

Introduction

Zines are unique, in the way that they unite the people who read and write them, and in the way that they seem to remain largely out of the limelight. A vast community of people communicate in this way, mainly underground, attracting little attention from the mainstream press. They are often the writings of those who don't fit into the accepted ideals of how people (particularly young people) *should* be, or what people *should* be interested in. Thriving behind of the spotlight and beneath the mainstream as they do, zines offer an alternative to the dominant culture, creating a forum for those whose opinions are not usually asked for.

With this in mind, i.e. zines as a unique form of communication, I propose to study them as an institution in their own right. By examining some zines, I intend to find out who the readers and writers of them are, the motives behind making a zine (particularly as they are predominantly non-profit), and the role that they hold within society. Also I intend to look at the way in which they manage to remain comparatively underground, despite having such a large following.

Aims and Methodologies

Because of the large scope of zines, and my own interests, I am going to focus on zines written by girls, with a personal content. I hope to gain contact with zine-writers, in order to gain primary recourses for analysis, through interviews, probably via e-mail, as zines are most accessible on the Internet.

Because of the nature of zines and the way that they are produced (in people's bedrooms, or slyly at work), to visit the institution that I am studying would be difficult to say the least; consequently my research will be mainly epistemological, focusing on the theories and ideas behind zine-making, and reading.

In many respects, following the vein of that done by the Chicago School of Sociology, as it is, ultimately, a study of people, though not through physical observation. By reading zines myself, and interviewing both their creators and readers, I hope to find out some of the philosophies, both personal and political, within them.

A Brief History of Zines

Before I go any further, I should make clear what I mean by ‘zine’ and where the name comes from. Zines in the format that we recognize them today, began in the U.S. in the 1930’s, when fans of science fiction, began to produce what they called ‘fanzines’. These were a way of swapping stories, analyzing sci-fi and communicating with each other, despite being a relatively invisible minority, within society.

About forty years later, in the 70’s, another group neglected by, and dubious of the mainstream press/culture, were the fans of punk rock music. Inspired by the lack of discussion and information available about the scene they were involved in, they began to recreate fanzines, in order to promote gigs and review bands amongst each other. In turn, using the medium in the same way the fans of science fiction did before them, as a means of finding out about events, and communicating with people with similar interests.

As more and more people, ignored by, or critical of dominant culture set up their own fanzines, the space they occupied grew and grew. The ‘fan’ seemed to be more regularly left off the ‘zine’ as increasing numbers were created about different subjects, until it has become irrelevant to many which contain little or nothing to do with music culture and fandom.¹

Definitions and Distinctions

The zines I'm going to be focusing on, i.e. with a personal content, are referred to as 'perzines', and feature articles to do with the aspects of the editors daily life; including work, socialising and relationships. They often feature poetry, drawings and even the author's own photographs. I will be focusing on paper zines, as opposed to those that exist solely on the web. These are often backed up on, or promoted with a page on, the Internet. It is impossible to ignore this development of technology, and its relation to paper zines as a result. The space occupied on the internet makes zines more visible and accessible, and of course, available to anyone, whatever their proximity.

While searching the Internet, I came across many zine home pages, e-zines and webzines, something that was initially a little confusing to distinguish between, so I will clarify the difference between these now.

Zine homepages can range from holding only a few details about the price and content of the zine, to elaborately designed pages with links, photographs, and examples of the zines' contents. They exist mainly as a way of promoting the zine, though can be used as an extension of the paper publication.

Webzines and e-zines exist solely on the internet, (see appendix 1, 2 & 3) which is the most significant difference. The creators of these don't make a paper zine, but instead, update and edit their e-zine/webzine as they desire.

There are pros and cons for each medium, the most obvious being the quick and easy nature of updating things on the web, as compared to the time consuming process of making, photocopying and distributing a paper zine. But, the failings of the paper zine are also its saviour, as many agree with the statement that ‘nothing beats the feel of a DIY paper zine in your hand’ (from an interview with Sophie, editor of *Antisocial Scarlet*, see appendix 4)

Something that needs to be defined also, is the different spellings of ‘girl’ within zines by females, and the differing appropriations of this spelling.

