When the Pet Shop Boys were "Imperial": Fans' Self-Aging and the Neoliberal Life Course of "Successful" Text-Aging

Matt Hills, University of Huddersfield

Abstract: I follow Harrington and Bielby's (2018) call for more work on "texistence" – how fans' self-aging and the text-aging of pop-cultural texts become intertwined. I focus on the British pop duo Pet Shop Boys (PSB), formed in 1981. Lead singer Neil Tennant coined the term "imperial phase" (2001) to describe the success of their album *Actually* (1987), and this terminology has been embraced by PSB fandom; enduring fans consider their fandom in relation to imperial/post-imperial phases. I consider how PSB fans desire a return of the "imperial", refuting any text-aging "narrative of decline", as well as counterfactually reimagining the duo's career success. Fannish interpretive community is based on celebrating the commercial authenticity of Pet Shop Boys' music, articulating both text-aging and fans' self-aging with neoliberalized concepts of the "successful" life course (Clack and Paule 2019) and "uniqueness" in marketized contexts (Nealon 2018). I thus argue that neoliberalism needs to be integrated into analyses of the contemporary fannish life course, even when fan objects (such as PSB) have been explicitly anti-neoliberal across their careers.

Keywords: Pet Shop Boys; popular music; text-aging; life course; fandom; neoliberalism

Contributor Details: Matt Hills is Professor of Media & Film at the University of Huddersfield, and Director of the Centre for Participatory Culture. He is the author of six monographs, beginning with *Fan Cultures* (Routledge, 2002), and the editor/co-editor of two further books including *Transatlantic Television Drama* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Matt has published widely on fandom.

Contact: University of Huddersfield, JM Building, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH, United Kingdom.
E-mail: M.J.Hills@hud.ac.uk

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C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby have suggested that, for long-term media fans:

> it seems that fans' *existence* is gradually transformed into *texistence* – the self develops in ongoing dialogue with the media texts that help define and sustain it… Our observations here point to a rich potential research trajectory for scholars focusing on how texts age from a life course perspective (life course analysis of a media text) or how… [we] might illuminate this duality of self-aging and text-aging (2018: 411).

I want to pursue this trajectory by considering how discourses of "text-aging" can be drawn on by fans following media texts across many years, and how this can be related to "self-aging". Such fandom has been described as "enduring" (Hills 2017a), as "life fandom" (Garner 2018), and even as "perpetual fandom" (Driessen 2018: 36). Multiple scholars have echoed Harrington and Bielby's (2010) call for work on fandom and the life course, with pop music providing a key site. Scholarship has addressed lifelong male fans of David Bowie (Stevenson 2006), long-term Springsteen fans (Cavicchi 1998) and enduring female fans of Kate Bush (Vroomen 2002). If this focus on "rockist" examples has reproduced cultural hierarchies surrounding rock versus pop (Gill 1995: 5), there has also been work on midlife female fans of Duran Duran (Anderson 2012) and the Backstreet Boys (Driessen 2018).

My focus here cuts across rock vs pop authenticity/inauthenticity; I will consider fans of the British pop duo Pet Shop Boys (PSB), formed by vocalist Neil Tennant and keyboardist Chris Lowe in 1981. Tennant and Lowe continue to release new music. PSB cannot be reduced to pop "inauthenticity" (Butler 2003) given their status as elder statesmen of "classic pop" (Earls 2018), along with their later-career embracing of rockist gestures such as publishing a collection of lyrics (Tennant 2018). Instead, their music has been (re)valorised by critics, especially given how they have engaged satirically with UK political currents, mocking Thatcherism of the 1980s and Blairism of the noughties (Frith 1989; Hatherley 2013). PSB have also been viewed as part of the cultural shift of "Pop into Art"; Steve Redhead (2011: 64–65) treats their *Catalogue* book (Hoare and Heath 2006) as emblematic of this.

