

DK: This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

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Punk Tarot

In this episode the arresting idea I want to share is the punk possibilities inherent in the Tarot.

Some time in the 1300s, playing cards from the Mamluk Sultanate made it over to Italy and began a fashion for gaming. The games played, Tarok or Tarocchi, from which the name Tarot comes, were based on winning tricks, and the packs had 4 suits and a separate group of trump cards. By the first half of the 1400s there is evidence that decks were being designed for rich families and through the rest of the century and into the 1500s the fashion for card games spread to other European countries.

In France, what we still use as standard playing cards were developed in the late 1400s. They had no separate trump cards and the suits were hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades which were simple shapes to print.

In the richer parts of society, the Tarot decks with their separate trump cards, offered the opportunity to create works of beauty, and the trump cards would incorporate scenes drawn from Greek and Roman legend, the bible, historical events, medieval theatre and folk stories. Artists would include the history of their patrons and families whilst lampooning their rivals.

The symbolism in the cards became increasingly rich and then later in the 1700s and into the 1880s the use of the cards for esoteric practices like divination began amidst a flowering of interest in spiritual practices from other cultures, particularly in France, where a fashion for Egyptian mythology was woven into the symbology linked to the claim that the Tarot deck originated as an encoding of Ancient Egyptian cosmology.

Layers of kabbalistic symbology were incorporated into the deck and attempts made to systemise the symbology and structure of the Tarot .

The creation of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, first published in 1909 and named for its publisher, author and illustrator respectively, was seminal, drawing together multiple influences and weaving a rich symbolic language that provided a template for other decks. This was the deck that was then published widely in the 60s when copyright on the images lapsed which led to an explosion of interest in the Tarot that continues to this day.

The Rider-Waite-Smith deck can serve as standard in understanding the pack both as a physical artefact and in its meaning and symbology.

The Tarot has 78 cards. There are 4 suits, called the minor arcana, each with a broad theme-

- Wands which represent inspiration & action,
- Cups which represent emotion & relationships,
- Swords which represent intellect & conflict,

- Pentacles which represent work & wealth.

For each suit there are ten numbered cards, ace to 10 which represent the raw emergence of the theme in cards 1-4, its development and challenges in cards 5-8 and culminates with cards 9 & 10 in a sense of completion for cups and pentacles and more a sense of overwhelm for swords and wands. There are 4 court cards for each suit representing different embodiments of the theme:

- the Page: a beginner's or child-like energy;
- the Knight: an impulsive, adolescent energy;
- the Queen: mature, nurturing leadership
- and the King: authority, and mastery.

The 22 trump cards, called the major arcana are separately numbered 0-21 and depict a kind of life journey taken by the fool- card 0- navigating society and the material world in cards 1-7, undergoing challenges while learning deeper personal discipline in cards 8-14, and engaging with the wider purpose of life and a sense of enlightenment and achievement in cards 15-21.

I have chosen, in presenting the Tarot as an arresting idea, to link it to the word punk and that deserves now a short contextualisation before bringing the ideas together.

The word 'punk' was borrowed from prison slang to apply to a musical movement emerging initially in the USA and UK in the 1970s. Punk described a stripped down, aggressive, guitar driven kind of rock. The music embraced simplicity- a well-known illustration from a fanzine in 1977 ran: *this is a chord, this is another, this is a third, now form a band-* and many musicians embraced the idea that you just needed energy and three chords to express yourself. This DIY aesthetic extended to the creation of zines promoting the scene, networks of small venues for bands to play at and independent record labels putting out small pressings, all of which made the music accessible. The originating, emotional heart of punk is captured by the phrase 'no future'- the chant through the Sex Pistols 1977 hit, "God Save the Queen" - capturing the sense of disillusionment and lack of hope amongst the young and working class communities.

Punk's emergence was destructive, anti-authoritarian and rebellious, but through that emerged a creative, eclectic, and innovative energy. Indeed the post-punk era in which I grew up in the UK was characterised by the emergence of bands and genres that took that creative and innovative energy in many different directions that had little to do with the musical feel of punk but everything to do with the sense of empowerment and unapologetic eclecticism.

The term 'punk' has been used in academic, artistic and cultural contexts where you can find punk sociology and punk pedagogy and literary genres like solarpunk or hopepunk. These coinages are signalling an ethos I would like to explore and apply to Tarot. For the purposes of the discussion I will discuss that ethos in three steps characterised as modes of punk. I think the development of the Tarot resonates with the punk ethos and makes the idea of punk Tarot rich and productive.

The first mode of punk is that of **destruction, rebellion and anti-authoritarianism**. Punk begins by rebelling, rejecting and tearing down. Destruction and rejection of preexisting hierarchies, traditions and ways of doing things allows us to be open to do something new, to take the best from what has been but bring in ideas from other places, listen to other

voices, to learn and create with each other rather than establishing and policing boundaries that mean certain ideas, genres, resources are off limits or incommensurate with each other.

