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Underground and Mainstream in Cultural Production in Britain and Ireland since 1979

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John Mullen and Frédéric Armao

I want to sell tracks but at the same time I want to stay true to the music I like. This is why I love the underground scene because they can stay true to what they want to do.

Columbus "Rahki" Smith, *The Liberator Magazine*, 10.1 n°25, 2011.

If she could see the beauty of this underground world, and appreciate what it means: the music, the dancing, the feeling of fingertips and lips, like a moment of flight after a lifetime of crawling.

Lauren Oliver, *Delirium Stories: Hana, Annabel, Raven and Alex*, New York, HarperCollins, 2013.

- 1 Underground music, underground cinema, underground hip hop culture, underground scene... The idea of the “underground”, originally connected to clandestine resistance networks under oppressive regimes, has frequently been linked to different activities of cultural production. Often claimed by practitioners themselves as a badge of honour, or a sign that they have managed to partially break free from market forces, it contrasts with the label “mainstream” usually attributed from the outside, or left unsaid: mainstream cinema, mainstream contemporary art, and so on.
- 2 We chose for this volume the limit “since 1979”, because it meant treating the decades after the 1960s and most of the 1970s, a period often thought of a heyday for underground cultural production, when alternative theatre and punk fanzines rubbed shoulders with radical bookshops and organic food shops run as workers’ cooperatives.

1979 was the year of the election of Margaret Thatcher who represented proud commercial values quite distant to the underground's "community" and grassroots. The Conservative governments of the 1980s had, among other effects, a certain retrenching of left-wing activity to the local left, and the rise of municipal multiculturalism was one of the signs of this. Modest but real municipal funding could, for a while, be found for radical artistic or musical projects. Some years later, the reduction of local government fundraising power under pressure from national government made the space for publicly funded initiatives far more restricted.

- 3 The period since 1979 covers those technological transformations, from browsers to Usenet bulletin boards, from Torrents and MP3 to Spotify and Netflix, from Facebook to TikTok, from blogs to Twitter, which widened permanently the almost free access to cultural products of all kinds, including underground products, as well as permitting many new varieties of participatory cultural activity.
- 4 The presentation of our day conference on this topic, held in Toulon in 2019 posed the following questions, among others:
 - What makes an activity "underground" and how can practitioners gain, defend or lose this label?
 - Can you be "underground" and rely on money grants from public bodies?
 - Can cultural production be neither underground nor mainstream?
 - How has underground cultural production been integrated or fused with folk or with "high culture"?
 - What is the connection between "underground" and other labels such as "community" (community arts, community theatre, community photography), "alternative" or "street" (street basketball, street skate, street art), etc.?
 - How much audience and influence can underground have without becoming mainstream?
 - Is underground still possible in the age of the internet?
- 5 Can the underground really survive now that sharing and participation in the elaboration of codes, of in groups and of cultural products is incredibly easy? And does the underground still have a role in a neoliberal century in which disruptive entrepreneurialism seems to be becoming a religion rather than a subversive activity?
- 6 The first meanings of underground were political; activities forced underground by the threat of repression: the underground railroad which organized escapes for slaves, the Polish underground and the French underground which resisted the Nazis. These undergrounds were about defying legality. Such meanings can still apply at times today, as in the case of the Iranian rappers, producing illegal CDs (the content seen as blasphemous by the authorities) and circulating them informally by throwing them through open car windows at busy crossroads.¹
- 7 Later it was a choice of – mostly young – cultural producers, who aimed at increased control over the repertoires and processes – of music, or visual art (like with underground comics), of social activities.
- 8 The aim was to resist, to some extent, alienated labour, by creating spaces which felt their own, and to publicly and forcefully reject mainstreams perceived as stultifying, official, and boring. These underground subcultures were imbued with all the strengths and weaknesses one might expect. Yet they were subject to as many contradictory tensions as other kinds of small business. Big business wanted to pick and choose among underground products which were suitable for a mass market, invest in them and develop them. Some fairly underground groups, such as Pink Floyd, Radiohead or

Chumbawumba, ended up playing in stadiums, and being ritually denounced by other formations who were still playing in rooms above pubs. The anarchist band organized as a collective, Crass, even wrote a song to denounce cultural activities and groups who were considered subversive by many.

