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## **“Losing what we never had”: Žižek and Lacan Rock On with Bryan Adams**

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“We learned more from a 3-minute record, baby, than we ever learned in school.”

—Bruce Springsteen, “No Surrender”

### **Introduction**

Slavoj Žižek’s fascination with the “short circuits” between high theory and popular culture is well-known. His engagement with the densest and most challenging ideas of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan proceeds via an endless detour through science-fiction stories, Hollywood melodrama and “sentimental kitsch” (Žižek 1992: vii). No sooner do we feel, in reading Žižek’s work, that we have escaped into philosophical abstractions and psychoanalytic formulae than he compels us to revisit the novels of Stephen King or the films of Keanu Reeves. Even Shel Silverstein’s children’s books are revealed to “render in naked form the basic matrix of the Lacanian opposition of desire and drive” (Žižek 2001b: vii).

As Noel Carroll observes, Žižek’s references to artefacts of popular culture are frequently “illustrative” (2004: 266)—he often draws on them to provide analogies for psychoanalytic

philosophy. In Adrian Johnston's words, the ideas of thinkers such as Lacan "are usually considered to be so ephemerally complex as to be almost unemployable with respect to the banal details of mundane, everyday existence," and in this regard, Žižek's engagement with popular culture reflects his commitment to "granting firmer access to truths typically exhibiting an elusive abstractness" (2008: xviii). But the aim of merging Lacan and popular culture is not just to make high theory accessible ("and thus to spare us the effort of effective thinking" [Žižek 1992: 3]). Far from "lowering" theory to the level of popular culture and thereby simplifying it, this procedure enables psychoanalytic philosophy (in Žižek's Hegelian terms) to "actualize its notion": "I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture" (2005: 175). Psychoanalytic thought remains limited *until* it short-circuits with popular culture, perhaps because, as Sarah Kay puts it, "each acts as an *anamorphosis* of the other" (2004: 50)—each provides a highly irregular perspective from which new and unexpected dimensions emerge in the other.

Popular music is one of few entertainments that Žižek has little to say about. But during my first days of attempting to grasp his key thrusts, I frequently found myself seeking assistance from the rock stars I'd grown up with, discovering in lyrics I'd heard a thousand times the very paradoxes, dialectic reversals and "anamorphic shifts" that Žižek accentuates. No sooner does one balk at his insistence that daily experience is permeated with the "pleasure-in-pain" of what Lacan calls *jouissance* than John Mellencamp's "Hurts So Good" or Bryan Adams's "Cuts Like a Knife" ("but it feels so right!") comes over the radio. Amidst our daily pursuit of pleasure, the supermarket stereo bespeaks "*pain itself as the source of libidinal satisfaction*" (Žižek 1999: 282).

This article explores a particular type of rock anthem, positioning one of Adams's biggest hits, "Summer of '69," as what Lacan might call a *point de capiton* or "quilting point" (2006: 681). "Summer of '69" (co-written with Jim Vallance) is one of a number of mid-'80s songs extolling the sublimity of summers gone by, looking back upon the glory of youth ("the best days of my life") from the perspective of adulthood and its inexorable losses ("everything has come and gone"). My reasons for short-circuiting psychoanalytic theory with songs of this kind are twofold. Since its inception in Freud, psychoanalysis has been concerned with the sublimity of things irretrievably lost, with desire's relation to states of perfection from which we are irrevocably separated. Žižek's re-workings of these motifs can help to reveal the theoretical *problems* and paradoxes staged in songs like "Summer of '69," which, if seemingly simple, have an uncanny resistance to death, hovering perpetually in the air. I work with them, furthermore, because there seems to me something highly complex in their own functioning as objects of desire, and in the dynamics of fantasy and sublimity reflected in listeners' relations to them over time. I am interested not simply in what we *gain* from these songs. To draw on Žižek's (Biblically-inspired) terms, these songs make palpable in daily experience the paradoxical dynamic of "losing what we never had."

## Those were the best days of my life

Though Adams is Canadian, his 1984 hit begins with four lines which, according to an American magazine, “just about anyone currently between the ages of 18 and 48 could recite better than the Pledge of Allegiance” (Unterberger 2007). “I got my first real six-string,” sings Adams, “bought it at the five-and-dime. Played it till my fingers bled, it was the summer of ‘69.” At this point the drums kick in as the singer ecstatically revisits the birth of his very first band (“me and some guys from school”).

If we acknowledge that getting a guitar and forming a band can be memorable events, the song’s lyrics, when taken on their own, offer little to convince us that these bygone days were so sublime. The guitar was very cheap. The band, plagued by a lack of commitment (“Jimmy quit, Jody got married”), never really had what it takes (“Shoulda known we’d never get far”). In the video, directed by Steve Barron, Adams is living in a very small trailer home with nowhere to play but a dilapidated barn surrounded by trash. The singer will go on to tell of a presumably unglamorous summer job that he had no choice but to take (“no use in complaining”). And while the summer “seemed to last forever,” much of that time was spent “killing time,” restlessly. If the music were different, if Adams’s voice were not so passionate, and if he didn’t hammer the point home a few lines later, we might see little reason to regard these as the “best days of his life.”

