**All Mod Cons: Paul Weller’s ‘successful ageing’**

1. Over the last weekend in June 2015, Paul Weller appeared in two different Somersets. On Friday the 26th ‘The Jam: About the Young Idea’ opened at London’s Somerset House; this was an exhibition of archive material about the band that Weller lead, curated by his sister, fans and music archivists. On the Sunday he played the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury festival before The Who. His set list spanned four decades, from ‘That’s Entertainment’ (1981) to the most recent single release from *Saturn’s Ring* (2015).
2. These two events, the exhibition and the performance, mark out different ways of ageing that are not always easy to distinguish from each other; in the first, age is positioned as a repository, in the second, it is an embodied lived experience. Weller successfully negotiates any tensions between these two possibilities, where cultural expectations of ageing are largely dominated by the former (Grenier, 2014; Jennings and Gardner, 2012). He does this though his juxtapostioning of the past and present, and through his gendered negotiation of specific popular cultural stereotypes.
3. Weller’s ageing present is haunted by a youthful past that in turn, is imbricated with periods in British youth culture of progressive politics and rebellion. He is the ‘Angry Young Man’ however old he gets, and at 53, his ageing is inflected both by his own past and by the broader cultural movements that he is contextually bound up in, specifically two English subcultures, mod and punk.He functions as a reminder of past progressive politics; on YouTube, The Jam are described as’ mod revivalist/punk’, clearly heralding a band whose music looks back to the 1960s but is also versed in the pared down confrontational rhetoric of punk and its anti-racist and anti-sexist politics. Through these ongoing alliances, whereby Weller acts as a ‘memory prop’ (Pentzhold, 2009), one that works for his fans as conduit to and anchor of youth, he manages to retain this sense of youthfulness, which is exemplified by his industry presence as an ongoing creative force (see Baxter-Moore, 2006) and his refutation of nostalgia, despite claims of the problematically nostalgia-drenched nature of his music (Reynolds in Zuberi, 2001:66).
4. The juxtaposition of the ‘now’ and the ‘then’ is afforded by Weller’s status as a palimpsest, whose performances are mapped over with pasts that are not fully erased. On stage, his performance style consists of the same moves as 1979, his gestures and movements, his guitar playing and facial expressions (Frith, 1996) have not ‘aged’ as his body has. And so, in performance, the younger Weller haunts a visibly ageing body through the bodily ‘ticks’ that remain(Fisher, 2001).
5. Weller is also known through popular media discourse as ‘The Modfather’ (Hawkins, 2009). This positions him as an established patriarch and, by extension, through reference to *The Godfather* (Coppolla, 1972), somehow allied to a mob (as well as mod) culture, which he has since come to signify. This clearly indicates his status within the British popular music industry and also underscores how Weller’s successful ageing is semantically accentuated by an iconic, conservative (and potentially aggressive or violent) masculinity. Unlike women in rock, his stature, heritage and lineage are prioritized and when his ‘looks’ are referred to, it is in the tradition of the ‘dandy’ (Hawkins, 2001) where the emphasis is on his ongoing immaculate taste in hairstyle and dress.
6. The ageing Weller is both a utopian and problematic figure; heis the aspirational white working class Englishman, able to travel across boundaries of space and time, from the urban, through the rural and beyond. He starts off *In the City (*1977), rambles around the *Wild Wood* (1993) and goes extra-terrestrial in *Saturn’s Rings*, (2015). He is the musical equivalent of a David Hockney or an Alan Bennett, a white English creative whose rise to artistic credibility relies very much on the rhetoric of the successful transcendence of class, or the reification of it as humorous and life affirming. However, some debates have considered this element of The Jam and Weller to be illustrative of a selective historicization of Englishness in relation to popular culture that erases Blackness (Zuberi, 2001) and certainly the reification of ‘Mod’ is commensurate with this (although it ignores Weller’s flirtation with soul during his Style Council phase in the mid 1980s).
7. From Stanley Road in Woking where he grew up, to Somerset House where he is exhibited, Weller is positioned as part of a tradition of white English masculinity that doesn’t ‘die before it gets old’. On the contrary, it ages successfully by corralling a utopian and selectively historicized version of Englishness. Weller may sing that he is a ‘changing man/Built on shifting sand’ (‘Thechangingman’, *Stanley Road*, 2005), but his success is in anchoring himself in particular discourses of Englishness and masculinity to maintain youthfulness in an ageing body.

**Questions/Points for discussion in symposium:**

**LINKED TO 1 (WELLER ON STAGE AND IN MUSEUM)**

* **What is ‘successful ageing’ and how might it be a useful tool to both apply to Paul Weller?**

This section will examine the term as it has been deployed within cultural gerontology (Chapman, 2005; Katz, 2000, 2008; Baltes and Carstensen, 2008; Rozanova, 2010; Marshall, forthcoming) and seek to argue that is applicable to Weller.

