Janet Maslin calls it a “shape-shifting” book, the chapters of which make “carefully arranged interlocking stories” which follow the phases in the lives of several characters, connected directly and indirectly in different ways.⁷ At the same time, various motifs of transience and changeability are interwoven throughout the novel, on an individual and generational as well as a wider societal and cultural level, both in relation to the music industry and the development of technology.

Despite their various life trajectories, ups and downs, aspirations and ambitions, realized and unrealized life plans, all the characters are confronted with the inevitable and unalterable facts of the passage of time, of (one’s own and others’) ageing and many (social and personal) changes, or, as Sarah Churchwell succinctly put it in her review, the characters in the novel live “their painful pasts and future disappointments.”⁸

In the article we will deal with three interconnected topics that largely determine the plot of the novel – time, music and ageing. Egan shows how time (re)shapes the lives of her characters, linking the flow of time with the ageing that they experience on a personal, interpersonal and intergenerational level. The influences of time passing and the inevitable changes time induces, including ageing, transformations in the music industry and professional survival, and on the (re) constitution of identity will be shown in an analysis of three male characters who cope in different ways with these inescapable processes.

Time is (no Longer) on their Side: Facing the Ruthless Oppressor

The very title of the novel indicates that the plot focuses on “the tyrannical power of time.”⁹ Likening time to the “goon squad”¹⁰ Jennifer Egan creates a modernized concept of time which relies on much older, ancient conceptions originating in various mythological and cultural traditions. For

4 Regarding the interconnectedness of time and punk rock music in the Egan’s novel see Martin Moling, “‘No Future’: Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 72, no. 1 (2016).

5 Sarah Churchwell, “A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan – review,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/13/jennifer-egan-visit-goon-squad>.

6 Churchwell, “A Visit.”

7 Janet Maslin, “Time, Thrashing To Its Own Rock Beat,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/books/21book.html>.

8 Churchwell, “A Visit.”

9 Robert Fulford, “Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is all about the timing,” *National Post*, January 10, 2012, <https://nationalpost.com/afterword/jennifer-egans-a-visit-from-the-goon-squad-is-all-about-the-timing>.

10 According to Fulford “since the 1930s American English has used ‘goon squad’ to mean hoodlums sent to beat up someone, often in a labour dispute.”

instance, in Greek and Roman mythology explicitly gendered concepts of time were well known – the masters of time were older, powerful and ruthlessly oppressive patriarchs. The Greek Titan Cronus (and later the Roman deity Saturn) was worshiped as “the god of time in its sense of eternal duration,”¹¹ the knower of past and future events, the devourer of his own children to prevent their intergenerational revolt against his authority. He inspired many to find out “the melancholy truth that time destroys all things.”¹²

Jennifer Egan’s novel recounts how individuals – their private and professional lives, partnerships, family and other relations – inevitably change with the passage of time and in different life contexts, whereby the characters in the novel experience and understand time on three levels: the personal level, the interpersonal level and in a wider societal context.

At the personal level, the characters feel and reflect the passage of time and locate their current life situation on a time scale of their own life path, comparing it with previous life periods. In this context, youth takes on an iconic aura and the status of the “good old times,” characterized by predominance of happiness, unlimited freedom, power, excitement, fun, excessive hedonism, endless possibilities and new beginnings. However, time shows its other, less attractive face, and just like a goon squad “beats up the vigorous, ambitious young people ... surprising them with its power.”¹³ Grand life plans, huge dreams and great expectations remained partially realized or completely unfulfilled due to unexpected life turns, social limitations, personal reasons, etc. It seems that the young rebels with their big dreams have experienced a similar fate as did punk music and whole movement – their songs of rebellion, resistance and revolution did not change the world: “Music seeks to change life; life goes on; the music is left behind; that is what is left to talk about.”¹⁴ So too, the characters of the novel grow old, and almost all of them gradually renounce their subversive rebellion and original anger, adapting to the system (with varying degrees of success/failure), or simply rejecting the establishment and its values while also abandoning any desire to change it.