This (admittedly artificial) gesture of extracting the literal content of the lyrics from their framing in the song enables us to grasp the dynamic of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. One way to understand this term is that it pinpoints the spectral difference between “objectively” mundane events and these same events as *sublime* objects of desire. The *objet a* is the intimation of an enigmatic, unnameable “something more,” irreducible to an entity’s empirical features but on account of which it appears infinitely desirable. It designates the paradoxical presence of an entirely insubstantial “it,” a dimension arising only when we view an entity from a certain angle—“when one takes a direct look at it, one sees nothing at all” (Žižek 2001a: 151). Sublimity, for Lacan, resides in this “anamorphic” transformation of the empirically regular, of that which is “part of everyday reality” (Žižek 2005: 95). We could think of it as a psychical rock-‘n-rolling of an otherwise ordinary object.

John Mellencamp’s celebratory “Small Town” offers a similar dynamic. Again, when looked upon directly the song’s lyrics give little cause to celebrate—they could easily have been set to despondent music and sung as a lamentation: “I was born in a small town, and I live in a small town, probably die in a small town ...” All of the singer’s friends are “so small town” and his job prospects are equally limited (“there’s little opportunity”). Most of the lines could theoretically be given as reasons for *fleeing* small towns. But Mellencamp’s song makes one feel as though small-town existence is a state of unsurpassable glory. The ecstatic tone of his singing and the driving

power of the band combine, in Lacan's terms, to raise these utterly mundane (if not depressing) features of small-town life "to the dignity of the Thing" (1992: 12). The song's message, in this regard, is not simply that small towns are intrinsically great, but that their infinite desirability resides in an ultimately unnameable feature, a "something more" that reverberates through their ordinary components when perceived from a certain (Mellencampian) angle.

In Adams's case, the perspective from which he is "looking awry" upon those summer days is the future ("And now the times are changing"), and we might suspect that it is this perspective as *such* that endows the summer with such inexplicable wonder: "Oh, and when I look back now [the relatively mundane events of youth shine with sublime splendour]." The *objet a*, in this regard, presents the paradox of a quality which "overlaps with its loss, which emerges at the very moment of its loss" (Žižek 2006b: 61)—a *retroactivity* known only too well to listeners of '80s music. When Chicago and Cinderella lament (in '84 and '88) that "you don't know what you've got till it's gone," they are emphasizing the paradoxical way in which the *objet a* appears in hindsight, correlative to its status as lost.

But if the aim of psychoanalytic theory were merely to expose the illusory status of sublime objects, it would be ill-suited to the passionate spirit of songs like these, and it would bypass Adams's own more radical lessons on the nature of desire. His opening verses are about trying passionately to "get" somewhere or *something*; and if those summer days lack nameable advantages, what they resonate with is a potent *yearning*. What the song laments losing, we could say, is not primarily something Adams possessed during that summer but something which possessed *him*—something which made him play that cheap guitar so ardently that his fingers bled and he *liked* it. A surprising feature of many '80s songs about desire for past days is the way in which *desire itself* emerges as the past's own defining feature. "When I turned seventeen," sings Tom Cochrane in "Boy Inside the Man," "we had passion, we had dreams"—the element of the past that most attracts him is desire itself (something tragically lost when he "turned much older"). Bruce Springsteen's "No Surrender" is an even more direct analogy with "Summer of '69." From the vantage point of fading desire ("hearts of fire grow cold"), the singer rocks his way into a past whose glory and wonder reside in a passionate attachment to *future* glories, evoked by the playing of music: "maybe we could cut some place of our own with these drums and these guitars."

The "lost object" is thus strangely circuitous. The summer of '69 is intensely desirable because it was a time of intense desire. The singer seeks passionately to grasp a past defined by its passion for something *beyond* immediate grasp (escaping his fingers, leaving them raw). It is this variation on the motif of "losing what we never had" that qualifies Adams as a Lacanian—the song's psychoanalytic "lesson" concerns not simply the retroactivity of sublimity (the summer becomes intensely desirable in hindsight) but the "self-reflexivity" at the heart of desire: "desire is

always also a *desire for desire itself*" (Žižek 2002a: 144).

Both Springsteen and Adams subject this circuitry to an additional twist, given our awareness that they *do* "get far," *do* ultimately "cut someplace" of their own with those drums and guitars. The fact that we're hearing their songs testifies to the fulfilment of their youthful dreams. Barron's "Summer of '69" video renders this conspicuously. When we shift to the present ("Oh, and when I look back now ..."), Adams is lying in a hammock, casually telling the story of his life to a journalist who eagerly transcribes his every reflection. The obstacles were short-lived: no more tedious summer jobs, no more trailer. Nor is there a trace of those "deadlines and commitments" that Bob Seger laments in "Against the Wind," no encroaching disillusionment with the music industry ("Wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then"). It's hard to resist the impression that *these* are the best days of Adams's life. But this contradiction only accentuates the inherent "swerve" of Lacanian desire. What is potentially inaccessible to one who "has it made" is the very *desire* that so potently infused those summer days gone by, their pulsating yearning for something to come. As Steve Winwood's "Back in the Highlife" makes clear, the most song-worthy state of affairs is not the highlife itself, but the acute feeling that one *will* be there, perhaps imminently.