*They said that we were trash
Well the name is Crass not Clash
They can stuff their punk credentials
Cause it's them that take the cash
They won't change nothing with their fashionable talk
Their RAR badges and their protest walk
Thousands of white men standing in a park
Objecting to racism like a candle in the dark.²*

- 9 The difficulty of remaining underground, or the tremendous force of mainstream culture's ability to later embrace marginality, is perhaps well symbolized by the fact that Crass and its work became the object of an art gallery exhibition in Leicester in 2016, and the curator, Sean Clark, was quoted as saying he was in search of Arts Council funding to enable the exhibition to tour the UK.
- 10 Many such outfits stayed small but, as government and council cultural policy changed, they looked for public subsidy to afford some stability to their cultural activities.
- 11 The dichotomy underground/mainstream recalls another different dichotomy: that between high culture and popular culture, a distinction which has no doubt weakened with the victory of popular culture on screens of all kinds, with the rise of mass higher education, and with attempts within high culture institutions from museums to conservatories and even to opera houses to weaken the hard and fast barriers around high culture practices, while prize giving ceremonies for pop music or cinema (for Oscars or Brits) resemble high culture rituals. These days, pop stars can receive OBEs or knighthoods from the Queen, and the "serious" press will discuss rap and rock music.³
- 12 If the high culture/popular culture distinction has needed looking at again as mores changed,⁴ is this also necessary with the idea of mainstream and underground? Was the underground only possible in a time of a dominant culture perceived as monolithic, pressed down on young people from across an unbridgeable generation gap, leaving them burning to give up participation in adult society "for music and a free electric band"?⁵ Do millennials in these days of alleged bonding between teens and hip parents have quite as much a need for "talkin' 'bout my generation"⁶ in inaccessible codes and places?
- 13 In the final analysis, was the underground a special place where a rich sense of humanity could be preserved from the cash nexus? Or was it just prefiguring in its creative individualism the start-up nation which became the new aim as disruptive entrepreneurialism became the new elite mantra?
- 14 There is other vocabulary too to mull over when we are considering the official and the unofficial within popular culture. The **alternative** bookshop, the **community** theatre group, the **street** dancing network, the **urban** exploration club, may not be exactly the same as underground, by any means, but they have something of the unofficial about them, even of the subversive, or at least the transgressive.
- 15 These were some of the ideas we were exploring in calling the conference in Toulon. Switching to French, here is a survey and presentation of the contributions we are now publishing.

- 16 La grande majorité des contributions qui nous sont parvenues traitaient de la musique populaire, fait qui suscite réflexion. Sans doute la musique, phénomène culturel qui provoque des émotions particulièrement puissantes et qui suscite donc un sentiment d'identification forte, se prête-t-elle mieux que toute autre à la construction d'une marginalité revendiquée. Il est également à noter que l'ensemble des contributions sur la musique et l'underground ont été écrites par des collègues hommes ; les deux collègues femmes qui ont participé à ce numéro ont traité d'autres domaines de production culturelle. L'underground serait-il avant tout « a boy thing » ? Question à creuser...
- 17 Enfin, nos contributeurs se sont concentrés pour la plupart sur la période entre 1979 et 1995. Sans qu'on puisse affirmer que l'underground n'a plus du tout de sens dans le monde d'internet et de Spotify, où la musique cachée n'a pas à rester cachée, il semble que la force du concept réside dans la période précédente. Mais, si maints analystes suggèrent un déclin radical de l'underground dans le monde connecté, d'autres, tel Stephen Graham⁷, ne sont pas de cet avis. Graham, mettant au centre de sa définition d'underground l'encouragement de pratiques DIY novatrices, passionnées et minoritaires, plutôt que la confidentialité ou la marginalité revendiquée, maintient que l'underground dans la musique a de beaux jours devant lui.
- 18 Nos auteurs se sont attaqués à la question posée, déployant des démarches très variées.
- 19 **Claude Chastagner** propose de revenir sur les influences japonaises dans le travail de David Bowie, en identifiant quatre personnages japonais qui ont travaillé avec la vedette. Puisque les références artistiques japonaises intégrées appartenaient plutôt à la culture savante, Chastagner utilise l'exemple pour explorer les résultats de ces emprunts. Rendent-ils la culture savante plus mainstream, ou contribuent-ils plutôt à pousser le travail de Bowie vers l'underground ?
- 20 **Timothy Heron** examine les milieux punk de l'Irlande du Nord dans les années 1970 et 1980. Le punk⁸ témoignait d'une capacité à réunir des jeunes catholiques et protestants qui s'identifiaient peu avec le conflit politique divisant leurs aînés. Il s'agissait d'un underground doté d'un fort sentiment identitaire, mais aussi d'une revendication de la marginalité à travers des pratiques du grotesque qui visaient à mettre à distance la bien-pensance et le mainstream.
- 21 **Philippe Birgy** propose une analyse comparative, et examine des initiatives underground de production musicale « indépendante » ayant lieu dans deux périodes très différentes : les années 1970-1980, et les années 2010. Cette approche lui permet de livrer une réflexion sur la nature de phénomènes underground, et ce que les transformations technologiques de l'internet ont changé.
- 22 **Jérémy Tranmer** nous livre un article qui retrace l'histoire et les débats autour des compagnies de disque indépendantes dans les années 1980. Le contexte de leur émergence, les valeurs qu'elles pensaient véhiculer et leurs rapports avec les grandes entreprises multinationales sont examinés. Il en conclut au déclin, à la fin des années 1980 d'un « deep underground », laissant davantage de place aux indépendants un peu moins underground...
- 23 **John Winsworth** se penche sur le déplacement d'éléments esthétiques et politiques appartenant à l'underground vers le mainstream, dans le contexte de la montée du