At the interpersonal level, the passage of time has an embodied dimension – some characters come into (in)direct contact with (un)familiar people and detect physical signs of ageing on their faces and/or bodies (grey hair, feigning a youthful appearance, wrinkles, loss of teeth, etc.) and try to determine their chronological age or reconcile/harmonize the familiar younger version of these people with their older, new and unfamiliar version. For instance, Sasha, ex-punk rocker Bennie Salazar’s assistant, notices grey hair on the heads of a plumber and a woman whose wallet she had stolen; Bennie assesses not only the age of his coworkers (his assistant Sasha, Chandra and Louise – girls from the Stop/Go band) and his son Chris, but also assesses the dilapidated physical appearance of Scotty Hausmann, a friend from his punk rock youth; Alex assesses his wife Rebecca, etc. The dramatic effect of the passage of time and the relativity of the subjective feeling and the definition of age are particularly clearly visible in the first and last meeting between Lou, a music producer and mogul, and Rhea and Jocelyn, punk rock girls who spent their teenage years with

11 E.M. Berens, *The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. S.M. Soares (MetaLibrary, October 13, 2009), 28, MM. 15, http://www.ibiblio.org/ml/libri/b/BerensEM_MythsLegends_s.pdf.

12 Berens, *The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome*, 28, footnote 1.

13 Fulford, “Jennifer Egan’s A Visit.”

14 Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 3.

Bennie and Scotty. Jocelyn first met Lou when she was still a minor and he was a 43-year old rock mogul, the father of six, and she was surprised not only by his age but also the double life that he had led at the time, so she asked him: “Do you even remember being our age?” to which he replied: “I *am* your age...”,¹⁵ ending with: “I’ll never get old.”¹⁶ Of course, being a teenager, Jocelyn could not consider Lou’s answer credible, because at the time she already considered him old.¹⁷ Twenty years later, at Bennie’s invitation, now 43-year-old Rhea and Jocelyn come to say goodbye to Lou, who was suffering severe health consequences of his second stroke. Their reunion after such a long time confronts Jocelyn and Rhea with changes that they did not expect – before them was no longer the powerful, confident, attractive, youthful and nearly ageless Lou, but a dying man, now admitting with no qualms: “I got old.”¹⁸ Looking at him, Jocelyn wonders: “How did you get so old? Was it all at once, in a day, or did you peter out bit by bit?”,¹⁹ wishing that the “the real Lou” that she had known would magically appear from somewhere, and oust this unknown helpless old man²⁰:

“I’m afraid the real Lou will be outside by the pool where he lived [...] and the real Lou and this old Lou will have a fight. *How dare you? I’ve never had an old person in my house and I’m not going to start now.* Age, ugliness – they had no place.”²¹

The temporal dimension is immanent to social processes and changes. Egan situates the individual lives of characters in a wider sociocultural and economic context, which is in contemporary western society closely linked to rapid technological changes, consumer culture, the neoliberal economy, the ruthless struggle for professional success, survival ... and, last but not least, a generational shift. The characters are well aware of these inevitable recent social, cultural, economic and generational changes and they make intergenerational comparisons thus creating a distinction between their own generation and the millennial generation. They detect new social and cultural trends, and dominant value orientations of the millennial generation, trying to evaluate them from a personal point of view and a value-engaged perspective. This intergenerational comparison – or perhaps, this biased generational segregation – sometimes has a moral component, and is most frequently characterized by opposing or criticizing the present. Of course, this process of intergenerational comparison and evaluation is not a recent phenomenon. Just like the late 1970s and the early 1980s saw punk rockers looking forward to the ageing of the hippies and to the decline in the relevance of the hippie movement, the new century brought along the coming of age of new generations, completely incomprehensible to the consistent older punk rockers who criticize and reject materialism, consumerism and neoliberalism, and strive for an authentic lifestyle. From the point of view of the millennials, these critically-minded members of the “older” generations – by millennial standards those older than thirty – seem to be criticizing

15 Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011), 58.

16 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 59.

17 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 59.

18 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 93.

19 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 89.

20 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 92.

21 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 92.

others only to defend their own prejudices; they exhibit resistance to new values hiding behind “atavistic purism” and “calcified morality.”²²

New Trends, Fast Changes: Time, Ageing and Music

Awareness of the relentless passage of time and of changing trends, fads and fashion is evident in the music industry as in entertainment in general. Egan describes how time in the corporate music industry passes much faster than in other domains – trends change very fast, and the market is driven by novelty. Bennie has always been fully aware of this fact, as seen from his statement paraphrased by his associate Sasha: “This is the music business. ‘Five years is five *hundred* years.’”²³

Generally speaking, most of the characters in the novel “live within popular music: They play it, write it, produce recordings of it or sell it,”²⁴ which means that they inevitably compare the recent situation in music with that of their youth, to which they ascribe authenticity, originality, artistic freedom and fairness between the artist and the audience that bought the music, respecting “copyright’ and ‘creative ownership.’”²⁵ The novel places strong emphasis on two important socioeconomic forces that have a profound effect on music – technological development and principles of the capitalist economy.

