

# THE IRONY AND THE ECSTASY:

THE QUEER AGING OF PET SHOP BOYS AND LCD SOUNDSYSTEM IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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## ABSTRACT

The English duo Pet Shop Boys and American group LCD Soundsystem are notable for their representation as artists who entered and succeeded in the predominately youthful market of popular music and the hedonistic aesthetic of electronic dance music (EDM) at ages considered old for the industry: 32 for vocalists/lyricists Neil Tennant (Pet Shop Boys) and James Murphy (LCD Soundsystem). Neither of these bands makes straightforward EDM—Pet Shop Boys fall under pop and LCD Soundsystem can be considered post-punk—but both are influenced by the New York City dance scene of the late 70s and early 80s, and are characterized as ironic. I argue that Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem are ironic *because* of their belated, knowing position in a genre that privileges the infinite present and unproductive reproduction through repetition. In light of Lee Edelman's claim that irony is the queerest of rhetorical devices, the ambivalence of Pet Shop Boys' and LCD Soundsystem's ostensible lack of youth and the youthful temporality of their EDM aesthetic place them in a queer tension between notions of immediate authenticity and the distance of age.

KEYWORDS: aging, irony, temporality, LCD Soundsystem, Pet Shop Boys

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“Neil said the other day he’s now a young old person.” (Tennant is 63).

“Yeah, I think I am,” says Tennant.

“Whereas I’m still an old young person,” says Lowe.

What’s the difference?

“I’m still like a child,” says Lowe. “A stropopy child.”

So Tennant can’t behave like that any more?

“He never did,” Lowe says. “Always the serious one” (Potton 2017).

thank fuck we were never skinny and young, or at least i wasn’t. that always happens with bands... they aren’t fat when they come back, typically, just, i don’t know, thicker. i was lucky to start this band kind of fat and old, so there’s no, like “look how YOUNG they were!” shit to even find on the internet. i mean, we were younger and everything, but we weren’t young, if you know what i mean (Murphy 2016).

The above quotes from English electronic pop music duo Pet Shop Boys (Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe) and American dance-punk outfit LCD Soundsystem (James Murphy) demonstrate a queer, or at least non-normative, sense of temporality. In the interview with Tennant and Lowe, they not only insist that they are simultaneously young and old, but qualify these statements with the words “still” and “always”. Similarly, in his blog post announcing the impending reunion of LCD Soundsystem, James Murphy remarks that he and his bandmates were “younger”, but not “young”. In both cases, there is a sense of remaining the same, but also simultaneously being and not-being. Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem not only share this non-normative temporality, but also the label of “ironic” from the media and critics (for Pet Shop Boys see Frith 1988; Garratt 1989; Price 2002; for LCD Soundsystem see Host 2005; Abebe 2010; Carlick 2017; Terry 2019). I argue that their non-normative temporality in terms of age, along with their belated career success—Neil Tennant and James Murphy were thirty-two years old when their bands became famous—in a youth-oriented genre like electronic dance music creates this irony. Neither of these bands is strictly electronic dance music—Pet Shop Boys are most often considered a pop band, and LCD Soundsystem’s music references post-punk—but their music relies on core elements of EDM (use of synthesizers, samplers, drum machines and sequencers, repetition, looping, grooves) and often pays homage to the nascent dance music scene of 70s and 80s New York City. The repetitive and looping features of EDM, as well as its association with the alternative temporality of all-night clubbing environments, sit in contrast to the linear, teleological time represented by growing older.

Pet Shop Boys first gained popularity on the re-release of their best-known hit “West End Girls” in 1986, in the middle of Thatcherite neoliberalism, and James Murphy released his first single, “Losing My Edge”, as LCD Soundsystem in 2002, a time identified with post-9/11 New York City and the rise of hipster culture. While Pet Shop Boys began their pop

music career as queer artists in the midst of the AIDS crisis, James Murphy had experiences in a series of rock bands and as a DJ before co-founding the record label DFA Records in 2001. To date, Pet Shop Boys have released thirteen studio albums, their latest being *Super* in 2016, but have never regained the mass popularity of what Tennant refers to as their “imperial phase” in the late 1980s. LCD Soundsystem released three studio albums—arguably peaking with *Sound of Silver* in 2007, which is listed in *Rolling Stone’s* top thirty EDM albums of all time and compared with Pet Shop Boys’ 1988 album *Introspective* (Rolling Stone 2012)—before disbanding, an event that was documented in a film of their farewell concert at Madison Square Garden in 2011, *Shut Up and Play the Hits*. Murphy then announced the reunion of LCD Soundsystem in 2016, and subsequently released a new album, *American Dream*, in 2017.

Though the context differs between Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem, they both have worked within particularly singular visions throughout their careers, with the former noting that “We just do what we do, and sometimes something comes along, like EDM, and it seems we’re in the groove. Other times we’re working totally against it”, and the latter claiming that success came through being “accidentally current” (Wood 2013; Jones 2014). However, most pertinent to my argument is the way both bands utilize narrative and lyrics more than is typically expected in EDM, producing various subjectivities that remain ambiguous about aging and temporality, and in effect, performing age through language.<sup>1</sup> This performativity, similarly to Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, works by exposing the gaps between reality and its construction through language, and the impossibility of an original, pre-linguistic reality (1990). As cultural theorist Claire Colebrook notes in her overview of irony, “We write and think belatedly, from a textual condition we can neither master nor abandon” (2004: 110). In “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Paul De Man contrasts this distanced temporality of meaning in irony with the more representational unity of meaning in Romantic symbolism, demonstrating that the distance between signifier and signified in irony is both spatial and temporal. De Man writes that irony “relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality” (1983: 222). In other words, there is no resolution to the tension between unity and infinity on the one hand, and division and finiteness on the other.