### **Standing on your mamma's porch**

If this paradox of "losing what we never had" applies to the first part of Adams's song, don't the subsequent verses emphasize desire's *fulfilment*? What made the summer of '69 so great, we learn in the middle, was the girl whom the singer met during his "evenings down at the drive-in." Adams himself insists that the song is about sex, the 69 in its title referring to a sexual position rather than a specific year (Mersereau 2010: 26). It is hard to find a youtube page or a blog on Adams that doesn't take giddy delight in exposing the song's "hidden reference," fuelled by the revelation that Adams was only 10 in 1969. Interestingly, this game partakes of the very "sexual reductionism" for which psychoanalysis itself is so often attacked (Zupančič 2008: 206), i.e., its predilection for translating everything into sexual references. But surprisingly, it is here that the insights of Lacan and Žižek encourage a twist: this *direct* translation of the song's title into sexual meanings is what a psychoanalytic approach should seek to complicate.

For a song supposedly about sex, "Summer of '69" evokes only a single, innocent image of contact: "Oh and when you held my hand." No one here is making love in the green grass behind any stadiums. Even the hand-holding occurs while the girl is "standing on [her] momma's porch," inaccessible. In fact, the only thing she *does* in this song is proclaim she'll "wait forever." (For what? Why?) Again we encounter a strange circuit. The song returns to the past out of nostalgic yearning, but the defining feature of this past was a waiting *for* some future event; it recalls a

moment in which they were passionately determined to wait interminably.

Here we should subject the motif of “losing what we never had” to an additional twist. What is lost with the past is neither a positively-given entity, nor simply the desire *for* a specific entity (still-to-come). What Lacan and Žižek share with many rock anthems is their insistence on the ultimately *unsymbolizable* nature of desire’s object, its attachment to an unspecified, indescribable “something” toward which that six-string seems to gesture. “Born to Run”—*where?* “Never Surrender”—*what?* “Don’t Stop Believin’”—in *what?* We should resist the temptation to reduce the dynamic of these songs to a generality that enables listeners to “fill out” their lyrics with differing personal content (each listener can “identify” with the song because he or she has specific things to “keep believing” in). When Journey encourages us so passionately to “hold onto that feeling”—without offering a scrap of insight into what the feeling might be—they are not merely being vague. What they recognize, like Lacanian psychoanalysis, is that holdin’ on is often most intense when it doesn’t know what it’s holdin’ on *to*. As Bon Jovi puts it:

Never say goodbye, never say goodbye,  
Holdin’ on, we’ve got to try, holdin’ on to never say goodbye.

Never say goodbye to *what?* To *holdin’ on*. What are we holdin’ on to? To *never saying goodbye*. ‘80s rock and Lacanian psychoanalysis are two domains where this tautological circuitry, this self-reflexivity of passionate emotion, makes perfect sense.<sup>1</sup>

But no one is less ambiguous than Adams about what he had in the past. Indeed, in *insisting* that his song revolves around a “blatantly obvious sexual reference” (qtd. in Mersereau 2010: 26), he prompts an almost comic inversion of psychoanalytic criticism’s “sexual reductionism.” In this case it is the artist himself who insistently “reads into” the song’s apparently innocent phrases. If the song is supposed to be about “sex in the summertime,” why does Adams give us nothing but mommas’ porches? In instances like these, Žižek is quick to emphasize the dynamic of Freudian dream interpretation. Freud posits not a simple opposition between “dream-text” (the surface-appearance of the dream) and “dream-thought” (the “unconscious” meaning it conveys): the “true core” of the dream is something that “inscribes itself only through and in this very process of masking, so the very moment we retranslate the dream-content back into the dream-thought expressed in it, we lose the ‘true motif force’ of the dream” (2008:72). In this regard, the properly psychoanalytic gesture consists not in revealing “sex” as the true referent veiled behind the song’s deceptively innocent surface, but in revealing the desire that inscribes itself through this “masking” as such.

If the song is about lost teenage years, we should recall that this game of hiding sexual

references is a teenage occupation *par excellence*. Adults may play the game too, but they don't really *need* to, at least not with each other. What is potentially lost to the singer in '84 is not the sexual 69 (surely this could still be attained?) but the days when such talk seemed *transgressive*, when one felt one had to *hide* it, veiling one's true messages because momma was just inside the door. What is lost, and what the song celebrates, is not (only) 69 but the wonder of those days when mutual oral sex was something you felt too inhibited to talk about directly, when, like some sacred unspeakable Thing, it could only be intimated in roundabout locutions and hushed tones. Consider the contrast between Adams's veiled references and Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane": "dribble off those Bobbie Brooks let me do what I please." Here, a vital dimension of youth has *already* been lost, not simply insofar as Jack and Diane have clearly lost their virginity, but insofar as they've lost any perceived necessity to veil their talk. Ironically, Jack and Diane are already talking like pragmatic adults, while the adult singer of "Summer of '69" enacts the trepidation of virginal adolescence.