Given that most of the characters in the novel grew up with independent, critical and anti-capitalist²⁶ punk music, through which they expressed their anger, rebellion and creativity, now as adults they experience (more or less pronounced) discomfort while witnessing the “normalization”²⁷ and corporatization of punk rock music (although some of them for the sake of their own careers have opportunistically tried to make some kind of agreement with a corporate establishment). This situation, especially in Bennie’s case, provokes internal conflict and long-lasting frustrating negotiations between his anti-capitalist younger punk self and his calculating and career-oriented middle-aged self. This complex internal conflict (younger punk self vs. middle-aged pragmatic self), which is complementary to the external conflict (punk rock vs. corporate music industry) is vividly described by Penny Rimbaud’s statement: “The capitalist counter-revolutionaries had killed with cash. Punk degenerated from being a force for change, to becoming just another element in the grand media circus.”²⁸

The eternal search for something new, something that will continue to incite interest and thus stimulate consumption is evident in the creation of music celebrities, maintaining their relevance and developing their careers. Here, chronological age also plays an important role, as the entertainment industry glorifies youth – in fact it creates and supports young stars, speaks to a younger population which makes up a particularly profitable niche market (even when it consumes

22 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 327.

23 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 35.

24 Fulford, “Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit*.”

25 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 28.

26 Olga Wawer, *Sociology & 21st century music* (WBP, 2016), Kindle.

27 Dylan Clark, “The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture,” in *The Post-subcultures Reader*, eds. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 224.

28 Cited in Clark, “The Death and Life of Punk,” 226.

anti-consumer, anti-capitalist and countercultural music).²⁹ For instance, the band Stop/Go once seemed like “an excellent bet; the sisters were young and adorable, their sound was gritty and simple and catchy (‘Cyndi Lauper meets Chrissie Hynde’),” which is why Bennie signed them on for three albums.³⁰ However, time passed, and the investment turned out to be unsound because “the sisters were pushing thirty” and were no longer “young” enough so as to be convincingly promoted “as recent high school grads, especially since one of them had a nine-year-old daughter.”³¹ Music stars are market commodities, just like music, and have their expiry date. Bennie knows this, and their friends and associates also feel that time is no longer on their side.

Egan connects time, ageing, youth and production/consumption of music in a sociologically relevant and inspiring way. There is a tendency to consider punk, rap, heavy metal and goth rock as music genres as well as lifestyles reserved for young people.³² Through fictional narratives, Egan points to more complex, “multi-generational”³³ relations between creators and consumers of the so-called “youth cultures,” thus encouraging her readers to contemplate “what happens to participants” of youth subcultural groups “as they become older.”³⁴ Some of them, like Scotty or Bennie, continue to participate and invest in the music that they grew to love in their youth.³⁵

One such genre that produces interest that overcomes the boundaries of youth and becomes a lifelong preoccupation is, as we have already said, punk. According to Sarah Churchwell, in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Jennifer Egan “shifts dramatically across times and places: punk teenagers in 1970s San Francisco become disillusioned adults in the suburbs of 1990s New York.”³⁶

We find out about the maturation of Bennie Salazar and the rest of his punk gang (Scotty Hausmann, Rhea, Jocelyn and Alice) through the voices and the point of view of the characters themselves, and the fictional descriptions of becoming and being punk rockers during the late 1970s turn out to be particularly interesting material from a sociological point of view. Teenagers, who are mostly of working class background, consciously build their “punk personality” and image – wearing Mohawks, and dyeing their hair bright colors, going to concerts, drinking alcohol and experiment with drugs, practicing underage sex and generally trying to establish themselves in the punk scene of a well-known club. All these are interesting descriptions of the diverse ways in which one becomes a true authentic punker: “When does a fake Mohawk become a real Mohawk? Who decides? How do you know if it’s happened?”³⁷

29 Timothy Dean Taylor, *Music and Capitalism. A History of the Present* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 40–41.