Tarot has had a rich and varied history over the last 600 hundred years with many traditions, symbols, uses, influences and practitioners. However, there is no centralised authority or control structure. There are different versions of the Tarot and even the numbering and naming systems for the cards varies. So whilst there is enough commonality to make it relevant to speak of THE Tarot Deck, there is no home religion or tradition or ideology that can claim exclusive ownership and so nothing to prevent reinterpretation, playfulness and repurposing of the cards. There are common threads and a shared symbolic language but the cards are open for each user to make of them what they will. The cards emerged at a time of intellectual foment in the Renaissance and carry the imprint of their feudal origins, with kings and popes, knights and empresses. They draw on myth and Christian symbolism. But through their history, for this very reason, they have also been used to critique, satirise and undermine systems of authority. The Tarot lends itself to rebellion and anti-authoritarianism.

A common thread in the Tarot is the balance between hierarchy and equality. The presence of kings and queens, emperors and empresses clearly references the social hierarchy. In the original Mamluk decks the wands were polo sticks, but they were recast as wands or batons to depict the peasantry as the suits evolved to represent a social mapping of the four estates of medieval society- nobles, priests, merchants and peasants. But alongside this, the logic of the game and of the esoteric use of the deck meant that all cards were equally subject to Love, Death, the Devil and the Wheel of Fortune. As Helen Farley says in her Cultural History of Tarot,

Fortune had been grouped with both Love and Death, depicted as personifications of an active force behaving like a blind person, choosing people at random irrespective of age, sex or social position.

She suggests that the suits were seen as depicting the hierarchy in society whereas the major arcana depicted the major forces of life that could affect anyone, anytime with Death the great leveller.

Early Tarot decks had a pope and popess which caused consternation within the Catholic church with occasional attempts to ban cards or replace these symbols with cards considered less mocking.

In France in the 1700s the names were changed by Antoine Court de Gébelin to High Priestess and Hierophant as part of an attempt to de-Christianise the deck and allow links with other traditions.

From early in its history, there was a tradition of commentary and opposition to authority in the Tarot. The illustrations of early decks were used to assert the authority and claims of the families who commissioned them but also to lampoon unpopular rulers and elites. The cards produced by Etteilla, a French occultist, in the late 1700s aimed to popularize the

Tarot and provide a symbolic language accessible to all. His motives may have been commercial but the Tarot became and remains present in all walks of life.

In more recent years, the Tarot has been enriched by queer and feminist artists creating new decks, and by decolonial readings and non-Western reinterpretations which serve to undermine traditional associations such as kingship being exclusively male, or Western or white. Having their origin as a simple game and accreting multiple meanings and symbols over a long history, with no central authority, the Tarot can continue to be a tool for the creative destruction that punk does so well.

The second mode of punk is the **DIY ethos**. Punk emphasises do-it-yourself, small-scale, grassroots ways of creating. Tarot began as a game, and particularly since the publishing explosion in the late 60s, has become accessible to all and its uses have expanded over the centuries.

It is used as a tool for story-telling providing creative inspiration by introducing a random new element or giving a symbolic structure to work like Italo Calvino's novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, and bringing rich imagery to the films and comics of Alexander Jodorowsky and Grant Morrison as examples.

The Tarot has been used for divination- uncovering deep truths and mapping possible futures. Normally this kind of practice was reserved for priesthoods and controlled by institutions. The Tarot made this accessible to all. The rich symbolism of the cards has been used as a tool for self-discovery and reflection and to tools to think with where the idea of divination relates more to depth and insight rather than foresight. The idea of working with the symbology in group settings and with specific themes in mind, I will return to shortly.

There is no barrier to entry- anyone can call themselves a Tarot reader, anyone can play with the cards and interpret the symbols and guides are widely and freely available. That democracy of accessibility has brought educators, philosophers, artists, filmmakers, novelists to the Tarot as users and designers in increasing numbers.

The cards themselves have been remade and reimagined over and over. Antoine Court de Gebelin, a French pastor, proposed in 1781 that the cards were actually transcriptions of Egyptian esoteric knowledge and occultists since have sought to change and codify the cards to reflect this supposed origin. Whilst there is no evidence to support the claim, the point is that embedded in the history of the Tarot has always been the individual and group who research, rethink and redesign the cards, thus adding their new layer of meaning and perspective.

The third mode is that of **transgressive creativity**. The effects of punk on music were far more wide ranging than punk music itself- the movement awakened a generation to the idea that they could create music and had a voice no matter where they were and who they were. It is this idea of openness, of many futures as opposed to no future that is its power and joy. This creativity is inherent in Tarot through its history and on to today. Tarot involved bricolage from the start. Through the centuries it has absorbed influences from local politics, Egyptology, Kabbalah and various mystical traditions.