Fandom and the Life Course as Concomitantly Neoliberalized

Harrington and Bielby (2010: 444 and 2018: 411) argue that there is a need to address the "duality" of fans' self-aging and pop-cultural text-aging, but this process can be highly complex. Textual identities can discursively shift as they chronologically age; for example, Jeffrey Nealon takes issue with Simon Frith's 1980s championing of Pet Shop Boys' anti-marketization, remarking:

> one thing that remains nearly constant is the discursive move whereby the critic locates a privileged artist or group that somehow rises above the fray of commodified musical cooptation. Here, one thinks… of Simon Frith's 1988 touting of the Pet Shop Boys as sharp purveyors of anticapitalist critique, a stance that seems more than a little bit puzzling today (Nealon 2018: 76).

And Tara Brabazon observes that Pet Shop Boys' "pop survival" was "confronted… in the release of *Behaviour* in 1990… that attracted a more adult audience. From the point of this release, they had to discover how to age through popular culture" (2005: 125).

It is therefore necessary to interrogate the multiple discourses which can frame text-aging. Neil Tennant's coinage of the term "imperial phase" is significant here (Tennant 2001), as it narrates Pet Shop Boys' peak pop-cultural success as a relatively brief moment. Consequently, there is a recurrent "narrative of decline" (Randall 2012: 11) which is combatted by fans in relation to Pet Shop Boys' text-aging. (Although I will discuss its application in greater detail in what follows, a pop artist's "imperial phase" can be defined as combining critical and commercial success, i.e. major hit songs, with a sense of seeming cultural omnipresence).

But it is important to note that fans' self-aging can be just as open to discursive reframing as text-aging. Neither fandom nor stages of the life course can be presumed to act as stable conceptual entities over time. I mean not simply that fans' self-narratives can develop longitudinally, but that what it means to be a fan can alter over time, as can normative stages of the life course. Daniel Cavicchi has noted how the "strangest discourse change for me has been the ubiquitous use of the term 'superfan' over the past decade" (in Baym, Cavicchi and Coates 2018: 142). He goes on to argue: "'superfan' has arisen in a social

media context where… everyone is presumed a ‘fan’ – that is, has ‘liked’ or ‘followed’ something. To be a superfan means that you are *really* committed; in other words, you are what we used to call a ‘fan’” (ibid). Nancy Baym links the discourse of pop ‘superfans’ to

> the decline of recorded music sales, and the deep uncertainty about how to make a living now if you used to do it from record sales… [T]he new labelling of these people seems directly tied to new challenges in making money from fans. Benji Rogers, for example, created PledgeMusic specifically to target these “superfans”, arguing that artists have been “leaving money on the table” by not catering to their needs (Baym in Baym, Cavicchi and Coates 2018: 143).

In short, the superfan is an intensely neoliberal subject, with their fan “subjectivisation” being centred not only on knowledge acquisition, performance and shared discourse but, more precisely, on consumer activity (Tarver 2017: 27 and 29). Fannish self-aging can therefore involve engaging with changing discourses of fandom itself.

Likewise, concepts of the life course in the 1980s – a time when many enduring fans first discovered PSB via their multiple hit singles – may not be fully coincident with such discourses today. As Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth pointed out in the early 1990s, there was already “an emerging de-institutionalization and a de-differentiation of the life course, with less emphasis than in the past being placed upon age-specific role transitions” (1991: 372). One result was the appearance of an extended cultural “new middle age”, “Third Age”, “middlescence” or “midlifestylism” (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 375; Pickard 2019: 222; Biggs 1999: 96; Blaikie 1999: 184), “stretching from the forties to the late sixties” (Biggs 1999: 100). Featherstone and Hepworth summarise this as follows:

> As they work their way through to retirement and old age, …[midlifestylists] will continue to take with them many of their cultural tastes, values, preferences and sensibilities, and for any adequate… understanding of these processes the life course *must be firmly situated in this historical process and considered as a continual reconstruction as we move forward through historical… time* (1991: 375, my italics).