30 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 20.

31 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 20.

32 Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” *Popular Music* 31, no. 2 (2012): 232.

33 Bennett and Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” 232.

34 See Paul Hodkinson, “Ageing in a spectacular ‘youth culture’: continuity, change and community amongst older goths,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 2 (2011): 262.

35 Regarding ageing fans, punk and popular music see Andy Bennett, “Popular music scenes and aging bodies,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 45 (2018): 49–53, and Andy Bennett, “Punks not dead: The significance of punk rock for older generation of fans,” *Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2006): 219–235.

36 Churchwell, “A Visit.”

37 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 48.

In their reminiscences of the early punk scene, it's not the age that only matters, the gender element is important too – the punk scene was predominantly male.³⁸ Bennie and Scotty are the central creative punk rock duo in a very ambivalent and turbulent relationship, and their friends Rhea, Jocelyn and Alice write lyrics for them, and cooperate with them to make the songs, singing in rehearsals, but do not like to perform in public³⁹. Punk concerts are aggressive and physically intense – the audience jumps, shoves each other, which sometimes looks almost like a brawl even bordering with one. A punk concert has the elements of the manifestation of (young) masculinity and narcissistic masculine performance – what dominates are young men's bodies who furiously counter attacks from the audience.⁴⁰

Searching for a Younger Self: “Musicalized Identities” and Ageing Masculinities

Music is “a temporal medium” and important agent in the process of identity (re)construction,⁴¹ which is particularly true when it comes to participating in subcultures or countercultures.⁴² The category of “musicalized identities” precisely describes the connection between music and identity⁴³ and refers to the decisive role of music not only in creating identity and self-presentation but also in everyday life, by mapping one's own biography, or organizing lived and memorized events.⁴⁴ As mentioned before, music is, together with time, the main topic of the novel. Moreover, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* features an impressive playlist, consisting of famous punk and rock bands (The Stranglers, Dead Kennedys [Jello Biafra], The Cramps, Blondie, the Nuns, Black Flag, Pearl Jam, etc.) which, like the madeleines from Proust's novel (*À la Recherche du Temps Perdu/In Search of Lost Time*) act as a “trigger for nostalgia,”⁴⁵ providing fleeting reminiscences of youthful feelings experienced long ago, of the state of youthfulness and the bygone days of rebellious youth. Music is able to “invoke past feelings and ways of being” and as such it is “an emblem of a larger interactional, emotional complex.”⁴⁶ Correspondingly, the relationship between music, identity

38 Bennett and Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” 238.

39 Gender exclusivity and asymmetries in the alternative music domain were in the sights of the Riot Grrrl movement in the 1990s. Kathleen Hanna, a punk rock singer and feminist activist, emphasized the masculinization of the punk rock scene and used the slogan “girls to the front” to appeal to create a girl-friendly space at punk concerts which were dominated exclusively by men (both as performers and the audience). Regarding punk rock and feminism see: Andi Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008); Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); Natalya Lusty, “Riot Grrrl Manifestos and Radical Vernacular Feminism,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (2017) and documentary movie *The Punk Singer* (2013, directed by Sini Anderson, <https://www.facebook.com/thepunksinger>; <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1785612/>).

40 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 54–55.

41 Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

42 Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 42.

43 Bennett and Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” 234.

44 DeNora acc. to Bennett and Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” 233.

45 Angeliqe Chrisafis, “Proust's memory-laden madeleine cakes started life as toast, manuscripts reveal,” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/19/proust-madeleine-cakes-started-as-toast-in-search-of-lost-time-manuscripts-reveal>.

46 DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 66.

and life trajectory is very important for nearly all male characters in the novel (Bennie Salazar, Bosco, Scotty Hausmann). Egan conceives music as a force that transcends temporal boundaries since it has the power to recreate the romanticized past in the context of a challenging middle aged present. For instance, Bennie Salazar connects his life and lived events with the music, songs and bands he used to listen to, which makes certain songs triggers that remind him of his high-school days or of that special (energized and rebellious) spirit in his teenage years.⁴⁷