Adams has claimed that the final line of the song is simply too explicit to be misperceived: "Me and my baby *in a 69*." But if this is really what he says, it's hard to hear. The music conceals what's going on—he *gets away with it*, sneaking in some sex without being heard. Of course, the adult Adams doesn't *need* to sneak around like this anymore—and *that*, I'd suggest, is what the song most laments. Put differently, what we miss in going directly *for* the sexual reference is the vital Lacanian distinction between the object of desire and the "object-cause." As Žižek explains, "while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature *on account of which* we desire the desired object" (2001a: 147), a detail or circumstance which we often misperceive as a secondary *obstacle* preventing desire's fulfilment. Mellencamp's 1987 "Paper in Fire" commences with this dynamic—it describes a woman who chased a dream "with much desire":

But when she came too close to her expectations  
Well the dream burned up, like paper in fire.

The woman is not merely thwarted by obstacles that prevent her from actualizing her dreams. Rather, it is because she *overcomes* the obstacles and gets "too close" to her dreams that they burn up. Lacanian objects of desire are similarly combustible when deprived of their object-cause. Or as U2 puts it: "I gave you everything you ever wanted. It wasn't what you wanted" ("So Cruel").<sup>2</sup>

Adams's most ambiguous line is also the only one to describe physical contact: "Oh and when you held my hand, I knew that it was now or never." Why on earth was it "now or never"? And what was "it"? Again, the unsymbolizable *is* the thing that's lost. What adult sex is at risk of losing is

precisely the sense of radical expectancy and indeterminacy that defined physical contact back then, the intense intimation that *something* was on the brink of happening, the sense of a fleeting, indescribable *it* that seemed urgently within grasp (making one “bleed” for it). What is Lacan’s *objet a* if not such an utterly indefinable “it” that marks the (very real) difference between *sublime* sexual contact and mundane repetition? As a brief mental experiment: do we know that the girl in Adams’s song *is* a “lost object,” gone forever with that distant summer? “Sometimes when I play that old six-string, think about you wonder what when wrong.” Could he not theoretically be singing *to* the girl—a girl whom he *still has*—and wondering what went wrong (with his *desire*), why he no longer feels the same quaking passion as when they stood on that porch? He *has* the object but has lost the *it* that made him desire it.

To make no mistake: if Žižekian psychoanalysis balks at Adams’s clear-cut insistence that ‘69 means 69, it does so with an eminently sexual agenda. What is missed in going directly *for* the sexual reference is not simply the “non-sexual” aspects of the song, but the much more pervasive dynamic of sexuality that can pertain to a summer. We might recall the strange experience of being made aware, for the first time, that 69 is not *just* a number, of being alerted, through suggestive smiles and knowing winks—or fearful, guarded reactions—that there’s something *more*, something enigmatic and somehow “sexual” going on here, that we’ve trespassed on some unfathomable realm of mystery. To designate a summer as the “summer of 69” is (also) to suggest the way this dynamic applies to the *whole* of it, overflowing specific sexual encounters. Adams’s “sexual” title should thus be taken *more* seriously—it conveys how a *time* can itself be sexualized, resonating with a “something more” by virtue of which even the most mundane entities (numbers) are no longer simply themselves.

### **I close my eyes, and she slips away**

It is crucial, for Žižek, to be clear on the dynamic of this overflow. The “sexualisation” of reality is not a simple consequence of there being a lot of sex going on, or of sex’s experiential fullness permeating everything around it. Žižek is quick to emphasize that this “universal surplus—this capacity of sexuality to overflow the entire field of human experience” is not to be taken as a “sign of its preponderance” (2004: 89), i.e., of sex’s substantial density in relation to everything else. “Rather, it is the sign of a certain structural faultiness: sexuality strives outward and overflows the adjoining domains precisely because it cannot find satisfaction in itself, because it never attains its goal.”

This brings us to a central contention of Lacan’s later work, his notorious (and often misunderstood) insistence that *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel* (“there is no sexual relationship”). 69



is not just a *particular* attempt at sexual gratification—it serves as a metaphor for the unity of opposed entities, the dialectical synthesis of inversions, or as Adams puts it, the reconciliation of “the yin and yang” (qtd. in Mersereau 2010: 26). But for Lacan, *il n’y a pas de 69*—there is no “natural,” innate unity of biological beings in human sexuality, since no two partners are ever a 6 and a 9: “Lacan is as far as it is possible to be from the notion of sexual difference as the relationship of two opposite poles which supplement each other and together form the whole” (Žižek 2005: 159). He is much closer to U2’s 1991 assessment: “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle” (“Tryin’ to Throw Your Arms Around the World”).<sup>3</sup> That is, no matter how attractive a physical partner may be, there remains a fundamental (indeed absurd) incongruity between this partner in his or her empirical reality and the *Thing*, the sublime entity that could truly make a divided, finite individual into a Whole. It is for this reason that the human sexual relationship, in Bono’s terms, is like “tryin’ to throw your arms around the world,” defined by a fundamental impossibility which both condemns it to incompleteness and simultaneously endows it with *sublime* scope.