In his study on irony and aging, gerontology scholar William L. Randall (2013) draws upon Lars Tornstam’s term *gerotranscendence*, which defines a “stage of development . . . in very late life especially in which the boundaries between Life and Death become increasingly ambiguous, as do those between Self and Other, Past and Future” (1996: 171). Though Randall uses gerotranscendence to argue that aging allows a person to better accommodate contradiction and ambiguity, there is also an interesting corollary in the temporal and subjective instability of gerotranscendence and the unfixity, or “oceanic feeling-tone” in Freudian terms, of EDM. Just as aging prompts one to live one day at a time, or in the “center of the moment” as Barbara Frey Waxman defines it, EDM is often associated with an eternal present in losing oneself in dancing and the music, sometimes for days (1997: 135). In generating this non-teleological temporality, the repetitive beats and grooves in

EDM confound the idea of original and copy, much as irony reveals the impossibility of an original and singular subjectivity.

There has been a variety of scholarship published on irony in music, including Katherine L. Turner's edited collection *This is the Sound of Irony: Music, Politics and Popular Culture* (2015) and Lars Elleström's *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (2002). Scholars have also explored irony in various popular music genres, such as new wave (e.g. Kronengold 2008; Cateforis 2011), rap and hip-hop (e.g. Jenkins 2015; Shryock 2015), electronic music and electroclash (e.g. Biddle 2004; Luvaas 2006; Madden 2011) and indie rock (e.g. Atchison 2011). Among these studies are differing approaches: some focus on the verbal irony to be found in lyrical content, others look at musical structure itself. Elleström supports the latter approach by arguing that if "music has the capacity of 'saying' things that are 'different' from what words say, it must also have the capacity of saying various things that are different from each other" (2002: 212). As Turner remarks in her introduction to *This is the Sound of Irony*, "musical irony is not a unified theory but a web of overlapping ideas, disciplines and treatments of dissemblage occurring within a musical framework that investigates the 'sound of irony' and its inevitable companion, the 'irony of sound'" (2015: 6). Since music is innately temporal, it lends itself to the inherent spatio-temporal implications of irony:

The ironic subject does not just take part in the discourses and norms that are present; she can ask whose norms these are and whether they are valid. Irony allows for detachment and an 'eternal' point of view; the ironic self can question whether life might not be otherwise, whether 'we' might create ourselves differently. Indeed, irony detaches itself from any recognised 'we' in order to question and disrupt accepted norms. Irony is provocative, disruptive, but also hierarchical—setting itself above everyday life and opinion (Colebrook 2004: 122).

This simultaneous existence within the present and an externality from time itself allows one to judge actions and beliefs while admitting one's own complicity (Colebrook 2004: 120). In De Man's view, language splits subjectivity and precludes an authenticity of an original self. Therefore, irony is regarded as a knowing position, placed in a position above or outside of the self, but also an ultimately unknowing one, in that there is no promise of a future resolution of meaning or total understanding. These concerns between irony and meaning, temporality, authenticity and knowingness are at play in both the music and identity of Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem.

Music critics and scholars alike have read Pet Shop Boys and their music as ironic (e.g. Hawkins 1997; Smith 2001; Hawkins 2002; Hughes 2012), or at the very least ambiguous (e.g. Textor 1994; Maus 2001; Balfour 2002; Maus 2013), and much of this ambiguity circulates around their queer sexuality. Pet Shop Boys themselves have acknowledged this perception of them in songs like "Yesterday When I Was Mad", when they lambaste their critics by impersonating their passive aggressive description of Tennant and Lowe as "Expressionless, such irony, although your voice is weak". This perceived expressionlessness

and inauthenticity in Tennant's vocal style is often read as ironic, and this is a feature he shares with James Murphy whose "flat, disaffected style of singing gives the impression that he's above it all, not quite dissociating but capable of floating free from the scene" (Hsu 2017). In studies on the ironic tone of voice (e.g. Kreuz and Roberts 1995; Rockwell 2000; Bryant and Fox Tree 2005), ironic vocal cues tend to be flat intonation, nasality and slow tempo, and can sometimes be confused with deception, which I would argue is a form of inauthenticity. The inauthenticity of Tennant and Murphy's vocal style is shared with electroclash artist Tiga, the subject of Stéphane Girard's article "(Un)originality, Hypertextuality and Identity in Tiga's 'Sunglasses at Night'" (2011). In this article, Girard usefully connects the issue of authenticity with gender politics, contending that music, such as pop and EDM, are often seen as less authentic because they are feminized, or in the case of EDM, the gendered self is ambiguous or non-existent, a blurring that challenges the naturalization of patriarchal, heteronormative authenticity. The blurring and doubleness of meaning that often define irony have also been noted in Pet Shop Boys' slippage between artificiality and authenticity, and play with notions of high and low art (Smith 1995; Butler 2003). As Ian Balfour observes in his essay "Queen Theory: Notes on the Pet Shop Boys", there is an excessiveness to Pet Shop Boys' simplicity; by using minimal language, they open themselves up to multiple meanings. In other words, Pet Shop Boys' meaning is more fragmented and unresolved than unified, fitting into De Man's temporality of irony.