Egan not only shows how musicalised identities are produced, but also how age and gender (masculine) identities are constructed in the temporal context of the main characters' life narratives and their situation in the "corporate capitalist landscape" in which the "'subculture' has become a billion dollar industry."⁴⁸ The main male characters (Bennie, Scotty, Lou, Bosco) are "actively producing themselves over time with and through music,"⁴⁹ and as of them are middle-aged and older, they are trying to recreate their "former" and youthful self,⁵⁰ which is perceived as their authentic and real self. They define this youthful self in terms of physical appearance and fitness, heterosexual activity, nonconformity, hedonism, unconstrained and rebellious creativity. In this context it is important to point out that ageing and the experiences of ageing are significant not only in experiencing oneself, but also in the development of professional plans for the future. Chronological age and ageing play a significant role in assessing one's own (physical) ability and "age-appropriateness"⁵¹ to do music – to start or to continue an interrupted musical career.

The stereotyped image of the "essence" of a male star persona consists of "idealized youthful heterosexual masculinity, authenticity and artistic honesty," and the ageing male (punk) rock star, through a "gendered ageist" prism, is inevitably seen in the context of the narrative about "physiological and sexual decline."⁵² Ageing male punk rockers in the novel perceive themselves precisely through the prism of ageing as weakening and decaying – the self-understanding of maleness is so intimately connected with the notion of physical strength and ability that ageing necessarily causes great damage which is difficult to restore.

Time, ageing and music are intertwined in a variety of interesting ways. This is evident through the specific ways in which three male characters build their identity strategies and relationships with the corporate music industry. Bosco – once a famous punk rocker, today irrelevant and desperate; Bennie – a punk rocker who tried to balance between authentic music and a profit-oriented system; and Scotty – an authentic punk rocker and "symbolic reincarnation of artistic purity."⁵³

47 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 24.

48 Clark, "The Death and Life of Punk," 223, 229.

49 DeNora acc. to Bennett and Taylor, "Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing," 233.

50 Ryan Reft, "Chasing Narrative: Jennifer Egan's Sometimes Non-Linear Take on Time, Age, and Technology," *Tropics of Meta*, July 18, 2012, <https://tropicsofmeta.wordpress.com/2012/07/18/chasing-narrative-jennifer-egans-sometimes-non-linear-take-on-time-age-and-technology/>.

51 Neugarten and Hagestad acc. to Carol Rambo Ronai, "Managing Aging in Young Adulthood: The 'Aging' Table Dancer," in *Aging and everyday life*, eds. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2005), 278.

52 Ros Jennings, "Popular music and ageing," in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, ed. Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin (London: Routledge, 2015), 80.

53 Moling, "No Future," 68.

In the late 1980s, Bosco and his band The Conduits were famous. He was a thin boy wearing tight trousers, with exuberant red hair, known for his incredible energy and enthusiasm, which made other famous punk rock performers (such as Iggy Pop) “look indolent onstage.”⁵⁴ A decade later, Bosco has become unrecognizable: by his red hair, which has thinned and turned grey, and by weight gain after cancer treatment which he explains as the consequence of consuming various medications (but in reality as a result of consuming unhealthy food). He was still signed to Bennie’s company Sow’s Ear Records, but given that Bennie was controlled by corporate bosses, he could not finance the production, distribution or promotion of Bosco’s CD. Bosco had a difficult time coming to terms with the fact that he was no longer relevant, and that the outside world was completely indifferent toward him. His desire to return to the stage and escape anonymity meant an attempt to recreate a younger, successful version of himself from the late 1980s. However, Bosco was also aware of the fact that a public attempt at recreating his younger self would inherently induce elements of public humiliation and would completely unmask the ruthlessness of the passage of time, coinciding with the brutality of the corporate music industry. Bosco is aware that the “Time’s a goon,”⁵⁵ and illness and ageing has transformed him into – as his PR manager Stephanie says – “an ailing and decrepit shadow of” his “former self.”⁵⁶ Still, Bosco is also aware how today’s industry of entertainment and the world of spectacle works, and he wanted to turn his decay and his (imminent) death into “an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery” and “a work of art.”⁵⁷ Thus he calls his return the “Suicide Tour.”⁵⁸ In order to regain part of his former “authenticity” and relevance, Bosco is willing to commercialize, commodify and trivialize⁵⁹ even his own dying.