It is also in this respect that Bloodhound Gang gets it wrong in their 1999 hit “The Bad Touch”: “You and me baby we ain’t nothin’ but mammals, so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.” Human sex, for psychoanalysis, is *never* strictly “natural,” never equivalent to a physical exchange between mammals. Indeed, the definitive incommensurability of animal and human sex is proven by the practice of *69 itself*, something no animal would ever bother doing. As Alenka Zupančič notes, “the further sex departs from the ‘pure’ copulating movement (that is to say, the wider the range of elements it includes in its activity), the more sexual it becomes. Sexuality gets sexualized precisely in this constitutive interval that separates it from itself” (2008: 207). In Lacan, even the most “straightforward” human sex is “separated from itself” through a complex imbrication with fantasy supplements—a dynamic attested to by “The Bad Touch” itself. For all the animalistic directness of the song’s chorus, its verses embellish the “basic” sexual act with an endless array of metaphors and fantasmatic imagery (“I wanna be down in your South Seas ...”).

We could thus paraphrase a central contention of Lacan’s later writings in saying that every empirical 69, in order to *work*, must be a  $6 + 9 + a$ . Insofar as a fundamental deadlock or impossibility pertains to human sexuality *per se*, every sexual relationship needs to be supplemented with an *a*, a “something more” infusing the base components of reproduction, a fantasy-dimension exceeding the physical bodies in their “natural” operations. And here we encounter an even more radical variation on “losing what we never had”: conceiving the full sexual relationship as a *fundamental* impossibility helps explain the odd but eminently human tendency to set about *losing* it, casting it *as lost*—a prospect that might sound absurd if not for the fact that hit singles are doing it all the time.

Boston's 1976 "More Than a Feeling," like "Summer of '69," recalls a girl ("Mary Ann") whom the singer "used to know" in a long-lost summer. What it stages, however, is by no means an imaginative return to Mary Ann but a strangely ecstatic re-enactment of her *loss*: "I dream of a girl I used to know, I close my eyes and she slips away ..." It is not simply that the singer's dream-girl (tragically) slipped away from him, nor that the dream *of* her inevitably slips away (when he opens his eyes). He explicitly fantasizes *about* her slipping away—his fantasy orchestrates and captures the moment of her irretrievable loss—and strangely, this moment is rendered ecstatic, *sublime*, the singer's voice soaring as the band explodes ("Away-ay-aaaaayyyyy!"). The song's most *awesome* moment is the moment of irrevocable separation from the empirical girl—"when I see Mary Ann walk away."

Revealingly, the refusal of Adams's lyrics to evoke a realm of empirical sexual activities is not only maintained but heightened by the song's video, where one might expect a "fleshing out" of the words with images of passion. At the critical moment ("I knew that it was now or never"), Adams actively *turns away* from the girl and walks off (toward the camera), leaving her *frozen*, lingering forever on the brink of a cliff as he returns to the present. The video thus provides a supplementary answer to the question of *what* was "now or never." It is as though the singer recognizes the precise moment at which he must *lose* the girl, eternally, in order to be able to preserve her as a sublime fantasy. It is thus that she becomes the signifier *of* 69—of a perfection (a full sexual relationship) that *could have* been attained if not for certain contingent obstacles. From a Žižekian-Lacanian angle there is a compelling "truth" to the ecstasy of Adams and Boston: we lose what we never had because doing so enables us most purely to *gain* it.

These songs are not, of course, inventing something entirely new—their dynamic is clearly indebted to the tradition of romantic poet-heroes. As Žižek writes, "It is only when the poet loses his lady that he finally and truly acquires her, it is precisely through this loss that she gains her place in the fantasy space that regulates the subject's desire" (1992: 86). But what distinguishes Adams's *rock* song from these melancholy poets is the purity of his *enjoyment* in all this. Not only is the girl not dead—the song orchestrates her loss in the strict absence of *any* details that would vitiate her sublime image: annoying quarrels, tedious post-break-up phone calls, guilt. It is as though she mysteriously vanished, with none of the sadness (or *finitude*) accompanying death. The absolute ambiguity and abstractness of "what went wrong" permits her both to occupy the sublime position and to be something one can *rock out* to. The true fantasy, thus, is not simply the perfection of the past but the *manner* of its loss—what's been lost are the empirical distortions that surround and vitiate any actual loss.

In these senses, the song's libidinal dynamic is diametrically opposed to Don Henley's "Boys of Summer" (released the same year). For all its comparable talk of a lost summer (to which

“you can never go back”) and an ideal Woman who inhabited it (her “brown skin shining in the sun”), what Henley’s song “gets off” on is not the irretrievably lost object but the determination to *regain* it: “Someday I’m gonna get you back, gonna show you what I’m made of.” The song’s desire is not, ultimately, a desire *for* that lost summer but a desire to outlast it, to keep *proving* desire long “after the boys of summer have gone.” By contrast, the singer of “Summer of ‘69” *is* one of Henley’s “boys of summer.” The song’s video reinforces this. Adams plucks a guitar out of the air, trampling a sign that reads “*Positively No Admittance*” as he fantasmatically returns to the site of his youthful summer—the girl nowhere to be seen. This “inaccessible” realm involves nothing other than the band and the dilapidated garage on a summer evening. In an eminent tautology, the adult Adams returns to the summer of ‘69 in order to play “Summer of ‘69.”

But the crucial feature of the video is still to come. As he’s playing away with the boys, we shift to a distant, blurred, bumpy perspective-shot of the same event. The enigmatic viewpoint is eventually assigned to the dream-girl herself, gazing through the window of a passing car. She *does* return, but against expectation she is driving by with a new boyfriend. As they pass the place where Adams is playing:

Boyfriend. Who was that?