Such midlifestylism appears to coincide with Pet Shop Boys' first commercial successes in a Thatcherite UK; it is premised on "midlife" being aligned with disposable income and consumerist identities (Biggs 1999: 96; Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2014: 9). It may therefore be possible to interpret enduring PSB fans as displaying a version of midlifestylism in which they retain their cultural tastes from initial 1980s teen consumption. Viewed as undergoing "continual reconstruction", however, this de-institutionalized life course cannot be interpreted as stabilising into a scenario where fandom acts to re-institutionalise its stages. Rather, the life course can be read, akin to the emergence of superfan discourse, as increasingly and discursively neoliberal – that is, as articulated with consumerist definitions of "successful" aging, where neoliberalism is premised on self-managing, competitive and individualised "success" (and a concomitant fear of failure as corrosively de-subjectivising; Crozier 2019: 171). The concept of successful aging has, of course, been highly influential in gerontology (following its formation in Rowe and Kahn 1987), as well as being subjected to a variety of critiques, with one strand of criticism arguing for a shift from biomedical to more sociological, or even subjective, evaluations of aging (see Rowe and Kahn 2015 for a useful summary). Here, though, I want to address "*successful" constructions of text-aging rather than biomedical notions of selfhood*, considering how discourses of text-aging can then be projected or mapped onto fans' discursive sense of self-aging. In addition, the version of "successful" aging that I am drawing on is one which is significantly shaped by neoliberal ideologies, consequently stressing the maintenance of consumer empowerment, of leisure/lifestyle consumption, and of economic capital – especially in the form of disposable income – as key markers of so-called "success". Furthermore, as Susan Crozier has highlighted, rather than "successful" aging being something that gerontologists might quantify, codify and measure, discourses of success in relation to one's life course development (career/family/status/leisure etc) and aging have themselves saturated Western societies, culturally and reflexively, such that there are "all kinds of cultural imperatives weighing on the neoliberal subject to be and to become" (Crozier 2019: 173) in line with dominant narratives of individualised, personal achievement.

I will therefore argue that neoliberalism, acting as a naturalised discourse (Hall and O'Shea 2015: 55), articulates Pet Shop Boys' text-aging and fans' self-aging, with both coming to focus on specific, consumerist ideas of "success" and warded-off decline. Although it has been suggested that neoliberalism constitutes a vague buzzword (Clack and

Paule 2019: 1), it has been defined in terms of neoliberal culture that extends the market into all areas of human life, placing consumer 'choice' at the heart of individualized existence (Hills 2017b: 81). In relation to normative fandom this can arguably lead to "good" fans, in the eyes of industry, being aligned with neoliberal marketization (Linden and Linden 2017: 68). And in the (2019) collection *Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle*, Beverley Clack and Michele Paule note that the "language of success and failure" plays

> a particular role in shaping neoliberal subjectivity. The entrepreneurial subject is an achieving subject. In one's achievements is the possibility of the meaningful life. …There are winners, and there are losers. There are those who have acquired the skills necessary for the successful life, and there are those who have failed to do so… It also suggests only one model of the flourishing life: that based on the qualities usually associated with the aspirational middle class (2019: 10–11).

Furthermore, this "successful" aspirational life is based on productivity (ultimately, the production of capitalist value) and consumerism via "the shaping of all activities… through the lens of the economic" (2019: 3–4).

Where Clack and Paule see the life course as increasingly neoliberalized, Jeffrey Nealon argues that popular music fandom has played a vital role in this overarching subjectivisation. For Nealon, "the dominant logic of American capitalism has morphed into a biopolitical form that was presaged by twentieth-century American popular music fandom and its intense investment in developing and maintaining your own personal authenticity within a wholly commodified field" (2018: 33). Popular music's values of individualized authenticity – which once seemed to represent an escape from corporatized conformity (2018: 32–33) – have shifted from the subcultural "stance of popular music fans" to become "the official house style of American biopolitical capitalism in the twenty-first century" (2018: 18). Rather than positioning fandom as a response to individualization and, I would add, neoliberalization of the life course (Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2011: 579–580), Nealon inverts this analysis and posits the discourse of self-authenticating popular music fandom as underpinning neoliberalized logics of consumerist life.