Unlike Pet Shop Boys, LCD Soundsystem has not yet been taken up extensively in scholarship however, music critics and journalists have been particularly interested in the interplay of irony and sincerity in James Murphy's music, especially in relation to early twenty-first-century hipster culture.<sup>2</sup> Ryan Leas, the only critic to have written a monograph exclusively about LCD Soundsystem, writes that Murphy "would seem to be at the pinnacle of the hipster generation's supposed mode of existence, that ironic detachment" (2016: 23).<sup>3</sup> Leas also writes of the first time he saw Murphy perform and the realization of his earlier misapprehension when having only heard his music: "he looked old, already. Older than expected, at the very least" (2016: 18). This surprise around his age, as well as the apparent incongruence of his age and the kind of music he creates, highlights the other main focus of critical and journalistic attention. The subtitle of Jody Rosen's article for *Slate* succinctly combines both of these defining elements of Murphy's profile: "how a chubby 'old' guy became king of the hipsters" (2011). Murphy is ultimately representative of old age and youth.

Taking Lee Edelman's assertion that irony is the "queerest of rhetorical devices", I argue that, regardless of sexuality, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem can be read as queer in their relationship to heteronormative notions of aging and maturation (Edelman 2004: 23). In their studies of aging music fans in various genres, Andy Bennett (2013), Paul Hodkinson (2011) and Jodie Taylor (2010) demonstrate that fans' relationships to popular music can be negotiated in different ways through the process of aging, including taking on the role of mentor to younger fans in a particular scene, shifting the collective norms within a subculture, and challenging heteronormative temporalities by continuing to expand along

with a music scene (Taylor 2010: 903-04; Hodkinson 2011: 278; Bennett 2013: 123-50). However, Taylor's work is most useful in its focus on specifically queer temporalities. Discussing the "stretched-out adolescences of queer culture makers", Judith Halberstam calls this non-teleological refusal to grow into heteronormative adulthood an "epistemology of youth" (2006: 3). Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman pushes against heteronormative time to identify queer time as defined by "asynchrony, anachronism, anastrophe, belatedness, compression, delay, ellipsis, flashback, hysteron-proteron, pause, prolepsis, repetition, reversal, surprise", and several of these features can be found in the work of Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem (Freeman 2010: xxii). In many ways, these artists refuse to "grow up" partly because their subjective time does not obtain with the time perceived as their actual ages; they are simultaneously always late, frozen in the present, and infinitely open to anteriority. Due to their already belated beginnings in a musical genre where the expectation is youth, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem perform non-normative aging and produce irony, and they do this in two ways: through the verbal irony of their lyrics and vocals, which indicate their knowingness and their ambiguous relation to age and temporality, and through the ironic structure of their music, which uses the existing temporal characteristics of electronic dance music whilst merging them with other genre conventions.

#### BELATED BEGINNINGS, THE ETERNAL PRESENT, AND IM(MORTALITY): VERBAL IRONY IN PET SHOP BOYS AND LCD SOUNDSYSTEM LYRICS

Neil: Well I was quite old when the first album came out. I was nearly 32.

Andrew Sullivan: Which as a pop star is ancient, right?

Neil: It's insanely old. I was a sort of a formed person (Sullivan 2009).

"Dude, I was like 31, 32 when 'Losing My Edge' came out. It's a very different thing being able to withstand the pressure of being the cool guy on the NME Cool List – when you're 19, 22 it's a very different thing" (Bidder 2009).

Due to their genre hybridity, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem are not straightforward electronic dance music, and one of the most prominent areas of difference is in their use of lyrics and narrative. If EDM includes lyrics and vocals, they tend to be short, repetitious and certainly not meaningful as narrative. In his book *Unlocking the Groove*, Mark J. Butler makes the distinction between a song and a track, the former more common in describing disco, classic house and garage—genres that feature prominent vocals and can be identified as a complete unit more readily—and the latter used to label instrumental styles of EDM with no discernible beginning or end, such as techno, drum and bass and hardcore (2006: 39, 41). By using the form of song rather than track, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem somewhat disrupt the expectations of the EDM genre whilst using lyrics to describe and comment on temporality in dance and clubbing scenes in ambiguous ways.

Despite the fact that most Pet Shop Boys songs are structured like conventional pop songs in terms of narrative and length, Ian Balfour notes that the “ideal Pet Shop Boys song lasts forever. . . . there is something in the structure and syntax of a Pet Shop Boys tune that suggests the song could—and probably should—‘go on and on forever’” (1991: 6). He argues that this “pervasive preoccupation with infinity” is evident in the Pet Shop Boys’ “refrains of truncated sentences that never end” (1991: 11). Balfour points to the implied ellipsis at the end of several Pet Shop Boys’ lyrics: “you were always” from “Always on My Mind”; “you can’t stop falling” from “Love Comes Quickly”; and “left to my own devices, I probably would” from “Left to My Own Devices”. Balfour locates the queer temporality of Pet Shop Boys music in their use of language: “vertiginous movement backward, forward, and back again in time is supplemented by its eccentric grammar (‘We were never being boring,’ a phrase that yokes together finitude and infinity)” (1991: 21). The elliptic structure works with the ellipsis as device to produce both repetitive infinity and an active present even as the lyric may negate itself by using past tenses. Simon Frith also comments on Tennant and Lowe’s odd temporality, but instead sees their songs as a paradoxical combination of the static and the anticipatory or belated. He contends that “it’s as if the spaces they occupy are actually frozen moments in time, the moments just before and just after emotion” (Frith 1996: 8). This observation echoes comments made by Neil Tennant about the rationale behind their promotional photographs: “we had the idea they should look like stills from films: ‘something just happened’ or ‘something is about to happen’” (Heath 1990: 95).

