PROLOGUE

The scene is straight out of an early Sergio Leone film, something probably featuring Clint Eastwood: grunting and poorly dubbed savages enter, with bravado, the main hall of Tromaville High and begin tossing hapless underclassmen aside, threatening to overrun the heretofore well-ordered oasis of Knowledge in a postmodern wasteland of primitivism. "It may just be my woman's intuition, you guys, but somethin's goin' *ahn*. Look around you!" a short-skirted blonde frets, eyeing the brutes early in Lloyd Kaufman's and Michael Herz's campy 1986 film *Class of Nuke 'Em High*, a cross between Mark Lester's exploitation flick *Class of 1984* and Ted Post's revenge western *Hang 'Em High*. Remembering the straight-A student who only a day earlier had without warning retched up a noxious green phlegm before throwing himself out a third-floor classroom window, the Valley Girl is remembering the nuclear power plant upwind from her high school (the recent meltdown of which had been covered up by local officials) and spying suspiciously this ramshackle collection of outlaws known as the Cretins. "Remember those guys?" she asks her clique with a nod. "*They* were the Honor Society. *Now* look at them."

Flaunting wild and variegated Mohicans, tattered tees, scuffed leathers, and a fundamentally oafish demeanor, these brigands, *Class of Nuke 'Em High* suggests, are not just any fugitive mob, but have been converted by radiation into a gang of mindless *punks*. And just what sort

0.1. Spike assesses the literary canon in *Class of Nuke 'Em High* (1986). Used by permission of Troma Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.

of threat do these barbarians pose to the developed world? "I remember in debating class they suddenly stopped debating and they *beat up* Mr. Bluick," the blonde continues in a whisper to her rapt friends as around her grunting confederates stalk her classmates. "Yeah—the change was instant," the girl's letterman boyfriend Warren adds with a start, like a groundskeeper remembering where he mislaid his keys. He had been watching distractedly as one Cretin molested a coed. "I mean, there they are one day a bunch clean-cut preppies, and the next day they're a bunch of violent, perverted cretins."

These punks are, the film contends, the blood pouring from the elevator, the embodied return of the repressed. Embedded within this return is not only an obscene (sexual) violence and general misanthropy, but an aversion to intellectual activity of any sort. Serving as heralds of the purported cultural senescence captured by dozens of handwringing

headlines from the previous decade ("Decline in Reading of the Classics Causing Concern about Students' Intellectual Grasp" warned the May 29, 1977, edition of the *New York Times* as punk raged), the Cretins make clear that *reading* in particular is a pungent punk allergen.[1] In a droll tracking shot preceding the film's title sequence, two Cretins are shown seated alongside a series of teen archetypes: bimbos and jocks, nerds and preps. Gonzo, the bone-carrying, nose-ringed creep whose entire face has been tattooed pitch black, chews his mouthpiece and looks around maniacally while using his pen as an awl, engraving his notebook and shredding several sheets of paper in a one sweeping motion. Sitting to Gonzo's left, a skunk-haired punk named Spike steals a textbook from the classmate behind him and tears out pages one after another, examining them briefly through narrowed eyes—his head assuming the angle of an expectant dachshund—before handing the creased papers to his dingy punk muse who completes the crumpling of the book's inscribed knowledge, throwing the pages off-camera with a flick of her studded wrist.

By the time of *Class of Nuke 'Em High*, youth on both sides of the Atlantic engrossed in punk rock were desensitized to this ugly depiction of their cognitive and social faculties, having been told for years by their parent culture that they were useless, dimwitted, *anti*-intellectual even. "He had never seen the inside of a library," Caskie Stinnett smirked self-righteously in the pages of *Atlantic Monthly* as early as August 1977 of a punk rocker whose identity he holds secret, "had never read a book that was not written by Harold Robbins or Jacqueline Susann." Upholding his status as the vainglorious defender of high society earned in the pages of *Travel & Leisure*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, Stinnett was lamenting not merely rock music, but the eruption of *punk* rock in England and America. "They wear hand-ripped clothes and plastic garbage bags, mascara, swastikas, chains, dog

collars, and they have pierced nostrils through which safety pins are fastened," Stinnett wrote disgustedly, documenting with a shudder how punk songs "are interspersed with torrents of four-letter words, and the groups have such names as The Sex Pistols, The Damned, The Vibrators, and Clash." Seizing on this dread were Kaufman and Herz, who proffered the mutated version of a stereotype that since the late 1970s had portrayed punk as nothing less than the bastion of what to the vanguard seemed an entire generation of destructive, foul-mouthed youth loath to express an intelligent thought or be caught reading a book. Caricaturing Stinnett's horror, Kaufman and Herz proposed that punks, in their vulgar hysteria and philistinism, go so far as to annihilate not only pop culture but *the literary canon*.

Feeding this dread, this misrepresentation, were often punks themselves, many of whom baited such reactions, reveling in the fear they had generated in their elders and recognizing the satire embedded within films like *Nuke 'Em High*. "Instead of studying theory, we're going to get up and go," Teen Idles singer Nathan Strejcek screamed in "Get Up and Go" on the first record produced by Washington, DC's Dischord Records, a label known for its punk ethos. The Teen Idles' record came out the same year that anarcho-punks Crass lampooned in "Where Next Columbus?" not only Freud but Jung, Marx, Sartre, and Einstein and warned listeners not to take theory too seriously. Of course punk was "empty, shallow and trivial," English historian and *novelist* Stewart Home, an early punk proponent, argued in *Cranked Up Really High* fifteen years after Crass and Teen Idles but one year before including one of his short stories in a punk fiction anthology whose title page notes that "Punks Can't Read."[2] Rolling his eyes at several writers for attempting to intellectualize punk and postpunk subculture, Home calls punk rock a calculated doltishness, thinking perhaps of the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" and the Ramones' ode to idiocy "Pinhead," wherein