Bennie Salazar grew up and lived with music – first he sold it (as a salesman in a record store), and then played it (in the punk band Flaming Dildos), and eventually produced it (in his own record company Sow’s Ear Records). As opposed to his friends Alex and Scotty, who are ruthless critics of corporate music, Bennie has an ambivalent relationship towards the music industry – on the one hand he is constantly critical of the music industry, the new sound, digitalization and new ways of production, distribution and consumption of music. However, on the other hand, as the former owner of the Sow’s Ear Records label, at one period of his career he tried to play by the rules of the industry itself – pandering to mass tastes so as to “stay on top.” However, this has turned out to be self-destructive – he became anxious and insecure, trying to conform to others, he used large amounts of money to buy gold leaves advertised as a way to cure erectile dysfunction and lack of libido; he undergoes psychotherapy, constantly terminates contracts with artists, he has one failed investment after another and numerous unrealized albums. He considered the music that the industry produced “bloodless constructions” based only on effect, because the digital sound and perfect production “sucked the life out of everything.”⁶⁰ However, these negative trends are

54 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 132.

55 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 134.

56 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 135.

57 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 136.

58 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 137.

59 Clark, “The Death and Life of Punk,” 231.

60 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 24.

evident in all spheres of art, an effect which Bennie calls it “*an aesthetic holocaust*.”⁶¹ Eager for recognition, status, prestige and professional success, he has tried to “stay on top” and “make songs that people would love and buy and download... (and steal, of course).”⁶² In the end, Bennie sells his independent record label to a multinational oil company.

This “corporate phase” in the professional life of Bennie Salazar is a prime example of the compromise that punk ideology makes with corporate capitalism in today’s music industry. Another excellent example of how a “bad boy” falls into the mainstream is the case of Max, an influential and venal former singer in the band Pink Buttons, and now the successful businessman and the owner of a luxury apartment in SoHo. Max has maintained his popularity through his wealth and reconfirmed it through Christmas parties where tons of caviar are served.⁶³ Bennie could not reach such “success.” Although at one time in his life he aspired to live in an elite neighborhood, he was conscious that what disqualified him were his class and educational background, and his appearance, particularly his skin color which grew darker with years thus deviating ever stronger from the normative whiteness. Bennie spent his middle age in a permanent process of questioning his own position between his “continuing subcultural involvement and the development of adult responsibilities, interests, bodies, and identities.”⁶⁴ The music industry works according to the principle of profit maximization and based on a synergy with various distribution channels, and such commodification of music usually comes at the expense of quality. Bennie knew this and felt disappointed; indeed, he now hates the industry “he’d given his life to.”⁶⁵ After a long accumulation of frustration and dissatisfaction both in his private and business life, Bennie decided to (once again) express his repressed punk anti-capitalist resistance by refusing to work according to corporate rules and by returning “to producing music with a raspy, analog sound, none of which had really sold,” and which has resulted in the fact that now – as he is nearing sixty – he is seen “as irrelevant.”⁶⁶ However, despite this, Bennie feels happy when he decides to share his feeling of professional fulfillment with his friend Scotty.

Scotty Hausmann, a more charismatic and talented friend of Bennie’s, has also experienced the passage of time first-hand. The energetic, attractive, muscular and charismatic guitar player was never willing to make compromises with the music industry. He remains a real punk rocker, and in his post-youth phase, remains angry, rebellious, critical towards capitalism and the establishment, and unwilling to compromise with the music industry. In fact, there was not a single moment when he gave up on his genuine punk identity and punk ideology. For him punk was much more than music – it was “a lifestyle project.”⁶⁷ He has worked as a janitor in a primary school in the neighborhood where he lives, and in the summer he would scavenge and fish in “the East River near the Williamsburg Bridge.”⁶⁸ He is not ashamed of being a loser from the point of view of the establishment, indeed, in his punk-based life philosophy he saw no real difference between

61 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 24.

62 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 24.

63 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 323.

64 Hodkinson, “Ageing in a spectacular ‘youth culture,’” 263.

65 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 38.

66 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 319.