Another example of this ambiguous temporality specifically related to age can be found in “Young Offender” from Pet Shop Boys’ 1994 album *Very*, a song that recounts the narrative of an older man’s attraction to a much younger one. The line “I’ve been a teenager since before you were born” stands out because the use of the present perfect complicates the meaning. Because the present perfect denotes an action done in the past but continued in the present, the lyric can be read as the narrator’s simultaneous old age and youth. It is knowingness, but also an expression of enduring hipness and relevance. This ironic temporality can also be found in the “I was there” refrain in LCD Soundsystem’s first single “Losing My Edge”. Murphy narrates his own increasing obsolescence in the face of younger musicians and fans superseding him. His assertion of being present at multiple milestones in popular music history, including “I was there in 1968/I was there at the first Can show in Cologne”, are clearly meant to be temporally impossible because Murphy is not old enough and it is unlikely anyone could have physically witnessed them all, but they are also a metaphor for his knowingness and justification for his own music creation in a scene that does not accept or expect his age. He manages to encapsulate the early history of electronic dance music in a few lines, “I was there in the Paradise Garage DJ booth with Larry Levan/I was there in Jamaica during the great sound clashes/I woke up naked on the beach in Ibiza in 1988”, and undercut the young hipsters he views as his usurpers by accusing them of “borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered Eighties”. At the same time, it is clear that he also borrows nostalgia for times and places he himself only remembers through mediation.

“Losing My Edge” brings attention to the ostensible queerness of the hipster figure in terms of temporality and age. In his book *The Sacred and the Profane: An Investigation of Hipsters*, Jake Kinzey questions “how long hipsters can ‘bend the stick’ between love of nostalgia (and the infantile) and an equally strong desire for the aged . . . before it finally breaks” (2012: 32). Kinzey attempts to understand this atypical temporality of the hipster aesthetic through Susan Sontag’s notion of camp, writing that hipsters have a “detachment from this reality, a refusal to be fully complicit with what is going on now. The hipster attempts to preserve their individuality by negating the world around it” (2012: 49). This detachment is then perceived as irony, and displays the breakdown of the adult-child binary in the age of neoliberalism, which appears in genres and times besides hipster culture (see Wodtke 2018). The same distancing and detachment can also be understood in relation to De Man’s irony and the impossibility of truly engaging and understanding reality through a world described and comprehended through language. In his book about LCD Soundsystem’s second album *Sound of Silver*, Leas describes it as “the kind of album that makes you feel like a badass kid at the same time as it makes you feel like a jaded adult”, and this “ironic reference and . . . emotional resonance” is inflected by assumptions of age and how it interacts with time (2016: 25, 30).

To further illustrate the ironic temporalities at work in Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem lyrics, I will compare “Tonight is Forever” from Tennant and Lowe’s first album *Please* with “Tonite” from LCD Soundsystem’s latest album, *American Dream*. In Pet Shop Boys’ “Tonight is Forever”, Tennant sings of a dance floor encounter that appears to be both ecstatic and static:

It will be like this forever  
If we fall in love

Tonight is forever, tell me now you don’t disagree  
Tonight is forever, open the door, you hold the key  
Tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight  
Tonight is the first night

We don’t need any more when we dance  
I don’t think of the future tonight

The present temporality of “tonight” is juxtaposed with the infinite temporality of “forever”, but implies futurity and linear time in the use of “the first night”. The narrator does not think of the future even as one seems to be planned with additional nights following this one. Another way of reading these lyrics is to see “tonight” as an idea or embodied feeling, one in which the narrator and their love interest inhabit a subjective time at odds with teleological time assumed to be elapsing in the external world, and indeed in the timeframe of the song itself.



James Murphy could be referring to a song like “Tonight is Forever” in his song “Tonite”:

Everybody’s singing the same song  
 It goes “tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight”  
 I never realized these artists thought so much about dying

...

And all the hits are saying the same thing  
 There’s only tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight, tonight  
 Then life is finite  
 But shit, it feels like forever  
 It feels like forever

...

You’re missing a party that you’ll never get over  
 You hate the idea that you’re wasting your youth  
 That you stood in the background oh until you got older  
 But that’s all lies  
 That’s all lies

Even as he equates the trope of “tonight” in popular music as a reminder of mortality, he maintains that it *feels* like forever. This statement could be understood in different ways: life goes on too long and aging is tiring, and life can feel infinite when one is in the middle of a dance music experience of the kind that makes sense of a “tonight” refrain. In fact, the music backing this song sounds like the very music Murphy is dissecting. The frantic sense of time slipping away and youth being wasted is negated as lies. The implication is that there will be more “tonights” much like the “first night” in “Tonight is Forever”. Aging both happens and does not happen. Furthermore, Murphy playfully references Adorno’s negative dialectics in the line, “I’m offering you a chance to get even/But oh, you know very well the dialect of negation”, perhaps offering his own version of unresolved processes, and condemnation of linearity and progress. The music video for “Tonite” compounds the sense of infinite repetition by featuring Murphy walking along the perimeter of a rotating circular stage as the rest of the band plays in the centre. Once again, the supposed knowingness of age sits alongside an eternal present of sameness, two sides of the same coin.