Girl. (secretively) Nobody ...

Boyfriend. I *said*, “Who was that”?

Girl. (evasively) I *said*, “Nobody” ...

The video offers a clear demonstration of Žižek’s insistence that fantasy’s true dimension is the *gaze*: “the proper object of fantasy is the fantasized gaze, not the fantastic scene itself” (2002b: 130). What the video stages here is not primarily Adams’s fantasy *of* the girl, but of her gaze upon *him*. The object of fantasy is *her* fantasy—the fantasy that he continues to exist for her on the level of fantasy, untarnished and inviolable, as part of a 69. As she drives away her smile and intense expression betray the sublime place that he inhabits within her, a domain that remains forever inaccessible to this masculine numbskull beside her, a domain to which there is “*positively no admission*.” It’s in this capacity that Adams emasculates her boyfriend, who can do nothing to uproot the (eternalized) memory of what *could have* occurred. An annoying fight breaks out in the car as the video ends—*this* is what Adams evades, preserving the fantasmatic status of his 69, free from the corrupting influence of empirical daily reality.

## Long after the thrill of living is gone

Perhaps the strangest paradox of these songs about past wonder and glory emerges when we consider listeners' relation to them over time. Andrew Unterberger writes of Bob Seger's "Night Moves":

Even when I was listening to the song back in my first years of high school, it made me feel like my best days were behind me, or at least that I better start living real good real quick, lest I not have anything to sing about with such passion when I reach my 30s. (2007)

Unterberger's response pinpoints a paradox that many can recall in their own experience with songs like "Summer of '69"—a song I listened to repeatedly at the age of 11. Of course, even an 11-year-old can experience forms of nostalgia, "identifying" with the singer in recalling previous summers (a week at camp?), or fantasizing about future days as great as those extolled by Adams. But in singing and rocking along, the 11-year-old engages in the strange practice of lamenting the *loss* of days-to-come, fantasmatically inhabiting a future gaze for which the wonder of youth will appear as irretrievable. Songs like "Summer of '69" offer youthful listeners the strange pleasure of *losing* great summers they have not yet had, of rocking ecstatically to Mary Ann's who *will have* slipped away. We should note that this *futur antérieur* was integral to "Summer of '69" from the beginning. Adams has described the hit as "a response to 'Night Moves,' one of his favorite songs" (Unterberger). In conceiving it, he was thus imitating the nostalgic gaze he'd observed in others long before he'd arrived at a place *from which* he could be properly nostalgic about teenage pasts.

To explore these paradoxes—which, I'd argue, reflect much about the functioning of "normal" desire and enjoyment—I suggest a brief detour through Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane" and its famous refrain: "Oh yeah, life goes on long after the thrill of living is gone." Singing of teenage sex and summer days, Mellencamp instructs his listeners to "Hold onto sixteen as long as you can" since "changes come around real soon, make us women and men."

If the song was hugely popular with teenagers in 1982, a sixteen-year-old might easily (as I did) experience a degree of confusion if not anxiety in the face of its urgent injunction. Being sixteen, as any sixteen-year-old knows, is not always or often thrilling. What *is* this "thrill of living" that I'm supposed to be exhibiting? The anxiety here is correlative to what Lacan terms the *Che Vuoi?*—"what do you *want?*" (2006: 690). What *is* it about my sixteen-ness that appears so eminently desirable to the gaze of the Other? Once again, a close look reveals that the singer's desire is directed toward desire and expectancy itself: "Jackie's *gonna be* a football star." The glorious aspect of that youthful summer resides, for the adult gaze, in the intimation of things imminently *to come*. Yet perhaps the song's key "psychoanalytic" lesson is to be found in the unexpected inversion accomplished by its chorus. What it stages is not just Mellencamp's (adult) lament that the "thrill of living" embodied in sixteen-year-old Jack and Diane is gone for him. When

we listen carefully, it's clear that this line is *Jackie's* ("and Jackie says ..."). Strangely, the song is about a sixteen-year-old who is *already* obsessed with the thrill-of-living's imminent loss. The chorus is Jackie's own mantra.

If this attitude seems an irregular distortion of melancholy—normally understood as an attachment to things that one *has* lost—Jackie, who spends his sixteen-year-old summer days refraining about the brevity of youth, gives body to what Žižek terms melancholy at its purest. Žižek draws here on Agamben's contention that "melancholy offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object" (qtd. in 2001a: 146). The "pure" melancholic treats an object as lost "*before the object is actually lost*" (Žižek 2001a: 147). But why? Jackie has the wonder of youth in his grasp, so why not "live in the moment" and fully enjoy it, rather than dwelling on its loss? The song suggests its own response to this question. Perhaps the "thrill of living" is a direct *product* of Jackie's perception of the present as fleeting and behind him in the moment of its occurrence; perhaps Jackie renders *sublime* his youthful reality by casting it as something already lost.

