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**Issue 3: *Sleep(less) Beds*****Scenes from a bedroom: situating British independent music, 1979-1995****Elodie Amandine Roy**

*'Oh the alcoholic afternoons  
when we sat in your room  
they meant more to me than any  
than any living thing on earth  
they had more worth  
than any living thing on earth'<sup>1</sup>*

There is a famous series of pictures of Ian McCulloch, the singer of Echo & the Bunnymen, allegedly sitting on his bedroom floor. The pictures were taken in the 1980s. The young man is surrounded with familiar objects; a record-player, vinyl records and flowers are scattered around him. Behind him there is a small black cat, staring indifferently. The pictures, often reproduced in music magazines, resonate with a famous photographic portrait of Morrissey. The Smiths' singer is lying on the floor, amidst a disordered collection of Oscar Wilde books. His body is covered in blades of grass. Morrissey's photograph was taken by Peter Ashworth, and was published for the first time in the popular music magazine *Smash Hits* (June 21-July 4, 1984). The photographs described above construct the domestic space as the quiet, remote realm of the post-punk musician (I use the term 'post-punk' in a broad, chronological sense, to refer to music made after 1979; the date of the establishment of the independent distribution network). The photographs help us visualise and consider the centrality of objects and collections in the experience and consumption of music – the bedroom, which is mainly shown as the realm of passive accumulation, may also become the realm of experience. It may be argued that the place where belongings are collected is simultaneously a place of self-collection. As a matter of fact, the bedroom acts as a literal image, or representation, of interiority, which the photographic process reveals and durably sustains. But it is possible that these promotional photographs also indicate and capture something external to their subject. They may act as instantaneous mirrors, sending the music fans a partial reflection of themselves. Incidentally, these pictures, torn from the pages of music magazines, may ultimately adorn the walls of countless adolescents' rooms. Were not The Smiths 'a dream waiting to come true in a hundred thousand bedsits?'<sup>2</sup>

I will argue that the birth and development of independent music is inexorably bound with the domestic realm. Until 1979, bedrooms were rather uncanny homes for popular music icons, who were more readily represented on stage or on the road. But post-punk musicians, as embodied by Echo & the Bunnymen or The Smiths, express a specific 'independent' sensibility. Fonarow, in *Empire of Dirt – The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*, has collated a solid study of the 'indie' or 'independent' sensibility in music. She especially connects it with an ethos of self-reliance ('do-it-yourself'), defiance against mainstream pop (and

trends), and a general introversion and secretiveness.<sup>3</sup> Though such an undertaking has necessarily required a level of generalisation and stereotyping, Fonarow's research has unquestionably shown that spatial (and notably domestic) roots cannot be underestimated in the making of the independent sensibility and ideology. Indeed, it is argued that 'independent music' did not describe primarily (as it does now) a genre of music but rather its means of production and of distribution (through self-releases, independent releases and the independent distribution network),<sup>4</sup> that is to say its relationship to specific spaces and environments.

The bedroom is incidentally a central image both symbolically (as a recurrent theme, for example in lyrics) and in material practice (as a space of creation and recording). In the late 1970s, affordable home-recording technologies were introduced (these include portable studios, synthesisers, drum machines).<sup>5</sup> Many independent record labels were created and run from a domestic space, such as Tony Wilson's Factory Records (which was first run from 86 Palatine Road in Manchester), Alan McGee's Creation Records (London), Matt Haynes and Clare Wadd's Sarah Records (Bristol) – and numerous others. Fanzines – such as Kevin Pearce's *Hungry Beat*, Matt Haynes' *Are you scared to get happy?*, Dave Haslam's *Debris* – were similarly made in a bedroom or a bedsit, often single-handedly. The bedroom is also, significantly, the 'primal scene of consumption' of music<sup>6</sup> and music paraphernalia (in the form of music magazines and fanzines). In the context of this article, the bedroom will be examined as the first axiom of independence or autonomy. It follows that the bedroom will be considered, in turn, as a space of creation, a space of mediation, and a place of resistance – that is, as a necessary and transitory antechamber to the outside world.