Riot Grrrl, is a term that came from the American punk scene, in Washington in the 90s, when young women fed up of the ‘scene’ being dominated by men began to set up their own bands, gigs, and zines, one of the most infamous being Bikini Kill. Indeed the lead singer of this now defunct band, Kathleen Hanna, is said to have coined ‘grrrl’ which came to be used by different branches within the movement.

This movement inspired women to continue creating zines, two of which, *Ben Is Dead*, and *Bust*, were publications set up to offer a more realistic approach to the experience of being a woman as they saw it, than mainstream publications like *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*.

“We decided to put something into the popular culture that would reflect women the way we knew them to be: smart, funny, sexy and undeniably feminist.”

Celina hex, writer for *Bust* (see appendix 5)

This began a new trend in zines, and riot grrl in America, and developed a large following over time.²

It was this movement that laid the way for Riot Grrrl and consequently the British zines that I have been studying. Some debate has occurred about the origin of riot grrrl, leading to the copywriting of riot grrl(2r's), by the Americans who claim they created it.³ But there is no strict definition, nor are the differences particularly vast.

Riot grrrl in Britain seems to have a less exclusive relationship to punk, involving a broader variety of people, and sharing more strongly than music tastes, a belief in the importance of feminism. But the feminism in them are relatively similar, both promoting active behaviour in girls, i.e. starting up bands, learning to play instruments, writing zines and so on.

Process and Research

My first searches on the Internet, brought up predominantly American zines, and I was interested in studying *Ben Is Dead* (now defunct), or *Bust* initially. I followed this up, and maintained a brief correspondence with Debbie Stoller, one of the founding editors of the latter (see appendix 6). Frustratingly, she broke the contact that we had, without giving reasons. But after more research, I realized how unsuitable *Bust* would've been in my study, unless I was looking at the more commercial aspect of zines. It is now a bona fide magazine (see appendix 7), and Debbie was probably right in realising its mismatch with the direction of my project.

The failure of this avenue of inquiry, led back to the study of that, which had been my primary aim. But because of its comparative invisibility, I had lost sight of, i.e. zines written by girls and based in Britain.

Riot Girl London (RGL), is an example of this type of zine, and after making contact with its editor's, Clair and Sophie, I began to examine how it fit into the zine world, and culture generally. From *RGL*, I soon made lots of contacts, gaining e-mail addresses of other zine writers, from Clair and Sophie.

I put together a questionnaire, featuring open-ended questions, asking about the technicalities of making a zine, from printing and photocopying to circulation and distribution, also asking questions about the reasons for doing this.

To correspond with this, I put together a more limiting questionnaire for members of the public, asking about their awareness of zines, their preconceptions of the

readers and writers of them, and where they thought zines belonged in society. I didn't use open-ended questions, because of the difficulty of getting the average person to take the time to fill out such things. I also kept the questionnaire fairly short, and put an option of handing it back, for people who didn't know what a zine was, fairly near the beginning, so that the answers I received would not be irrelevant. Because of the nature of these questionnaires (see appendix 8), it has been possible to record the results in pie charts, which feature on the next few pages.

Findings and Analysis of Questionnaire 1

48% of people that were aware of what a zine was

39% of people were not

13% were unsure

20% of people who knew what a zine was, had read one or more zines

77% of people had not

3% were unsure

23% of people who knew what a zine was, knew one or more publishers of a zine

77% of people didn't

75% of people considered zines subcultural

5% of people didn't

20% were unsure

54% of people considered zines political

3% of people didn't

43% were unsure

33% of people thought British zines could compete with American zines

13% of people didn't

54% were unsure

It is important to take into account that this survey took place at a university campus, and that over 60% of the people that participated in this survey were media students; which would suggest that the results would show people to be more aware of zines, than perhaps, a survey conducted in a supermarket would.

Still, the findings show that less than half of the people asked, could correctly define what a zine was, and we see this amount decrease in regards to whether these people knew the publishers of any zines, or whether they read any.

The majority of people considered zines to be both political, and subcultural, which is important to note, as it draws attention to the subterranean existence of zines, and their place behind, or below the dominant culture. In this respect, it is possible to see them as offering an alternative to the mainstream.

People who had read both American and British zines, generally thought that British zines *could* compete, but not enough people had read both, to make it an accurate response, with the majority stating themselves as 'unsure'.