Notably, Jackie's refrain ("Oh yeah, life goes on ...") accompanies the teens' sexual encounter; the chorus commences as they head off behind the shady trees. In this light, sex for Jackie involves an implicit *self-division*. He engages in sex with Diane as a sixteen-year-old, while simultaneously refraining about the irrevocable loss of such things. The encounter is thus a clear  $6 + 9 + a$ . The *a*, in this case, is the additional (future) gaze that is carried into the act and upon whose presence its intensity depends ("the proper object of fantasy is the fantasized gaze"). Jackie performs sex with an eye to a future gaze for *whom* it will appear to encapsulate a lost "thrill of living," for *whom* it will appear to contain the sublime "it." Put differently, one way to make sex especially intense in '82 is to perceive it as something that one *will* look back upon with infinite longing in 2011—one "sublimates" the sexual encounter in performing it for one's own future (thrill-less) self. Žižek has this kind of dynamic in mind when he insists that even private sexual encounters (behind shady trees) are "minimally 'exhibitionist'" (1997: 179).

Jackie's melancholia, in this respect, is linked to his *own* encroaching awareness that *il n'y a pas de 69*. Only moments after the sexual encounter ("Jackie sits back ..."), he has already begun to express a restless discontent. He wants to "go off to the city," failing to perceive (as Diane needs to inform him) that they "ain't missing a thing." The "thrill" of the experience seems already to be threatened, just as Jackie suspected it would. His melancholy, in this light, operates as a strategy to avert confronting the sublime object's illusory nature. He is able to gain the thrill more purely by framing these moments as something he'll *later* perceive as a lost perfection. As Žižek explains, "*the only way to possess an object [or a perfection] which we never had, which was lost from the very outset, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost*"

(2001a: 146).

Youth's intensity, the object of Mellencamp's reflections, is here revealed as correlative to a type of temporal "short circuit," and the song's psychoanalytic "lesson" is to be found in the peculiar inversion it accomplishes: what we may overlook, in gazing nostalgically on past times, is the way in which this gaze was inscribed in the "lost" time *from the very beginning*. Perhaps Jackie is not so unusual here. A good part of one's happiness "in the moment" can be related to the realization that what one is currently experiencing will *later* be perceived as something sublime; present happiness is generated *with an eye to the future gaze observing it*. Rock concerts are excellent examples. Much of one's joy in seeing a rock star perform is linked to the knowledge that one will later be able to say that one *was there*, that one *experienced* it (regardless of how terrible the acoustics happen to be in the moment). Doesn't this dynamic help account for the fact that a great many concert-goers spend a large portion of the concert looking at it through their camera-lens? In this way the future perspective is directly inscribed in the "present" experience.

### **Tonight, let's enjoy life**

Žižek's work also encourages a supplementary inversion of the dynamic explored above. If enjoyment can arise from the way we live our present moments with an eye to their future re-telling, it may also be facilitated by the fantasy that we've *already* enjoyed, irrevocably—in the past. Simply put, why should the fundamental premise of these songs—i.e. that we enjoyed ourselves as youths but "now the times are changing" (and we're thrill-less adults)—be correlative to an intensely *rocking* experience in the present (for which we may be willing to pay large sums of money)? A Žižekian response to this paradox compels an inversion of its basic terms: perhaps the issue is not simply that our present "adult" reality is deprived of enjoyment (which purely existed only in the past), but rather that this present reality is *saturated* with enjoyment, congested with it. This is the late-capitalist dynamic theorized in the later writings of Lacan and emphasized throughout Žižek: a shift from Symbolic Law as prohibitive agency (separating subjects from enjoyment) to the contemporary Superego as *injunction to Enjoy*, an injunction which follows us relentlessly and assumes innumerable forms. In the contemporary world we are "bombarded from all sides by different versions of the injunction 'Enjoy!', from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening" (2006b: 104). The paramount "ethical duty" imposed on us by contemporary capitalism is the duty to extract maximum enjoyment from all facets of existence, and to do so, as Van Halen and Nike insist, "Right Now."

"Tonight, let's enjoy life," suggests Pitbull in the 2011 hit "Give Me Everything": "Let's do it

tonight” because “for all we know we might not get tomorrow.” One doesn’t have to be a psychoanalyst to recognize that this “it” refers to sex, and that the singer’s reference to finitude is a strategy of seduction. The “unconscious” of this song consists not in some veiled sexual reference but in its complicity with the dynamic of contemporary capitalism, which itself compels us to demand “everything tonight.” In this light, perhaps the enjoyment afforded by anthems like “Summer of ‘69” resides not primarily in a fantasized return to previous days of enjoyment, but rather in the fantasmatic *release* they offer from a stressful *obligation* to enjoy in the present. Amidst a realm saturated *by* enjoyment, the projection of enjoyment into the unattainable past functions ironically to open the space *for* enjoyment—the fantasy of having already fully enjoyed releases us from the (enjoyment-squelching) obligation to do so right now. Confronted with Pitbull’s urgent injunction to “do it tonight,” Adams can simply respond: “I don’t need to. I already did it back in the Summer of ‘69.” He can then relax, spend the evening jamming with the boys—and actually enjoy himself.

If this dynamic of “enjoined enjoyment” seems counterintuitive, it is perhaps nowhere more apparent than at a rock concert. For many of us adults, though we may love a particular band’s music, the prospect of attending a concert can be *tiring*, and not simply due to the associated headaches (on-line ticket queues, traffic). The very thought of having to sufficiently *enjoy*, to rock out with sufficient abandon, can itself be a source of anxiety (“Am I enjoying every second enough to warrant the \$300 I spent on the ticket?!”). At a Bon Jovi concert I recently attended, my friends and I were admonished by the sixteen-year-olds in the group beside us for not screaming with sufficient ecstasy every time Jon broke into another #1 hit. Ironically, these sixteen-year-olds spent most of the concert recording it (and themselves) through their cell phones, enjoying the experience by framing it as a purity of enjoyment to be later *recalled*.