Tennant and Lowe are representative of this duality, too. In his 1988 article about Pet Shop Boys for the *Village Voice*, Simon Frith writes,

I enjoy Morrissey’s over-the-top gesture of refusal—no sex! no sales! no fun!—but I’m too old to take it seriously, which is why, for me, Pet Shop Boys have a more profound point to make. . . . At their best the Pets capture that sense of psychic space, that anticipatory *tingling* moment just before the money changes hands, when we know that this will be the record, the shirt, the dance, the sex to change our lives, *and* they share the knowledge that the moment has already gone, the choice is made, our lives remain the same (Frith, 1988: 9).

By contrasting Morrissey and Pet Shop Boys in this passage, Frith implies that Morrissey's music is too idealistic in a young person's way, whereas Pet Shop Boys are capable of both capturing the affective charge of futurity without ever reaching a unified resolution; they are effectively remaining in stasis rather than progressing, and this way of being is held in tension with the conventional forward motion of heteronormative maturation. In Chris Heath's book *Literally*, Tennant states, "I've always tried to write about *adult* concerns in pop music" (1990: 147). The implication is that pop music is generally not about what are considered adult concerns, but that Pet Shop Boys provide a double perspective through their simultaneous occupation of different temporalities, an ironic "double perspective that invokes two incongruous worlds: the possibility of could or should be, glimpsed in the face of what is" (Clift 1999: 539). For example, Pet Shop Boys' song "Why Don't We Live Together" acknowledges the doubleness of this conventional milestone of heteronormative maturity, "I may not always love you/you may not care/but if we should live together/there's something we could share". Similarly, on "Saturday Night Forever" from *Bilingual* they invoke the infinity of tonight, but Tennant adds, "I know/that it's not gonna last".

Pet Shop Boys end their 2014 record *Electric* with "Vocal", a song that seems to comment on the preceding music on *Electric*, and more generally on Pet Shop Boys and their temporal position:

I like the people, I like the song  
 This is my kind of music  
 They play it all night long  
 I like the singer, he's lonely and strange  
 Every track has a vocal, and that makes a change  
 And everything about tonight feels right and so young  
 And anything I wanna say out loud will be sung

Once again, they evoke "tonight" as a representative of the oceanic feeling-tone of electronic dance music, a feeling that comprises both "*loss* (of differences between self and others, of time and space, of words, images and the senses)" and "*gain* (of unity, of timelessness and eternity, of control, joy, contact and ineffability)" (Malbon 1999: 108). At the same time that it revels in an eternal youth and borderless temporality, the song also acknowledges difference through self-referentiality. Put differently, the song title, "Vocal", and the lines "I like the singer, he's lonely and strange/Every track has a vocal, and that makes a change" could be read as describing music like that of Pet Shop Boys; Tennant's vocals are often interpreted as lonely and strange. Moreover, Pet Shop Boys remain an outlier in current electronic dance music in that they often use vocals in a conventional narrative song structure, an element that is associated with early dance music and an older audience. The trackiness of several of the songs on the rest of *Electric* ("Axis", "Shouting in the Evening" and "Bolshy") are not typical of Pet Shop Boys and emphasize the pull between their contemporaneity and their different "kind of music".

For LCD Soundsystem, there is a similar merging of various temporalities, or as José Esteban Muñoz describes this convergence, “ecstasy” (2009: 189). Their *Sound of Silver* album, which according to Leas is “an album built for and off of youth”, emphasizes this distanced, unresolvable temporality (2016: 45). For example, the titular song consists only of the following verse chanted multiple times:

Sound of Silver talk to me  
 Makes you want to feel like a teenager  
 Until you remember the feelings of  
 A real live emotional teenager  
 Then you think again

The fact that the entire song repeats these five lines over and over again over an EDM background creates an inescapable loop that obfuscates meaning. There is a yearning to return to the past and feel like a younger person, but also a reluctance to experience the reality; at the same time, the line “Then you think again” refuses to resolve. The narrator of the song thinks again *again*, creating an ambivalence over feeling like a teenager and not feeling like one. Just as Pet Shop Boys’ ellipses and ambiguity produce a “syntactic open-endedness . . . co-existing with the structural infinity of the extended and extendable mix”, the lyrics of “Sound of Silver” fuse with the relentless beat of the music to create a similar structural infinity without linear progress and a stable subjectivity (Balfour 1991: 11). Like Pet Shop Boys, LCD Soundsystem produces the type of irony that “comprises a series of disruptive acts that shatters the illusion of an organic, linear time and repeatedly forces one back to a blind present” (Adlington 1997: 30). The knowing position of Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem’s age distances them from youth even as their repetition and oceanic feeling-tone holds them in an endless present. However, if Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem’s lyrical open-endedness is part of their unpredictability, as Balfour argues, then how does this reconcile with the predictable, repetitive yet accumulative beat of their electronic dance music?

