

Sympathy for the 90s (Chapter 1)

Dear Young-Girl,

You ask me, was I alive in the 90s? Do I remember?

Let's see... I remember reading that-you remember something, not by remembering *it*, but remembering the last time you remembered it.

The last time I remembered taking Polaroids in a Berlin nightclub called Trésôr was yesterday. The cavernous space was a former bank vault, hence the name, and of course it was underground. In this Underworld, we danced on the ruins of late communism/capitalism, as we understood them to be the flipside of each other's coins. It was so crowded. The Polaroid shows a swelling sea of bobbing heads with one face in the center: a young-girl with sweaty forehead eyes shut mouth open. Her face in the photograph is blurry, almost liquid, like the chemical emulsion that carries her image, at the same time threatens to wash it away, to dissolve it. Do I need to spell it out? It was XTC.

Our mating rites were not for the faint of heart: One night in W139 – the epicenter of everything that happened in Amsterdam in those years, or so it seemed – Tommy X walked across a bed of burning coal to serenade his mistress with Madonna's "Like a Prayer." If the outcome of the AIDS test he had received the same afternoon had been positive, he would have been singing a different tune, but that night the mood was celebratory.

On the opening night of the aptly named "Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers," the curator (a friend of mine), asked if I would show one of the participants a night on the town. I said yes, of course. After the opening party we went to San Francisco. The attractions to this place were manifold: it was just down the road, it was cheap, and it was open all night (as in ALL night). It had a jukebox, so you could dance there too.

Over a beer the visiting artist reminisced about growing up in The Lake District in the 70s, with its miner's strikes and brass bands. I was super impressed because we all worshipped a working class hero, and especially the British. He told me he still lived with his parents. "Oh. Wow," I said. But he said it was okay because he had his own entrance. "Oh. Okay." I am not sure if I remember all of this correctly... I might have made up bits about his dad being a coal miner and the strikes and the brass bands after the fact, as I have since familiarized myself with his work...but I am sure he told me he still lived with his parents –because that is kind of thing you remember– and I remember his name was Jeremy Deller.

Another Polaroid is from Thai bar. Three couples pose against a bamboo interior in thrift store outfits. We wanted to look like common people, because although we were in our late twenties we were not fully grown. We did not have mobile phones, so it was

more like "be there two o'clock by the fountain down the road." The boys-who-are-girls-who-like-girls-to-be-boys who worked the bar were super friendly but didn't shower us with any of the attention they reserved for the regulars, and anyway, we went there just because it was cozy. We were into Blur and Pulp. Everything was Blur and Pulp. By which I mean to say: the 90s was the last time you could fully occupy the musical terrain you were part of, in such a way that it was *everything*.

On *The Quietus*, David Bennun reminisces about Tricky's *Maxinquaye*, a landmark of the decade:

For a long time, I didn't listen to it. It was like a house you'd lived in, or your old school. Somewhere that for a while, an eventful and formative while, had seemed like the centre of the world. Then you move on, and other things happen. You lead a different life, become a different person. When you do go back, it's uncanny. In the Freudian sense: altogether familiar, altogether strange. It all seems so much smaller now, a place a whole other life occurred.

It wasn't just me. It's hard to recall, in our atomised era, but [then] it was possible for an entire segment of culture to not only like, or love, but to inhabit an act. If you were one kind of music fan, Oasis were where you lived. (At that point, it sometimes felt like Oasis were where the whole country lived, whether it wanted to or not.) If you were another, you were Tricky's tenants.¹

Tricky's *Maxinquaye* did, and does, defy definition. So much so, that when you Google the term "*Maxinquaye definition*" what you get, outside of references to the album, are links to thesauruses with the message: *We are sorry, but we have no **definition** of phrase: **Maxinquaye** yet.*