### **Conclusion: Hold on to sixteen as long as you can ...**

“Looking awry” from a final angle on the dynamic of enjoyment in these songs, I’ll turn briefly to a concept of increasing centrality in Lacan’s later work. Like many rock songs, “Summer of ‘69” concludes—or rather fails to conclude—with an endlessly protracted rocking out. The volume gradually fades on a band that refuses to stop and a singer who won’t relent reformulating his praise for that eternally lost summer. In the context established by the lyrics, this immortalized repetition creates a dynamic which Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to capture with the term “drive,” best understood through its distinction between “goal” and “aim.” The explicit *goal* of Adams’s song may be to journey into the past, to reclaim it, to figure out “what went wrong,” but the journey toward this goal (facilitated by the six-string) starts to function as its own *aim*, that is, “as something that brings its own satisfaction” (Žižek 1999: 304). Adams never gets back to the past, never

reaches the girl again nor discovers why things fell apart—the process, to use Žižekian terms, circulates around a “radically inaccessible X that forever eludes its grasp”; and in that respect, all this rocking is marked by a constitutive *failure*, a failure it endlessly repeats. But here, as in Lacanian drive, failure is transformed into a paradoxical success. In this riffing and repetition we shift from a quest or lament for the lost, inaccessible object to an *objet a* that emerges *in and through* this endlessly repeated rocking, a by-product of the purported goal. By the end, the singer is no longer directly targeting what was lost, no longer wanting to be *there*, given the joy generated *here*, in the rocking itself. Put differently, if the song is about loss—about what the singer no longer has and can never regain—its result is a transfiguration of loss. The singer doesn’t really *want* to return to the summer of ‘69, because in the summer of ‘69, he didn’t have this song.

We could hardly find a better demonstration of this “reflexive reversal-into-self constitutive of drive” (Žižek 1999: 304) than Springsteen’s 1984 “Glory Days,” a song that I could hardly conclude without mentioning. For all its lyrical emphasis on finitude and inevitable loss (“Time slips away, leaves you with nothin’, mister”), what the song ultimately brings forward, and celebrates, is a strangely *immortal* dimension in human beings—the self-proliferating dynamic of *talking* about the past, the insatiable, relentless impulse to *repeat* such talk, and the *enjoyment* that eternalizes this repetition. Talking (and singing) of glory days circulates around a central impossibility, stretching toward something forever lost that can never be gotten back; but Springsteen’s song turns failure into success, rocking not *to* the inaccessible days themselves, but *in* the paradoxical enjoyment derived from an endless circulation around them. In these songs, as Žižek says of drive:

[W]e pass from the lost object to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say: the weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is *a push to enact ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself directly*. (2006b: 62)

Nowhere is the paradoxical human *enjoyment* of “enacting loss” more apparent than in our incessant return to these songs. Properly *seductive*, they entice us to keep coming back, repeatedly granting us the exquisite pleasure of losing something that we never (fully) had.

If a state of absolute unity and wholeness with an other—a metaphysical 69—is the ultimate “goal” of human beings (given their inherent division and separation), what these songs reflect is the upside of the fact that *il n’y a pas de 69*. Put another way, when Springsteen asserts, famously, that glory days will pass us by “in the wink of a *young girl’s eye*,” he gives voice to what the enduring popularity of these songs seems to prove—that there’s something seductive, indeed sexual, about *losing* sixteen, again and again.

## Notes



1. Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* may be of some help here. Like a good '80s rock star, the character Brick spends his nights lamenting the loss of what he had when he was "still young an' believing":

BIG DADDY: Believing what?

BRICK: Believing . . . .

BIG DADDY: Believing *what*?

BRICK (*stubbornly evasive*): Believing . . . .

BIG DADDY: I don't know what the hell you mean by believing and I don't think you know what you mean by believing ... (53)

Big Daddy could be addressing the members of Journey here. But Brick is not being merely "evasive." It was the very *intransitivity* of his youthful belief that makes its loss so traumatic. Simultaneously, it is the difficulty of specifying what one *had* there, in the past, that attaches one to it so forcefully. The melancholic, notes Žižek, "is not aware of *what* he has lost in the lost object" (2001a: 147)

2. Adams resurrects momma a few years later with the oddly-named hit, "Is Your Momma Gonna Miss Ya?" By now, the singer and the girl have succeeded in leaving the porch ("She's going with me, momma"), but this accessibility of the love-object only inspires Adams to a full-blown fetishization of the object-cause. Now that he's got the girl he can't stop talking about momma—"Is your momma gonna miss her little rolling stone? Is your momma gonna cry now she's alone? Cause momma's little girl ain't going home." Finally free from restrictions, the singer insistently and repeatedly re-invokes the obstacle, revealing its *constitutive* relationship with desire.
3. This line, popularized by Gloria Steinem, originated with Irina Dunn.

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