#### REPETITION, NON-PRODUCTIVE REPRODUCTION, AND THE GROOVE: STRUCTURAL IRONY IN PET SHOP BOYS AND LCD SOUNDSYSTEM MUSIC

Chris Lowe: There’s too much information for your brain to assimilate . . . ‘Cause dance music’s not about that, is it? Dance music’s about repetition. This was just that (“Track by Track: Pet Shop Boys and Stuart Price on Electric”).

James Murphy: That’s where I think meaning is . . . I mean, anything that’s resolvable is boring, musically. And if it’s too chaotic, you don’t feel tension, it’s chaos (Chinen 2007).

In terms of sound, both Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem notably recall the New York City dance scene eclecticism of the late 70s and early 80s. Their music sonically references clubs like the Paradise Garage, Mudd Club, Area, Danceteria and the Funhouse, which

played a mix of new wave, post-punk, hip-hop, motorik, early house and techno, disco, punk and funk; Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force would be played in the same set as Yazoo and Inner Life, and Gang of Four would be spun alongside Kraftwerk and Kurtis Blow.<sup>4</sup> This was the scene from which New Order and Madonna gathered inspiration in the 80s, leading to a fertile cross-pollination between New York and Manchester via Factory Records and their Hacienda night club. Tennant and Lowe have spoken about their preference for this era of clubbing in New York (see Robinson 2013; International Music Summit 2016), first recorded music in New York with Hi-NRG producer Bobby Orlando and eventually played at the Hacienda in 1992 (Hook 2009: 245). Furthermore, they have acknowledged the influence of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and Afrika Bambaataa on their breakthrough hit “West End Girls”, and their band name alludes to the Peech Boys, a New York City dance music group that included Paradise Garage’s Larry Levan (Heath 1990: 108; Nika 2010; International Music Summit 2016). The New York-Manchester dance scene also became an obvious reference point for James Murphy’s DFA record label in the early 00s. Many of the bands that Murphy mentions in “Losing My Edge”, including PiL, The Normal and Mantronix, were played in New York clubs during the early 80s. In fact, the hybridity that defines Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem’s approach to EDM is rooted in the genre-agnostic dance music scene of this time.<sup>5</sup>

The period is documented, and to some extent romanticized, by Tim Lawrence in his books *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (2003) and *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983* (2016). Part of this idealization is linked to the scene’s ambivalence towards categories of age. Lawrence describes the polymorphous child-like atmosphere, which acted as “the perfect milieu for experimental regression . . . and the sheer density of bodies accelerated the transformation from autonomous adult to child-like dancer” (2003: 25). Cultural critic Tavia Nyong’o uses Freud’s concept of the oceanic feeling-tone to describe disco, and its association with a sensual, polymorphous existence that breaks down the borders between the subject and the outside world (2008: 105). Tennant makes a point of connecting Pet Shop Boys’ creativity with childness: “I think it’s really important to stay connected to that childish, playful element to making music. Some people cut themselves off from that when they become a ‘grown up’... and when you do that, you generally cut yourself off from your own creativity” (Rachel 2013).

Furthermore, EDM evokes childness in its use of repetition, which is often associated with childlike behaviour and regression (Adlington 1997: 12; Garcia 2005: 1.1). Though this repetition could be interpreted as the “sound of the unobtainable, time turned back on itself in an eternal loop”, it can also be heard as an unresolvable dialectic between linear and vertical rhythmic development, which Hawkins describes as “*oppositional*”, or what I suggest is ironic (Frith 1988: 8; Hawkins 2003: 97). This sense of both linear and vertical progression within the ostensible stasis of a repetitious loop can be seen in James Murphy’s description of his song “All My Friends”, which was inspired by Joy Division’s “Transmission”. He describes “Transmission” as “the same thing the whole way through,

and without any kind of embarrassing rockist gesture. It starts off so gentle, and becomes so *fucking* overwhelming. By the time he's going, 'Dance, dance, dance to the radio,' your head's exploding. And I wanted to see if I could make a song *without* people playing together. Just do it all myself by doing it in layers" (Harris 2017). This account begs one of the main questions in relation to EDM structure: "when will it change next, and how will it remain the same?" (Garcia 2005: 6.2). The music seemingly expands in two different dimensions at once whilst in an endless present of monotonous rhythm. On the other hand, Pet Shop Boys often curtail formal development to emphasize non-linear trajectories. For example, in his article about Pet Shop Boys' cover versions, Mark Butler argues that their cover of U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name" alters the musical structure of the original to inhibit the growth of the song, starting in a brash manner rather than building to it (2003). This flattening of climax, or arrested development, markedly works in a contrary way to "All My Friends", but in both cases the ground of the music overwhelms, but doesn't obliterate, the figure, a posited characteristic of rave music (Tagg 1994). Tennant and Lowe, and Murphy use ground to create a queer repetition and reproduction without futurity, or an irreconcilable future. In this sense, their temporal irony becomes a "series of disruptive acts that shatters the illusion of an organic, linear time and repeatedly forces one back to a blind present" (Adlington 1997: 30). At the same time, there is a "desire to be in the groove, at least in terms of audio verisimilitude", which also allows them to "depart from the present" (Hawkins 2016: 39).