Joey Ramone chants "D-U-M-B / Everyone's accusing me!" Even Nirvana's Kurt Cobain got into the act, Home recalled, mugging meatheadedness repeatedly, from admitting "I feel stupid and contagious" on his band's breakthrough record *Nevermind* to moaning "I think I'm dumb" and "I take pride as the king of illiterature" on his band's terminal album *In Utero*. "After all," continues Home, "if punk rockers had preferred 'analysis' to 'rhetoric,' they'd have been attempting to organise a revolution instead of pogoing to three minute pop songs."[3] To claim otherwise, suggests Home with reference to Greil Marcus and Neil Nehring, is to engage in an intellectually dishonest mystification of punk that may be popular among highbrow necrophiles in the academy but misses the point of punk praxis. Or, as John Roderick, singer with Seattle group the Long Winters, put it as late as 2013 in a polemic essay for the *Seattle Weekly*, far from honing its adherents' critical thinking strategies, punk subculture created a caste of kids who merely "internalized [punk's] laundry list of pseudo-values—anti-establishmentarianism, anti-capitalism, libertarianism, anti-intellectualism, and self-abnegation disguised as humility," resulting in an intellectual ghetto where "dumbasses were teaching dumbasses."[4]

The consensus thus seems to be that to be punk means to oppose oneself to literature, erudition, even functional thought. But to conclude as much is a mistake. Home's invective and Stinnett's grousing at the impropriety of his progeny notwithstanding, a parade of song lyrics, interviews, and performances since the 1970s signal instead that "proto-punk," punk, and postpunk culture was and remains interested in not only critical thinking but literature, philosophy, and avant-garde art and theater broadly. Moreover, this attraction to books both contributes to punk aesthetics and politics generally and has held up over time, if not increased, in several punk scenes around the world. In addition to the literary pretentions of American proto-punks Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Tom

Verlaine, Patti Smith, and Richard Hell, for instance, consider the art schooling of English first-wavers Wire and the Mekons. Likewise, early California hardcore acts Bad Religion and Descendents were dismissed by "Dean" of the rock critics Robert Christgau, who called these groups "thesaurus rock" for their often forced use of polysyllabics—anechoic, enthalpic, irascible, pusillanimous—and their pedantic tone on record and in concert.[5] "When I was in high school I was looking for an origin narrative. I read Darwin's journal of his travels and that was very inspiring to me. I read *Origin of Species* in college and that helped me understand my own origins," explains Bad Religion's Greg Graffin, a graduate of the UCLA doctoral program in evolutionary biology whose father was an English professor and whose band referenced, over the course of several records, Hemingway, Henry Miller, Kerouac, Ludwig Boltzmann, Diogenes Laërtius, Spinoza, Richard Leakey, James Hutton, and other writers and scientists. "Fiction came later," Graffin adds, Salman Rushdie in particular.[6]

Long before the singers of Bad Religion, Descendents, and Offspring earned their doctoral degrees, though, Cleveland punks Pere Ubu named themselves after an Alfred Jarry play and Johnny Rotten noted his affinity for not only Oscar Wilde but Shakespeare—*Richard III* in particular.[7] In his widow's words, Joy Division singer Ian Curtis's reading list included "Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre, Herman Hesse and J. G. Ballard."[8] Taking their name from the writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, English postpunks Scritti Politti would reference French theory in the songs "Jacques Derrida" and "The Word Girl," calling their publishing imprint "Jouissance, Ltd."—a reference to one of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's more seminal concepts. All of this came before Birthday Party and Bad Seeds front man Nick Cave turned his affection for southern American gothic writing—William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor—into a handful of grotesque

novels, poems, and plays. For his part, Simon Reynolds notes repeatedly in his celebratory *Rip It Up and Start Again* how many punk and postpunk figures were "ravenously well-read" and steeped themselves in the prose of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Joseph Conrad, and Samuel Beckett, among other writers, paving the way for groups like Michigan's Bear vs. Shark, named for the Chris Bachelder novel of the same title.[9] Finally, Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon recalls having taken to "Nietzsche, Sartre, Balzac, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and all the other French thinkers, writers, and poets my high school felt it unnecessary to teach" long before she went on to include the ideas of Philip K. Dick and William Gibson in the music she made with her future- and ex-husband Thurston Moore, who too is a published author.[10]

"My life has been surrounded by books—growing up we were seriously *choked* by books," Minor Threat/Fugazi/Evens singer and Dischord Records cofounder Ian MacKaye, whose grandparents and parents were writers, told me, acknowledging a fondness for the work of Kurt Vonnegut, C. S. Lewis, and James Baldwin. "My grandfather, Milton MacKaye, wrote a series of true crime books in the 1930s and wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post*, and my grandmother Dorothy Cameron Disney wrote mysteries and then later did the 'Can This Marriage Be Saved' column for the *Ladies Home Journal*." According to MacKaye, during his time in Fugazi, a band whose name was taken from Mark Baker's Vietnam War memoir *Nam*, after his grandparents' deaths "[Fugazi would] drive up to my grandparents' house in Connecticut to rehearse and write songs, and their house was full of books. So, playing in the living room we'd do a song and then just look at the wall of books for a working title to use for the song. A lot of those titles we swapped out, but something like 'Lusty Scripps' [the title of Gilson Gardner's biography of newspaper publisher E. W. Scripps] was a song we never finished and so the title stayed."[11]