The results of this survey overall, highlighted the extent to which zines exist as an alternative to the mainstream, and moreover their lack of visibility to the majority of people.

Findings and Analysis of Editor's Questionnaires

Before I begin to examine the responses of the writers of zines to my questions, I will give some details of them and the content of their zines.

Sophie is 20 years old, and the editor of *Antisocial Scarlet*. Her zine is by her own definition "a horribly personal zine"(see appendix 9) and features feminist rants, poems, photos and diary-esque pieces of writing.

She is also the joint-editor of *Riot Girl London (RGL)*, with Clair, also 20. *RGL* is a feminist zine that aims "to change society through active and creative means" (*Antisocial Scarlet*, issue 7).

Clair is the editor of *Hairspray Queen*, *Honey Spectacular* and *Sister Disco*, her zines focus on female issues with body image, "fat phobia, animal rights, feminism" (*Antisocial Scarlet*, issue 5), and feature rants, pictures, poetry and so on, also of a personal nature.

Bec is the author of *Starlette*, *Stormy Weather*, and most recently, *Spilt Milkshake*, "a riot grrrl feminist zine" (her own definition from interview, see appendix 10). Aged 21, she is a new (er) recruit to *RGL*, and has been publishing zines since she was 17.

Kirsty (21), publishes *Princess Superstar*, a zine with a less overtly feminist message, and more a mixture that she describes as "...inspiring stuff, personal stuff, pointless stuff that's just fun..." (response from interview, see appendix 11).

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Her zine features music reviews, lists, pictures and also, work from outside contributors.

Debbie Stoller is the co-founder of *Bust*, she is American and over 30.

Darby Romeo is the creator of *Ben Is Dead*, she is also American and over 30, her zine has recently become obsolete.

The reasons given for starting a zine were, in the majority of answers, correlating. The general consensus seemed to be that making a zine, gave the women the opportunity of having their opinions heard, and also empowered them, by changing their roles within society. Bec from *Starlette* says

“It’s just very liberating when you realize that you too can create something, you can be a producer, not just a consumer.”

(Interview response, see appendix 10)

When asked what they were hoping to achieve, the reasons were more varied, but still along the same vein. All of the women talked of zines as a form of communication, and a way of expressing themselves in a world that doesn’t often ask the opinion of the unknown. Sophie from *Antisocial Scarlet* said

“I basically felt/feel that my zine is an outlet for things I feel passionately about.”

(Response from interview, see appendix 12)

Most of the editors were in agreement as to what makes a good, and what makes a credible zine. All of them placed emphasis on the editor’s freedom

within the zine, and the necessity to use this freedom in the way that they believe to be right. Bec from *Starlette* wrote,

“A good zine to me is one that is exactly what the editor wants it to be. I enjoy all kinds of zines as long as they seem to be written by someone who genuinely believes in what they’re doing.”

(Response from questionnaire, see appendix 10)

Not surprisingly, credibility was linked to the authenticity of a zine, and privileged a handmade ethic, also the issue of selling out was mentioned, and compromising beliefs to gain support from advertisers.

“I guess zines that lack credibility could be seen as sell-out zines, zines that make profit, use advertising for profit...”

(Response from questionnaire, see appendix 10)

This consideration of profit as a negative repercussion of zine-publishing is probably what makes zines unique, and also what keeps them separate from, and largely hidden from the mainstream media. None of the girls that I interviewed made profit from their zines. Rather, many stated a loss of profits (see appendices 10, 11 & 12).

As to issues of production, distribution and circulation, all of the girls that I spoke to responded similarly. Most of them produced their zines, when they had the time free from work or university, as for distribution, they mainly sent to friends and relatives, and swapped with other zine-writers.

The editor's of zines tended to view the readers and writers of zines differently to those outside of the subculture. Sophie (*Antisocial Scarlet*) describes them as,

“Creative/passionate/expressive/political people”

(Response from questionnaire, see appendix 12)

Whereas a participant from the first questionnaire (filled out by a more general public) described them as “anally retentive” (response from questionnaire 1, see appendix 13), and “geeks” (response from questionnaire 1, see appendix 14)

Whichever way we view zine writers, it must surely be in a positive light, as with their publications they fight the causes that the mainstream press dismiss, and they tell the stories of those that the mainstream culture ignore.