What made *Maxinquaye* the defining album of that decade –to me and many others who occupied that particular mood—was not only Tricky's bag of tricks, but the sacred trickster by his side: Martina Topley-Bird. Nineteen summers at the time the album was recorded, Tricky's muse and mistress was so much more than a sideshow; she was a show stealer. Martina's is not the voice of the decade, but a voice beyond her years, yet her gritty girly-ness was right on time; once you've heard her laid back vocal slur and drawl its way through those Public Enemy lines

*I've got a letter from the government the other day
opened it and read it
it said they were suckers
they wanted me for the army or whatever*

¹ David Bennun. "Twenty Years On: Tricky's *Maxinquaye* Revisited" *The Quietus*, 20 February 2015. <http://thequietus.com/articles/17220-tricky-maxinquaye-review-interview> (accessed 18 January 2016)

*picture me giving a damn, I said never*²

you cannot un-hear it. Not that you'd you want to.

By now it should have occurred to all of us that suckers have authority, but back then we just thought it was all such a laugh! We would party so hard we could almost forget there was an *actual* war going on in Europe: “No don't look now, look over here: That's Tony Blair, the sexy beast, with his YBA arm candy!”

In retrospect, the 90s as an era was a post-modern and pre-internet parenthesis in time, and the inter-bellum between the cold war and the war on terror. It was also the decade of the girl, as manifest in various cultural phenomena, beginning with Riot Grrrl's rallying battle cry “revolution girl style now!” then morphing into the consumer savvy mainstream popularity with the Spice Girls, and intellectualized in Tiqqin's “Theory of a Young-Girl,” released in France in 1999.

In defense of the Spice Girls I would like to say: although they were a commercialized consumer product, they were commodified in such a way as to poke fun at commodification – a clever trick of which we were aware. Thus the joke was on us, as our being aware of it was part of the cleverness, and even so; it *did* make you feel somewhat clever, and yes, empowered, standing on the bar of the Pink Flamingo in some brand new retro acrylic mini dress and knee high boots blaring: “I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want!”

We did not care if everybody could see our knickers—another advantage of nobody having mobile phones—because *that*, in fact, was what we really, really wanted: to let the world know that we would show them our knickers when (and only when) we really, really, wanted to.

I have nothing to say in defense of Tiqqin's “Preliminary Materials for the Theory of a Young-Girl,” which, as far as theories go, is really no more than a giant pile of fortune cookies. It opens with a disclaimer (because how else could it open):

“Listen: The Young-Girl is obviously not a gendered concept. A hip-hop nightclub player is no less a Young-Girl than a beurette tarted up like a porn-star. The resplendent corporate advertising retiree who divides his time between the Côte d'Azur and his Paris office, where he still keeps an eye on things, is no less Young-Girl than the urban single woman too obsessed with her consulting career to notice she's lost fifteen years of her life to it. And how could we account, if the Young-Girl were a gendered concept, for the secret relationship

² “Black Steel” Tricky, *Maxinquaye* (4th & B'way: 1995). Original lyrics by Public Enemy: “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam 1989)

*between ultratrendy musclebound Marais homos and the Americanized petit-bourgeois happily settled in the suburbs with their plastic families?*³

Palatable as this sounds, we read on to discover, that Tiqqun –like anybody else (the proverbial “bunch of wankers”) who like to theorize on the Young-Girl—are stealing the Young-Girls body for their own purposes.

Roughly twenty years earlier Deleuze and Guattari had already lamented this theft by saying:

*“The question is ultimately that of the body – the body they steal from us in order to fabricate opposable organisms. This body is first stolen from the girl: [...] The girl’s becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her.”*⁴

But only *after* imposing their own pre-history upon her by declaring her:

“An abstract line, a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to any age group, sex, order or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes.”

The two texts present the young girl solely as an abstraction –a mirror to her times— but do nothing at all to acknowledge the *interior life* of the young girl. The 90s in contrast did, exactly that, if nothing else.

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³ Tiqqun, *Preliminary Material For a Theory of the Young-Girl* (Cambridge: MIT Press/Semiotexte, 2012). 14-15.q

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 277.