67 Bennett and Taylor, “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing,” 240.

68 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 98–99.

collecting garbage in the park and working in an office building on Park Avenue.⁶⁹ In contrast to Bennie, Scotty did not aspire to climb the social ladder or be accepted by the establishment, nor did he try to escape his class and punk roots. Scotty becomes aware of the class and status asymmetries between himself and Bennie when the two met after many years in Sow's Ear Records. The comparison of their existential positions that this meeting made possible was crystal clear: Bennie, who used to be a lousy bass player, became "a big shot," and Scotty remains "an asswipe,"⁷⁰ and the latter's socioeconomic position manifests itself in his appearance – he is a sunken and toothless man who fishes and picks through garbage in a public park.⁷¹ Despite the instances of competitiveness and rivalry, now in their fifties, Scotty and Bennie begin a business collaboration. After he has left Sow's Ear Records, Bennie devotes considerable efforts to furthering Scotty's career, a career that stood in stark contrast to the customs and rules of the music industry in the age of the neoliberal economy. Scotty insists on the quality of the music and harbors no ambition of his music becoming marketable or visible, e.g. in the media. Unlike Bosco, he does not want to recreate his younger self nor does he want to negotiate with the industry so as to secure a successful career. He remains "a solitary person" who "refused to do interviews," and he is deeply suspicious of technology, not communicating over the web with his fans, etc.⁷² Like Bosco, he is aware of the tyranny and ruthlessness of time which has transformed him from a sexy and attractive punker into a decrepit man with "red and gnarled" hands, "empty, blasted eyes" and "guttled cheeks," making his "white and sparkling" (porcelain) teeth stand out in counterpoint.⁷³ His first appearance before an audience four decades after his youthful punk career starts out as a traumatic experience, but Bennie realizes that it is finally time for Scotty to become a star. And he was right, as a multigenerational audience at a public and free concert recognizes the quality, sincerity and authenticity in the songs of a man whose dilapidated appearance were diametrically opposed to young, muscular and energetic music stars. Scotty's songs were an uncalculated expression of his life – they spoke of the experience of rage, "paranoia and disconnection," life on the margins of the society,⁷⁴ beyond technology, consumerism and corporate influences that corrode all important aspects of human life. Scotty's success seems to confirm Sean Bohrman assessments: "People say, 'Oh, there's no good music anymore'" and "they're absolutely, positively wrong, there's always good music, somewhere, forever. Somewhere in the world, someone is making good music, you just have to find it..."⁷⁵

In the end, Scotty's iconic concert suggests the possibilities of a new understanding of music, time and ageing. It shows not only that there is still great music despite global domination of corporative music, but also that time is more than just a tough player and a relentless tyrant who punishes and takes away thus modifying the image of ageing as nothing but decay. Hence a space

69 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 98.

70 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 106.

71 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 109–110.

72 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 334.

73 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 340–341.

74 Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 344.

75 Sean Bohrman cited in Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 167–168.

opens up for a more complex approach to ageing, which needs to be understood and lived as – in the words of Jan Baars – “a dialectic of loss and gain.”⁷⁶

NOTE

The analysis presented in this paper is partially based on the presentation *Searching for a Younger Self: Punk Rock and Ageing Masculinities in the Novel A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan at the 3rd ENAS Conference, 1st Joint ENAS & NANAS Conference, 9th *International Symposium on Cultural Gerontology Cultural Narratives, Processes & Strategies in Representations of Age and Aging*, University of Graz, Austria, 27-30 April 2017.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baars, Jan. “Philosophy of Aging, Time, and Finitude.” In *A Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging. What Does It Mean to Grow Old?*, edited by Thomas R. Cole, Ruth E. Ray, and Robert Kastenbaum, 105-120. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- Bennett, Andy. “Popular music scenes and aging bodies.” *Journal of Aging Studies* 45 (June 2018): 49-53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.01.007>.
- Bennett, Andy. “Punks not dead: The significance of punk rock for older generation of fans.” *Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2006): 219-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506062030>.
- Bennett, Andy and Jodie Taylor. “Popular music and the aesthetics of ageing.” *Popular Music* 31, no. 2 (May 2012): 231-243. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143012000013>.
- Berens, E.M. *The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome*, edited by S.M. Soares. MetaLibrary, October 13, 2009. Accessed December 16, 2019. http://www.ibiblio.org/ml/libri/b/BerensEM_MythsLegends_s.pdf.
- Chrisafis, Angelique. 2015. “Proust’s memory-laden madeleine cakes started life as toast, manuscripts reveal.” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/19/proust-madeleine-cakes-started-as-toast-in-search-of-lost-time-manuscripts-reveal>.
- Churchwell, Sarah. 2011. “A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan – review.” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/13/jennifer-egan-visit-goon-squad>.
- Clark, Dylan. “The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture.” In *The Post-subcultures Reader*, edited by David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, 223-236. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003.
- Cole, Thomas R., Ruth E. Ray, and Robert Kastenbaum, eds. *A guide to humanistic studies in aging. What does it mean to grow old?*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. London: Corsair, 2011.