Notwithstanding the temporal ambiguity and strangeness of their lyrics, as well as their manipulation of linear and vertical sonic dimensions, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem both keep precise rhythms, not the more nuanced grooves of other dance music outside of EDM, such as funk and soul; there is not a leaning into or away from the beat. In his 2013 Red Bull Music Academy lecture, James Murphy expresses his preference for being on top of the beat. Notably, this is a repetitious, visceral affect that captivated him as a child; he describes it as "this relentless kind of nodding thing, like this hypnotizing thing. I was always really entranced when things were really hypnotizing. I used to listen to humming machines, anything that was kind of repetitive and loopy . . ." (Gross 2010). In 2011 the music website *Pitchfork* produced an annotated discography of LCD Soundsystem's work in which they often remarked on the prominently locked groove, which can be understood as an embodied feeling (Roholt 2014).

In the face of the failure of semantic language, the embodied groove and repetition of the EDM beat takes over. The bodily pleasure of dance music, or the *jouissance*—"transcendent, indescribable presubjective and prelinguistic bliss" of childhood—achieves what De Man argues is impossible, but only addressable through irony (Hanson 2014: 390-91). De Man's irreconcilable subject can perhaps be temporarily reconciled or transcended in phenomenologist Alfred Schütz's concept of the "vivid present" in music (1951). The vivid present is a time that musician and audience enter into and experience together as a shared subjective temporality, which he interestingly describes as "growing old together". Therefore, Schütz appears to be juxtaposing an atemporal subjective present with a linear idea of aging.

Whether a vivid present or *jouissance*, or perhaps even a gerotranscendence, the experience of EDM does produce a time outside of normative temporality. In fact, Frith asserts that the purpose of dance music like disco is “to encourage its hearers to do nothing but listen to it. Not even think” (1978). This absence of thought, and thus, an overabundance of presence is aptly illustrated by Kieran Dahl in his article about using techno music to ameliorate his depression. When immersed in the repetitive beat, Dahl writes, “there was no room in my head for intrusive thoughts” (2017). He goes on to describe depression as

a disease of contradictions and opposites. . . . You’re anxious of what tomorrow will bring, yet you’re certain you’ll feel no different. . . . Your mind is ablaze with distant memories of roads not taken, yet you can’t remember why you just walked into a room. . . . If depression is atemporal, rendering recollections of your past as bleak as visions of your future, raving is feeling present in a series of moments delineated by a beat (Dahl 2017).

This focus on the present moment rather than any other temporality generates a distance from reality. Music theorist Jonathan Kramer’s description of what he calls vertical music is useful in conceptualizing this temporal state. Kramer’s conception of vertical music

denies the past and the future in favor of an extended present. . . . Future as well as past orientation is minimized. The future, to the extent that it is anticipated at all, is expected to be the same as the present. This kind of music tries to create an eternal now by blurring the distinction between past, present, and future, and by avoiding gestures that invoke memory or activate expectation (Kramer 1988: 375-76).

Though he is describing avant-garde music, he could be defining EDM. Just as the vertical and linear form a queer tension with the present in the music of Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem, there is also a distinctive interaction between making timely and timeless music at the same time. According to Charles Kronengold, this simultaneous timeliness and timelessness is one of the features of disco, which is also a musical touchstone for Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem. Kronengold argues that disco is a musical syntax that works through textural stratification and on an affective continuum that ranges from “absolute freedom to perfect rigidity”; he elaborates on the flexibility and multiplicity of disco temporality by including “the moment that occurs too early or too late; tropes of time accelerating, slowing down, or stopping abruptly, the sense of clock time’s inadequacy (or adequacy); and . . . the machine time of the synth motive” (2008: 53, 55-56).

Pet Shop Boys make a consistent effort to write songs that keep pace with current dance music and stylistic changes, incorporating elements of disco, Hi-NRG, house, techno, electro, New Jack Swing and reggaeton, which resonates with Taylor’s description of middle-aged queer music fans who continue to pursue and engage with new styles of music in spite of their age (Heath 1990: 185; Taylor 2010: 903). As Tennant says, “We’ve always tried to be of the present” (Heath 1990: 184). In one way, this attachment to the present moment should make their music ephemeral, as much of popular music is; however, there is

a sense that past songs are in conversation with newer ones, and in this dialogue, they gain a timelessness. Tennant remarks that “the making of new music is what fuels and re-fuels an interest in the old songs...and being able to see the through-line of continuity within all the work and how both the new material and the old somehow tie together”, implying a continual return (Rachel 2013). Similarly, James Murphy explains how he wanted LCD Soundsystem to produce music that could be returned to over time and be newly meaningful:

I kind of liked things that meet you as you changed your taste and changed and grew up. Yeah, I think David Bowie’s good at that. I think The Smiths are really good at that. You’re a kid and you’re like, “This music is so sad.” And then you get older and you’re like, “This music is hilarious.” Like, I just didn’t know it was hilarious when I was a kid because it seemed so sad, and then I realized he’s really funny. Like, it would just keep refinding you and refinding you. . . . I was always trying to make it so if you scraped through a layer, there was hopefully another layer that was interesting behind it (Murphy 2013).