Such an approach is mainly influenced by the works of Bachelard and its followers, most notably Bollnow and Stewart.<sup>7</sup> Bachelard was the first to recognise fully and systematically the importance of matter and space in the structuring of identity, and their influence on creative practice.<sup>8</sup> He showed how the materiality of the world is but the means into a spiritual and creative understanding of the world. Trained as a scientist, he conscientiously analysed the geography of houses and their 'dream potentialities.' In the *Poetics of Space* (1958), he excavated their layers, their corners, attics, garrets and wardrobes. Bollnow, building on this model, further explored the territory of human spaces.<sup>9</sup> He wrote extensively about beds, doors, windows and locks, defining these often overlooked, commonplace artefacts of everyday life as essential in producing the concept of the self. Every time, the particular material properties of lived spaces anticipate a specific way of relating to and *inhabiting* them. It seems particularly appropriate to explore the bedroom as both a real, experienced space and a spiritual or mythical space, which leads to a specific type of creation and consumption.

### **The bedroom as a space of creation**

The bedroom, which was one of the main loci of consumption of music (as it sheltered the record-player and the radio), also became a privileged locus of creation of music in the late 1970s. In 1979, it became possible to make multi-track recordings at home. The Tascam Portastudio four-track recorder became the basis for the home studio. In 1982, Yamaha produced the DX7, the first cheap synthesiser. The musician was able to work in a much smaller place and also create a somehow smaller or more minimal sound. (for instance, one may think of electro-pop, with its sparse notes, and its thin sonic texture, which seems as much the result of spatial and technological restrictions as of a premeditated stylistic austerity)<sup>10</sup> In 1983, Martin Newell's *In the Golden Autumn* was recorded on tape and duplicated at home; the cassette tapes were then sent to pen-pals across the UK.<sup>11</sup> Matt Johnson (The The) notes that the post-punk sound is characterised by its iconoclasm and diversity, for everyone was virtually able to record from home.<sup>12</sup> The Smiths formed in May 1982, after Johnny Marr (then Maher) knocked at 384 King's Road, Stretford, where the young Morrissey lived with his family. (Carman, p. 39) Marr carried with him a demo tape, and the two young men purportedly sealed their alliance in a bedroom. The room can be thought of as a primary place of inspiration and creation – it is the hidden, solitary space where songs are conceived and crafted. For to create, said Bachelard, means to be isolated; the musician, as Virginia Woolf's female writer, needs a room of one's own. Isolation however is only valid and relevant to the extent that it allows for the self to focus and to develop within a given spatiotemporal framework. Yet the bedroom also presupposes or requires the outside world. As Bachelard notes:

La vie renfermée et la vie exubérante sont l'une et l'autre deux nécessités psychiques. Mais avant d'être des formules abstraites, il faut que ce soient des réalités psychologiques avec un cadre, avec un décor. Pour ces deux vies, il faut la maison et les champs.

*[Inner life and exuberant life are both psychological necessities. But before they become abstract propositions, they have to be psychological realities grounded in a frame and a décor. To be able to live these two lives, one needs the house and the fields.]*<sup>13</sup>

As Morrissey said in an interview to the *Sunday Times* (08/01/1984), 'If you're going to produce something of value, you have to think about what you're doing [...] and I gained a lot from being isolated'. That is to say that the bedroom offers only a temporary separation from the world, a separation which is a means of creating rather than an end in itself. The Smiths, signed on the Rough Trade label (based in London), have perhaps best embodied the tension between introversion and the desire to encounter the world, between the wish to be hidden and the wish to be exposed, between passivity and activity, secrecy and exuberance. Morrissey's songs are consistently riddled with houses and rooms; suffocated spaces of adolescent longing (one can think for instance of 'These Things Take Time', 'Reel Around the Fountain' or 'Girl Afraid', the lyrics of which deal with sexual frustration, disappointment and fear of love).

The bedroom is a sheltered and enclosed space. Such a space consistently contradicted the rhetorics of pop music as a public, crowded reality (typified by the 'open' spaces of the venue, the road, the stadium). In the 1980s, independent music directly opposed chart pop (embodied by the New Romantics), characterised by glittery, smooth, synthetic and shimmering productions and gimmicks. Whilst chart pop eagerly embraced hedonism, dance, spectacle, and the culture of the body, independent music would rely on introspection, the mind and 'meaning.' (Reynolds, p. 14; Fonarow, p. 72) Independent music became a more visible and measurable reality when Iain McNay (founder of Cherry Red Records) imagined the alternative charts in December 1979. The alternative charts became effective in 1980 and existed for almost a decade. Any record which was not produced on a major record label could qualify for them. The charts were printed in the weekly *Record Business* (a professional reference for record shops), and later in *Sounds* and, by the late 1980s, in the *Melody Maker*.<sup>14</sup>