The members of *RGL*, seemed to remain faithful to their mission statement through their writing. With their brand of feminism, which encourages the open enjoyment of sex, the expression of opinions and the general pro-active behaviour of females, they embrace, but also step away from older ideas of feminism.

In the *Riot Girl London* manifesto, they write,

“Riot Grrrl is inspiring, empowering and most of all fun, so why not join our group, or start your own, and help infiltrate society with REAL grrrl power. Forget the media lies- this is about equality, not superiority. Man-hate dos not figure in our beliefs.”

(Taken from *Riot Girl London*, issue 3)

All of the editors seemed to say things here that were backed up by the content of their own zines, and also seemed to be fair in their criticism and support of others. One problem that arises when we examine the manifesto is the mention of being ‘open to everyone’.

“Riot Grrrl has now evolved... we come from all sorts of backgrounds, like all sorts of music, dress in all sorts of styles... Riot Grrl is open to everyone.”

(Taken from *RGL*, issue 3)

Although like everything, it is subjective, and therefore not open to everybody; sexist, for example, or non-feminists (see appendix 9 and 15, the rants in issues 4 and 7, *Non-feminists* and *Ladies Against Feminism*).

Obviously, nothing is without its own judgments and prejudices, so it is perhaps, not a flaw of the members of RGL, as much as it is an

inescapable element of human nature. Still, it is interesting to draw attention to Riot Girl London's own ideologies.

Another problem that *RGL* faces is related to the desire to be heard, to have their voice expressed. All of the women shared a feeling that their zines were not so much opinion changing as "...preaching to the converted..." (see appendix 10), which poses a problem to those which hope to portray a message of the continued relevance of feminism in today's culture. The fact is, that if people are reading the zine, they are probably already aware, to an extent, of the theory behind the content.

Conclusion

Despite the contradictions and failings of zines, which are often their greatest successes and accomplishments, I consider them to be hugely important within society. For example the lack of profit-driven motivation, and the small and somewhat ‘cliquey’ distribution techniques employed by the editors, i.e. sending to friends and other zine-writers that you admire, are important components to their individuality, and in turn, their distinction from the mainstream media.

What started out as the American zine *Bust*, is now a bona fide magazine, and given the main principles of credibility within zines, it must expect criticism for ‘selling out’ (see appendix 16), but it is debatable whether or not the editors at *Bust* would see their actions in this way.

I think that, what zines like *Bust* are doing is problematic, considering zines’ largely anti-capitalist morals, and the values decreed a credible zine, but if its main incentive was to get its opinion out to many women, then how can it be criticised?

As Sophie from *Antisocial Scarlet* said,

“...if we want to change things then we need to get noticed by the media,

etc. That doesn’t mean selling out, it just means being louder.”

(See appendix 12)

If we listen to what Sophie said, then the worst *Bust* can be accused of is shouting shouted that extra bit louder.

Finally, I think that this world of zines is undeniably an established institution in it's own right. *Riot Girl London*, is so much more than just a zine. In an attempt to define *RGL*, Sophie, it's co-founder wrote,

“Over the years the number of members has grown and it seems that our main function is friendship and supporting each other's projects (zines, bands, events etc)... with much swapping of zines, fliers, etc... I think basically its about being surrounded with like-minded people.:

(see appendix 18)

This brings us back to my beginning point: zines *are* unique in the way that they unite the readers and writers of them, and offer a forum for these people to communicate. They step away from the usual hierarchy of things, where only those with enough money and connections can gain easy access to publication.

This appropriation of media, by people neglected by it, is the beauty of paper zines, they *are* empowering as *RGL* suggest in their manifesto, they shake up the standing order of the powers that be, even if only for a moment, and only underground. Offering a new way for voices to be heard, and valued for their diversity, rather than drowned out by a more socially acceptable, and recognised status quo.

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¹ Most of this information found in *Notes from underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture*, Stephen Duncombe

² Most of information taken from video 7605. *The Grrly Show*, Women Make Movies, 1990

³ Researched from *Girls: feminine adolescence in popular culture and cultural theory*, Catherine Driscoll, p.274