**LINKED TO 2 (GOOGLE LINE)**

* **Does Weller’s presence in exhibitions and on stage add to or extend that term in any way and if so, how?**

‘Successful Ageing’ is a discursive positioning that has become a normative idea within a neo-liberal framework that emphasizes individuality and ‘work’ (both paid and in relation to the maintenance of the body). The ‘successful ager’ is not a burden to state health care or their family, is cognitively able, ‘well’ and engaged with life (Rozanova, 2010;124). Work on the subject has been prevalent in ageing studies and is now being utilized in work on media representation. Less has been done on how ‘successful ageing’ might map across to popular music and ageing. Ageing in this area has been dealt with in relation to subcultures, style and identity (Hodkinson, 2011; Bennett and Taylor, 2012) and gender (Jennings and Gardner, 2012). What I want to explore in this symposium is whether there are any parallels between Barbara Marshall’s (2015) recent arguments around successful ageing and sexuality in particular, and Weller. My thinking is that there are and that they rely on the layers and traces of his and others’ pasts that I refer to as his ‘repository’.

**LINKED TO 3 (TOWNSHEND)**

* **What am I arguing when I say that Weller’s successful ageing is semantically accentuated by an iconic, conservative (and potentially aggressive or violent) masculinity? And how does this segue from the previous point?**

My argument here rests on the supposition that Weller is not ‘just’ Weller, but that he needs to be understood as related to a generic and historical context whose lineage runs through him – these lineages are those of the ‘dandy’ (Hawkins, 2001), the Modfather, so patriarch, progressive (Mod’ernist’) and violent (Godfather/mafia). His ageing body is marked upon by these various images, histories, narratives – and, to fold this argument into the previous one on ‘successful ageing’ and sexuality, these narratives are tinged by a priapic heterosexuality and youthful vitality that remain on Weller’s body. This is achieved through his alliance with historical decades (the 60s and 70s) through his MOD and through PUNK.

**LINKED TO 4 (MODFATHER HOCKNEY)**

* **How might Weller be a utopian and problematic figure?**

Here I want to examine how Weller stands for an aspirational white working-class hero, in line with 1960s tropes that have stood as a synecdoche of the possibility of class mobility**.** Part of what Weller stands for, and what emerges from the Somerset House event, is that this trajectory is **historically placed.** As part of a punk and post-punk movement, he has been allied to progressive politics (typified by Red Wedge) that have become mythologized as emancipatory and liberatory.

I am aware too of the critiques of his work in relation to its appropriation and erasure of blackness (Zuberi, 2001) – and this might be looked at alongside other ageing male rock stars (like Jagger) whose musical work has relied on Black American musical traditions. This might be investigated via his time with The Style Council but for now I want to park that debate and consider whiteness in respect to English masculinity and romanticism, seeing in there another less obvious lineage within which to place Weller.

**LINKED TO 5 (NICK DRAKE SLIDE)**

* Bracewell (2009) positions Weller as a ‘romantic’, which is also a useful lens through which to track his ageing as it brings with it an associated classlessness which has its own problems in terms of disavowal of working classness. This comes out in the words he choose to describe Nick Drake’s music in ‘A Skin Too Few’, a documentary about the singer-songwriter, whom Nathan Wiseman-Trowse has positioned as being a voice of a waning class and emblematic of a specifically placed upper-middle class and southern Englishness. Seeing Weller here broadens out his ‘reach’ .
* **FURTHER THOUGHTS THAT HAVE RECENTLY EMERGED TO MAP ON TO MY CORE ARGUMENT**

**REPETITION BLOB**

Writing on pop music and feminism within neoliberalism, Robin James considers the role of repetition within current popular music forms and, using Edelman’s argument that **‘**Traditional Western, sexual, epistemic and aesthetic structures over-emphasize ”reproduction” in order to conceal the presence and importance of repetition (sameness and the lack of progress) (Edelman, 2004: *No Future, Queer Theory and The Death Drive* in James, 2015:54), claims how repetition is now a key structural component of popular music. Despite Western culture privileging growth and linearity and ‘secret[ing] repetition’ (Tricia Rose, James Snead), she notes how these patterns of repetition threaten a western aesthetic based on accumulation and growth.

I want to stretch this claim out to talk back to where I started and consider repetition in relation to Weller’s ‘successful ageing’. Part of what I see as his success is not just in his growth or development from young disaffected lead singer of The Jam in *The City* to a contributor on a Nick Drake documentary discussing magic, mysticism and fragility. His is not just a journey from angry young rebel to a wise old man with Romantic sensibilities whose work merits a retrospective. His success is also about repetition and specifically about repetitions that are re-versionings of familiar types. The linearity proposed by the Google timeline is one commensurate with a western modernist and neoliberal narrative of progression. I hope that using the form of presentation technique I have today goes some way to illustrate the flows and layers of his work. Weller is successfully ageing because his youth is present within him, he is haunted by it (as Mark Fisher describes in his work on hauntology) and ‘it’ in turn is imbricated with other figures, movements, and ideologies that are all in different ways affixed to notions of youth and progress. It is important to map Weller against these historical narratives, and figures now because it illustrates how the popular music culture, not just the industry but the broader terrain of fans and audiences, gains increasing affordances of success through allying ageing ‘icons’ of music as iconographic through museumifying them and considering them alongside their own and others’ pasts.