The independent charts consolidated and encouraged the growth of independent record labels. They also gave them an existence and a reality which expanded much beyond the house or the local scene. Along with the radio and specific disc-jockeys (John Peel on BBC Radio 1, Mark Radcliffe's *Transmission* on Manchester-based Piccadilly Radio), they helped blur the line between the self-contained, domestic realm and the broader world of music. In 1989, the two founding members of the Scottish band BMX Bandits, Douglas T. Stewart and Norman Blake (later to form Teenage Fanclub), earnestly planned 'a tour of people's living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens all over the country.'<sup>15</sup> They quietly subverted the traditional idea of touring, neglecting music venues and preferring domestic, intimate environments – thus offering an original middle point between the house and the world.

The bedroom, when it remains unconnected to the world or unmediated, is a profoundly selfish, agoraphobic (and possibly sterile) reality. Phil Wilson from the June Brides encouraged his fans to bury themselves in the bedroom: 'run away from the people and hide in your room',<sup>16</sup> yet, the June Brides, like The Smiths and other independent musicians, have experienced the world in its fullness. The bedroom is the space of contemplation and imagination, but perhaps it is as much the place of imagination as it is the place which is transcended and mediated, therefore remediated, by the imagination. The end of isolation, which in its way is a form of total independence, is always already contained within the purpose of isolation itself. Indeed, it might be argued that creation is an isolated yet non-autonomous process, as it relies heavily on the internalised knowledge and use of a language (one 'writes' music), that is of otherness. What has been created in the solitude of the bedroom is not created from *nowhere*. The attachment to a symbolic, even mediated, other or outside is apparently inescapable.

Furthermore, at a simpler level, it can be said that a creative work is also inevitably informed and influenced by a broader socio-cultural framework.<sup>17</sup> For example, Morrissey's lyrics consistently borrow from British literary and audio-visual culture (such as the literature of the Angry Young Men and kitchen sink dramas). In 'Reel Around the Fountain', Morrissey infamously sings 'I dreamt about you last night / and I fell out of bed twice', a line he directly borrowed from the film adaptation of *A Taste of Honey* by Shelagh Delaney.<sup>18</sup>

### **The bedroom as a place of mediation and self-mediation**

The bedroom is transcended through the means which mediate it. The radio and the material artefact (such as record, tape,

fanzine or magazine) respectively allow for the individual to connect his or her inner self to the outside world and the other. Attfield, in her analysis of the material culture of the everyday, remarks that:

The dwelling place and its periphery anchors the individual and acts as a sort of lodestone in providing a point of departure and a point of return. Its physical form and contents offer one of the richest sources for the study of material culture as a mediating agency [...].<sup>19</sup>

For instance, the radio is simultaneously domestic, personal, intimate and external. It is essentially a means of transmission, a point of exchange and encounter between two separate realms. Programmes such as the Peel Sessions (which had been broadcast since 1967 on Radio 1), can be seen as the porous point between the house and the world. They were broadcast late at night, and listened to from a constellation of bedrooms across the UK (John Peel, in the late 1980s, had a regular audience of about 250,000 listeners).<sup>20</sup> They helped in fostering connectivity between individual listeners, and allowed for the music of young musicians to be disseminated and to find audiences. Not only does the radio belong to the bedroom, it also belongs to the night. It has a double intimacy to it. However, it might also be said that every record (either heard on the radio or owned in a tangible form), every magazine, is a fragment of the outside world; such a fragment may be appropriated, yet it ceaselessly carries with it its own otherness and exoticism.

If the bedroom comes before the world, it is also that which presupposes the outside, or external, world. Music, in order to be heard, needs to travel and be disseminated, either through an official distribution network (provided by the Cartel) or a more private one (swap, penpal). The secretive songs of The Smiths were paradoxically broadcast nationally through the radio. The Smiths themselves would exist in the world and perform on stages. Furthermore, artefacts produced in one bedroom (I am thinking of mixtapes) were meant to resonate in another person's room. Objects can be seen as the link or the passage between two domestic realms. They are the point of connection between the self and the other. And the materiality of the tape ultimately materialises and embodies evanescent or ungraspable feelings. Music is where there is no body; still music can be fixed on an object and thus given a materiality. As a matter of fact, the recording, where voices are separated from their original bodies, always already retains the memory of an original body. Simon Frith underlines that '[W]e assign [recorded voices to] bodies, we imagine their physical production,'<sup>21</sup> but the record is both a testimony of bodies and the liquidation of presence, it irremediably hovers between reality and illusion (or fiction).