⁷⁶ Jan Baars, “Philosophy of Aging, Time, and Finitude,” in *A Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging. What Does It Mean to Grow Old?*, eds. Thomas R. Cole, Ruth E. Ray, and Robert Kastenbaum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 106.

- Fulford, Robert. 2012. "Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad is all about the timing." *National Post*, January 10, 2012. <http://news.nationalpost.com/afterword/jennifer-egans-a-visit-from-the-goon-squad-is-all-about-the-timing>.
- Gubrium, Jaber F. and James A. Holstein, eds. *Aging and everyday life*. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2005.
- Hassard, John, ed. *The Sociology of Time*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990.
- Hodkinson, Paul. "Ageing in a spectacular 'youth culture': continuity, change and community amongst older goths." *The British Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 2 (June 2011): 262-282. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-4446.2011.01364.x.
- Jaques, Elliott. "The Enigma of Time." In *The Sociology of Time*, edited by John Hassard, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 21-34.
- Jennings, Ros. "Popular music and ageing." In *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, edited by Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, 77-84. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Lusty, Natalya. "Riot Grrrl Manifestos and Radical Vernacular Feminism." *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (December 2017): 219-239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1407638>.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick traces: a secret history of the twentieth century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Maslin, Janet. 2010. "Time, Trashing To Its Own Rock Beat." *The New York Times*, June 20, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/books/21book.html>.
- Moling, Martin. "'No Future': Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's A Visit from the Goon Squad." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 72, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 51-77. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2016.0000>.
- Muggleton, David and Rupert Weinzierl, eds. *The Post-subcultures Reader*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003.
- Rambo Ronai, Carol. "Managing Aging in Young Adulthood: The 'Aging' Table Dancer." In *Aging and everyday life*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, 277-287. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2005.
- Reft, Ryan. 2012. "Chasing Narrative: Jennifer Egan's Sometimes Non-Linear Take on Time, Age, and Technology." *Tropics of Meta*, July 18, 2012. <https://tropicsofmeta.wordpress.com/2012/07/18/chasing-narrative-jennifer-egans-sometimes-non-linear-take-on-time-age-and-technology/>.
- Šubrt, Jiri. "The Problem of Time from the Perspective of Social Sciences." *Czech Sociological Review*, 9, no. 2 (2001): 211-224. Accessed December 16, 2019. https://sreview.soc.cas.cz/en/artkey/csr-200112-0011_the-problem-of-time-from-the-perspective-of-the-social-sciences.php.
- Taylor, Timothy Dean. *Music and Capitalism. A History of the Present*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, Amazon Digital Services, 2016. Kindle.
- Twigg, Julia and Wendy Martin, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Wawer, Olga. *Sociology & 21st century music*. WBP, Amazon Digital Services, 2016. Kindle.
- Zeisler, Andi. *Feminism and Pop Culture*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008.

AUDIOVISUAL SOURCES

Neumann, Andreas and Joshua Homme, dir. *American Valhalla*. 2017. An Eagle Rock Film Productions in association with Do Stuff Corporation and Siouxx Productions (USA).
Anderson, Sini, dir. *The Punk Singer*. 2013. Sundance Selects/IFC Films (USA).

Zdenko Zeman is a Senior Research Scientist at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar in Zagreb (Croatia). He received an MA in philosophy (1995) and PhD in sociology (2003) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb (Croatia). Zeman has participated in many international scientific conferences and is also the author of many papers in the field of the critical theory, sociological theories of modernity and modernisation, gender issues and socio-cultural aspects of ageing. Zeman's most recent research interests are qualitative methodology, critical age(ing) studies and representation of ageing in literature and media.

Marija Geiger Zeman is a Senior Research Scientist in Sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar in Zagreb (Croatia). She received an MA (2005) and PhD (2008) in sociology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb (Croatia). Geiger Zeman is the author of many papers and conference presentations focused on feminist theory, gender and age issues. Her empirical work is based on qualitative methodology. In 2010 Geiger Zeman received the *Annual Science Award* by the Croatian Parliament in the field of social sciences.