In the years since the Second World War, as the popularity and accessibility of the Tarot has exploded, there has been a proliferation of new decks and guides to the Tarot including reinterpretations of the cards by artists from queer, feminist, new age, indigenous perspectives. The Tarot is capacious enough to allow the cards to be rethought,

and the fact that it is steeped in a world of kings and queens, priests and peasants, allows these symbols to be critiqued and reinterpreted whilst the universal themes of relationships, wealth, power, love and hope, remain to be woven into new decks carrying new perspectives. The universal human experience remains, but always open to new interpretations.

I think there is also a punkish gonzo element to the Tarot. Something cartoonish and over the top that harks back to its gaming roots and allows for the best elements of play to be incorporated- the idea of taking seriously the need to play and of that play dissolving boundaries and rules. Some people will see Tarot as something restricted to professional readers, who use one method and tradition- for example a reading where which way up the card is drawn determines whether you read positive or negative interpretations. But all these rules can be transgressed- the positive and negative sides of any card are always available. You can be querent one day and reader the next, or a reading can be co-constructed by all concerned.

I have suggested here a punk reading of the Tarot that shows how it can be used to reflect on decisions in your own life, to open up creativity in your artistic practice, to be used by a group to reflect on shared futures and possibilities, to tell stories and provide a tool to think with. These uses already exist, and I think the punk reading provides a greater freedom and impetus to find the more anti-authoritarian, DIY and transgressive aspects of the pack, since insight into the rich origins of the Tarot suggests that the deck would reward such punkish play with the depth of its history and symbolism.

To give one practical example I would like to turn to the work of [Suzanne Treister](#), a British artist working in painting, digital and multimedia art with an interest in speculative fiction and esoteric belief systems. Much of her work focuses on the interface between power structures and technology, and the project I want to mention is HEXEN- a German term for witches. The project addresses cybernetics, the science of systems of feedback, control and self-regulation, and its application in technology. She has produced two Tarot decks, Hexen 2.0 in 2011 and 5.0 in 2025, in which she uses Tarot to explore the dual nature of cybernetics. She says:

Where HEXEN 2.0 analysed the legacy of cybernetics as embodied in Web 2.0 and systems of control, showing how Web 2.0 works as a societal controlling system, HEXEN 5.0 traces cybernetics' relevance to whole earth systems and how the cybernetic self-regulating feedback loops of the planetary ecosystem, which we have sent out of whack, need to be addressed through an understanding of the workings of the total global ecosystem.

Both decks have 78 cards, offered to the reader to use as they see fit, positioning the reader as having agency- not subject to the inevitability of government control or climate change or whatever other card is in front of them, but able to reflect on the card and play with new interpretations and possible futures that can flow from it.

The cards in HEXEN 5.0 depict topics from space colonisation to the climate crisis, surveillance capitalism to solar punk and from AI to Greta Thunberg. I picked one card at random from HEXEN 5.0 to illustrate the dialogue between the card meanings and her research. I turned up the Seven of Wands, a card traditionally associated with resilience

and defending yourself against challenges and attacks. In the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, a man stands on a hill armed with a stick facing six others in battle.

In HEXEN 5.0 the card is allocated to Regenerative Systems, exploring how cybernetic self-regulating feedback loops can be applied to repair the planetary ecosystem. She is focusing here on the positive use of cybernetics- such as deep ecology and living systems thinking, and design that is holistic and uses natural feedback loops such as permaculture and living buildings. Here is the traditional Tarot, reimagined for work with grassroots activists by an artist promoting ways to subvert existing systems of control to work for better futures on our planet.

She designed the deck for use by groups to work together to imagine positive futures and the very purpose of her Tarot is to challenge systems of control. She has done it through creating her own cards, mapping her research onto the traditional deck which creates a dialogue with their original meanings displayed through her beautiful watercolours referencing alchemical drawings from earlier decks.

I hope you have found looking at the Tarot through a punk lens to be an arresting idea. It is an approach which suggests blurring the line between the reader and querent to promote exploring together. It means treating the conventions of tarot reading and meaning with respect but not reverence so the Tarot becomes a tool for creating possibilities rather than a straitjacket.

The tradition of divination connotes an openness to discernment and the possibility of working towards alternative futures. The history of Tarot being rooted in card games brings playfulness. Story-telling can provide narrative structures to tell new stories. Self-knowledge and authoring becomes a chance to change and transgress our own roles. Creativity and artistic expression gives a way to draw together and interrogate ideas from different places across cultures and time in the unashamed and eclectic way punk has done in the musical realm.

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