Amidst recorded objects, the mixtape is certainly the most personal of all. It is home-made and retains with it the domestic space. The art of the mixtape shares interesting similarities with the art of letter-writing. Kafka, in his *Letters to Milena* – the woman he fell helplessly in love with through correspondence – identifies the dangerous joys of a life lived in letters.<sup>22</sup> He says of letters that they lock both the expeditor and the receiver in a circle; they lead both the sender and the receiver to live in the artifice, or phantasm, of the words and objects they exchange. In other words, for Kafka, the letters to Milena completely replace the young woman. They become more essential than her physical presence. That is to say that the body of the lover takes shape, and is fetishized, in the letter. The collection of letters forms at once the tangible reality and territory of Kafka's love. It can even be said that objects *realise* feelings, and depersonalise them at the same time. They give love a paradoxical foundation and monument. I believe that mixtapes operate a function similar to letters. They allow for the individual to fixate or petrify feelings, through a carefully composed track list. In her fictionalised autobiography about growing up in the 1980s, Lavinia Greenlaw states 'I listened and, not able to manage my own feelings, had the feelings of the songs.'<sup>23</sup> But mixtapes also presuppose the receiver and listener, who alone can 'perform' or decode the mixtape: 'The greatest act of love was to make a tape for someone. It was the only way we could share music and it was also a way of advertising yourself. Selection, order, the lettering you used for the tracklist, how much technical detail you went into [...] these choices were as codified as a Victorian bouquet.' (*ibid*, p. 160)

The bedroom (locus of feelings) is reified and miniaturised in the form of the letter or the tape. It travels. It redeploys itself later, somewhere else. What has been crafted and felt in one environment can be superimposed onto another environment. The dialectic between the miniature and the gigantic has been explored at length by Bachelard, and later revived by Susan Stewart. Both authors argue that the microcosm is both a fragment of and a reduced version of the world. In other words, this suggests that the microcosm of the bedroom is already a representation and embodiment of the world, albeit miniaturised. Furthermore the

bedroom itself can be reduced and fragmented into still smaller parts. The bedroom can be internalised or *incorporated*, and command a structure of feeling and thinking. Kafka, in one of the posthumously-published fragments of the *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, writes that each man carries within him a bedroom, which is a manner of shell, internalised and made invisible.<sup>24</sup> The bedroom is as much a material space as an inner space of the mind. It is a physical and psychic reality.

The enclosed, claustrophobic rooms depicted by The Smiths can also describe a certain frame of mind. For to live in the bedroom is to live inwardly, close to oneself. It is to live shyly, absorbed or perhaps ceaselessly resorbed in daydreams. In other words, the bedroom is an ideal bedroom as well – its reality is primarily that of the mind, of the imagination. The poetics of space, to use Bachelard's expression, inexorably corresponds to the phantasm of space. The bed is (both symbolically and effectively) the place of life and death; it is a primitive and crucial place of experience, as Bollnow explains: 'The course of every day (in the normal state of affairs) begins in bed and also ends in bed. So it is in the bed that the circle closes, the circle of the day as well as that of life. Here, in the deepest sense, we find rest.' (Bollnow, p. 156) Yet, the bed is also the place where one may, unable to find rest, lose oneself in endless existential angst: 'And when I'm lying in my bed / I think about life / And I think about death / And neither one particularly appeals to me.'<sup>25</sup> The persona of the singer, locked in his sleepless nights, is indifferent to everything. Suspended between day and night, light and darkness, he also hovers between life and death in a state of absolute, disheartened indecision. The bed becomes a zone of neutrality, where no decision is to be made, no comfort to be found. The insomnia felt at night is the exact counterpart of the uneasy indifference experienced during the day. Consciousness has not yet dissolved into dreaming and passivity. The bed is an extension and reminder of feelings. The bed which appears in song is an ideal or symbolic bed: the idea of the bed. It becomes obvious that the bed is never purely material but belongs to what Novalis called the 'dream of things' or the imagination, the abstraction, of the material.