néolibéralisme sous Margaret Thatcher. S'agirait-il d'une forme de résistance créative aux événements politiques ?

- 24 **Frédéric Armao** propose une comparaison du mainstream et de l'underground à travers le prisme du « mythe celtique » en Irlande. Il fonde son analyse sur l'étude de deux formations musicales distinctes : l'artiste Enya, mainstream s'il en est, propose une vision du « celtisme » radicalement différente de celle du groupe de Metal underground nommé Cruachan. Il apparaît que ces deux visions d'un mythe identitaire exploité à l'envi depuis plus d'un siècle en Irlande sont en fait les deux faces d'une seule et même pièce d'un imaginaire celtique foisonnant.
- 25 Enfin, **John Mullen** a tenu à faire entendre des voix extérieures au monde universitaire, en recueillant les propos de deux personnes, **Jack Simpson** et **Stephen Gilbert**, qui travaillent dans le secteur de la musique populaire aujourd'hui et qui suivent en détail ses dernières inventions.
- 26 Deux articles explorent des thématiques en dehors de la production musicale. **Mathilde Bertrand** nous présente la situation du Community Arts Movement à Londres pendant les années Thatcher. Motivé par une volonté d'organiser l'implication de masse dans la création artistique, ce mouvement sera soutenu par le gouvernement régional travailliste de gauche, malgré l'opposition thatchérienne à de telles dépenses, mais il devra confronter les contradictions inhérentes à sa contestation du tsunami néolibéral.
- 27 **Moya Jones** suit les aléas du théâtre alternatif des années 1980, afin d'éclairer les positionnements de troupes de théâtre qui voulaient échapper à la cérémonie bourgeoise que pouvait représenter le théâtre établi. C'est Jean-Paul Sartre qui avait déclaré « De toute manière, le théâtre appartient, en gros, à la bourgeoisie », mais des groupes tels que « Belt and Braces » étaient déterminés à présenter un théâtre socialiste à un public de la classe ouvrière. Le tournant néolibéral des politiques publiques rendra un tel projet infiniment plus difficile.
- 28 Ces textes ne pourraient évidemment pas épuiser une question traversée par de multiples contradictions, mais nous espérons que leur lecture fera avancer la réflexion. Nous nous excusons, par ailleurs, du retard avec lequel paraît ce numéro – la crise sanitaire y était pour beaucoup.

NOTES

1. Golpushnezhad 2018, quoted by Ellis Jones, *DIY Music and the Politics of Social Media*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, p. 26.
2. From the song "White Punks on Hope", *Stations of the Crass*, 1979.
3. See for example *The Economist*, 17 December 2010, "What Is This Thing Called Rap" or the review of Kanye West's new album in the *Financial Times*, 31 August 2021.
4. See for example Veenstra G., "Class Position and Musical Tastes: A Sing-Off between the Cultural Omnivorism and Bourdieusian Homology Frameworks", *Canadian Review of Sociology*, May 2015; vol. 52, N°2: 134-59.
5. From the 1973 song "The Free Electric Band" by Albert Hammond.

6. From the song “My Generation” by The Who, released in 1965.
 7. Stephen Graham, *Sounds of the Underground: A Cultural, Political and Aesthetic Mapping of Underground and Fringe Music*, Chicago, University of Michigan Press, 2016.
 8. Il est aisé de trouver sur YouTube des chansons de presque tous les groupes évoqués par T. Heron.
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