This kind of repetition is connected to a tension between growing older and repetition, again suggesting a timelessness and timeliness. This sense of vertical time, or depth and open-endedness of meaning, then converges with the difference to be found in the sameness of EDM, or Hawkin’s oppositional repetition. The open-ended verbal ellipses that Balfour identifies in Pet Shop Boys’ songs reappear in the music of LCD Soundsystem (see Balfour 1991). Leas describes the song “Sound of Silver” as “an obscure wandering, synths and beats working in mutated ellipses and ellipticals as if forming pathways inward, through those layers of childhood and teenage memory and occasionally bringing those watercolor remnants to some clearer adulthood foreground” (2016: 50). As an ellipsis is an omission or suspension point, and an ellipse is a cyclical figure, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem’s songs lack a resolution, and ultimately prove their inherent irony.

## CONCLUSION

Tennant: For me, being in the Pet Shop Boys has always been a struggle between total embarrassment and total shamelessness (Burston 1994).

Murphy: The whole thing was just made up because it was such a fertile and embarrassing and circular set of feelings (Gross 2010).

Just as the remarks from Neil Tennant and James Murphy at the beginning of this article reveal their bands’ queer temporalities, the quotations above signal the ambiguity and circularity in their sense of age and their work in electronic dance music. Part of Murphy’s decision to dissolve LCD Soundsystem in 2011 involved his discomfort in continuing the band into his late forties. His “formula that appeals both to 20-somethings who just want to lose their bodies to the music and to their more dignified elders who are beginning to realize they won’t be able to do the same for much longer” is comparable to the mixed audiences

of old and young for Pet Shop Boys (Cruz 2010: 57). The embarrassment described by Tennant and Murphy could be viewed as part of their knowingness and distance from the queer temporalities of their lyrics and music, but their continued work in an art form that privileges youth and the present speaks to a simultaneous distance from heteronormative time.

Despite the fact that Pet Shop Boys recently achieved their fortieth hit on Billboard's Dance Club Charts with "The Pop Kids" from their latest album *Super*, radio stations continue to tell them "oh, we won't ever play your records, because you're too old. . . . They're quite blatant about it. And someone else—who shall remain nameless—said, 'if yours was Daft Punk's next single, we'd have played it automatically'" (Rogers 2013). Moving from their usual disco-influenced lyricism to the minimal, simple lyrical content of later EDM styles, Pet Shop Boys have actually become less conventionally verbal in their last two albums, *Electric* (2014) and *Super* (2016), which were both produced by Stuart Price and feature tracks such as "Axis", "Shouting in the Evening", "Pazzo" and "Inner Sanctum". The older Pet Shop Boys get, the more they appear to embrace the pure, wordless affect of EDM, which moves in the opposite direction of linear notions of maturation.

As Simon Frith observes, "music is . . . about temporal possibility; it suggests that time can be organized intentionally, as a matter of accent and stress, pulse and phrasing, rather than having to be experienced only as a matter of industrial discipline, or of menstrual and seasonal cycles, or of inexorable aging", and this reorganization of time can also be read as the performativity of age in the context of EDM (Frith 1996: 156). In this respect, Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem operate between poles and in cycles, a circuit that moves across temporal planes and produces the irony of what Tennant describes as the "strange dialectic that pop in theory is a young people's musical form and it can be about growing old" (Dax 2012).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner produced an edited collection (2012) looking at the performativity of age and aging for female musical artists, but do not discuss artists who began their careers at an advanced age; they are more interested in how female artists negotiate propriety and success as an aged performer within cultural constraints, not least of which are gender expectations.
- <sup>2</sup> LCD Soundsystem is mentioned in passing as an example of one of the bands that contributed to the early electroclash scene in David Madden's "Cross-Dressing to Backbeats: The Status of Electroclash Producer and the Politics of Electronic Music" (2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Lizzie Goodman includes brief chapters on James Murphy, especially his involvement in the founding of DFA Records and the production of "Losing My Edge," in her oral history *Meet Me in the Bathroom: Rebirth and Rock and Roll in New York City, 2001–2011*, but does not focus comprehensively on LCD Soundsystem.



- <sup>4</sup> According to the setlists in Tim Lawrence's history of the late 70s (2003) and early 80s (2016) dance scene in New York City, music commonly ranged over diverse artists: The Clash, The Slits, PiL, Pere Ubu, Talking Heads, Joy Division, Delta 5, The Bush Tetras, A Certain Ratio, Was (Not Was), Quando Quango, Grace Jones, Suicide, Liquid Liquid, ESG, Konk, Cybotron, Chic, Sylvester, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Blondie, the B-52s, Heaven 17, Dinosaur L., Freez, James Brown, Funkadelic, Prince and Imagination.
- <sup>5</sup> Pet Shop Boys problematize the genre of EDM, especially as it has been used over the past decade in a more mainstream, American context (including artists such as Skrillex, Deadmau5 and David Guetta), and assert that Pet Shop Boys music is not strictly EDM because of the underground nature of their influences: "It's sort of fragmentary. It does have a link to EDM, because we make 'electronic dance music.' But we do something that's a bit more coming from a subculture. . . . It's a different sort of inspiration" (DeLuca 2013). Similarly, James Murphy has made a distinction between his style of EDM and the more recent mainstream trend; he notably called this current incarnation of the genre "repellent", "commercial" and "maximalist" (Jones 2014). The implications of authenticity and inauthenticity at play in these comments from both Pet Shop Boys and LCD Soundsystem raise questions about the cultural and subcultural capital at play in their work that are beyond the scope of this article.

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