### The bedroom as political space

A second wave of independent music, born in the late 1980s (after The Smiths had dissolved in 1987), has appropriated the legacy of The Smiths by incorporating the theme and sound of domestic life into their songs.<sup>26</sup> Morrissey, whose influences were principally literary, had already integrated the kitchensink sensibility into his song writing. The Bristol-based labels Sarah Records (1987-1995), Subway Organization (1985-1989), and Tea Time Records (1988-1991), took the domestic themes further. These record-labels almost entirely relied on home-recording technologies. In a 1987 issue of his fanzine *Are You Scared to Get Happy?*, Matt Haynes (co-founder of Sarah Records) succinctly writes that one needs '1 Portastudio, 1TDK C60, 1 Glasgow bedroom'<sup>27</sup> in order to make an album. Sarah Records as well as myriad other micro-independent record labels<sup>28</sup> were non-profit labels which were originally started as fanzines, and progressively set to release flexi-discs and records (mostly 7-inch records), first relying on a network of supportive penpals in order to disseminate the music. The music released by these labels has been coined 'twee pop' or 'bedroom pop' by the contemporary music press. It was essentially listened to at home and primarily dealt with intimate, and introverted, feelings and secrets. The Field Mice were the most successful band on the Sarah label. Characterised by minimal arrangements and sung in thin, almost weak voices, their songs resemble diary entries. The song 'Couldn't Feel Safer', in contrast with The Smiths' song discussed earlier, explicitly associates the bed with complete protection and self-abandon.

('In this dark room, in this bed / When you hold me like this / You're so secure / [...] Right now I fear nothing / I couldn't feel safer')<sup>29</sup>

Bedroom pop is irremediably marked and fashioned by the rhetorics and aesthetics of childhood. (Reynolds) In the late 1980s, the cult of childhood was as much a cult of unbridled idleness as it was a reaction to Thatcherism, as Bob Stanley (Saint Etienne) retrospectively observed: 'The mid-eighties were the peak of Thatcher's Britain. The 100% consumerist society she envisaged was only a reality for the chosen few: most were on the receiving end of the decline of heavy industry. No jobs, no cash, no choice but to do everything yourself within your means.'<sup>30</sup> Children, as they do not work and do not have children, are not engaged in any productive or socio-economically 'useful' activity. They are presumably incapable of any contract. Home-made recordings (along with fanzines) are bound to enter an alternative and non-traceable economy, often a gift or swap economy, as they have no strict exchange value. Writing about American fanzine-writers from the 1990s, Duncombe suggests that '[w]ithdrawal from economic, social and political production makes sense as a (partially unconscious) strategy of resistance in our (post)modern world.'<sup>31</sup> Sarah

Records' co-founder Matt Haynes, in a naïve yet revealing political declaration, considered 7-inch records (which were very affordable) to embody socialism, whilst 12-inch records were capitalism. The child is a metaphor for the economic marginal. It is also a routinely *acted* and *lived* metaphor for indie pop's artists and audiences (which very often coincide). Cernes Cannings (a London promoter) humorously reports that the first time he saw the Pastels' frontman, 'he was upstairs at Rough Trade with Joe Foster, and he was playing with an Action Man toy on a parachute. He was wearing an anorak and he looked about 13. I thought he was Joe Foster's son.'<sup>32</sup> The realm of the bedroom can be that of resistance, albeit a cowardly, at times almost passive and inevitably childish, resistance.

### **Conclusion: Back to the old house**

In this article I have discussed the centrality and cruciality of the bedroom in the establishment of independent music. The bedroom has been explored as a multi-layered reality, simultaneously symbolic – the place of creation, inspiration and imagination – and real, as the home-studio defines and privileges a certain type of creative practice. The bedroom can also be seen as the place of an indefatigable, persisting childhood. It follows that the bedroom is first and foremost a place of irrevocable transition, which is bound to be outgrown and possibly mourned. As Tolstoy nostalgically wrote in his memoirs, upon leaving his childhood room: 'It was difficult for me to separate myself from my accustomed life (accustomed for an eternity). I was sad... less because I had to separate myself from people [...] than from my little bed, with its curtain, its pillows, and I was anxious about the new life I was entering.'<sup>33</sup>

In the post-punk years, the bedroom – for all its remoteness – may be perceived as a site of critical resistance, not the least because a bedroom is a shelter from the high street or the mainstream (where the myth of the extraverted, public rock star dominates) but because bedrooms may have allowed a challenging of Thatcher's version of capitalism, as they led to different, more meaningful, forms of consumptive and creative practices (swap, gift economy). The bedroom proved a necessary former and formative environment for the development of independent music. It provided it with a primitive ground and primal metaphor or centre – an original image to be durably incorporated into 'indie' aesthetics and ideology.

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