This logic of individualized authenticity is present in how Neil Tennant narrates PSB

as a “unique” pop group creating their own world in opposition to pop conventions of the day (Hoare and Heath 2006: 318; Beaumont 2018: 30). It is also strongly present in his self-account in *Pet Shop Boys, Literally*:

> [*Neil:*] People write and say, ‘All my friends like such and such but I hate that and like the Pet Shop Boys and I really like the B-side to such-and-such and I’ve written these interesting poems…’ …It’s an aspirational thing, and it’s exactly the sort of person I was when I was sixteen or seventeen. …I didn’t want to be like anybody else...
>
> *I’ve read a lot of your fan mail and most of it is ‘Why are you called the Pet Shop Boys?’ or about how they fancy you.*
>
> *Neil:* Yes, that’s probably true. (He sighs.)…
>
> *And you want to believe that your fans are as different, in terms of fans, as you want the Pet Shop Boys to be different in terms of pop music, don’t you?*
>
> *Neil:* …[Y]our fans don’t always live up to your expectations (Heath 1990: 217).

Here, “good” PSB fans are not mainstream pop consumers of the 1980s, aligned with the “Thatcherite” presentism of dance-pop tracks produced by Stock, Aitken and Waterman (Heath 1990: 238–239). Instead, they are “aspirational” fans seeking personal authenticity in a way that explicitly mirrors Tennant’s own middle-class subjectivisation, not wanting “to be like anybody else”. Entirely of a piece with Nealon’s argument, what could seem resistant in the disciplinary moment of Thatcherism appears normatively neoliberal by now, as PSB entrepreneurially release their own music and utilise webstore merchandising. Fans’ investment in the duo’s “difference” is integral to their branding and consumption.

Contra Nealon, though, Pet Shop Boys’ pop output can be convincingly interpreted as anti-marketization. Simon Frith’s argument, reprinted in the programme for Pet Shop Boys’ first tour in 1989, is that PSB stress “the seediness of Mrs Thatcher’s ‘enterprise culture’”, functioning as a “great pop band” by making “a new sense of our circumstances” (1989: np). Frith reads PSB as “reversing Tory values, confronting the free market and repressive moral order with an account of market oppression and the liberation of desire”. The Conservatives of the 1980s had sought to valorise the satisfaction of consumer needs at the same time as oppressing those outside heteronormative matrices of desire (Frith 1989:

np), and songs such as 'Opportunities', and 'Shopping' can very obviously be read as ironic, satirising responses to 80s neoliberalism (Heath 1990: 115; Beaumont 2017). 'Opportunities' archly repeats "I've got the brains, you've got the looks / Let's make lots of money" within its lyrics, whilst the track 'Shopping' relates how "I heard it in the House of Commons; everything's for sale", explicitly contrasting the "we" of privatising City traders and investors to the listener: "We're buying and selling your history… We're all on the make… Our gain is your loss". What renders PSB fascinating here is the emergent ambivalence surrounding their anti-neoliberal stance, something that resonates with their many other ambiguities (Maus 2001: 386). They were anti-marketization, against Thatcherism, and explicitly opposed to the corporate sponsorship of pop music in the 80s and 90s (Heath 1993: 234). They have even been described as "anticapitalism" across their career (Scott 2013: 72), yet they narrate a version of "text-aging" that stresses authenticity within a commodified field (Nealon 2018: 33) as well as the peaks and troughs of a neoliberal life course constructed around success/failure (Clack and Paule 2019: 5–6). It is important to distinguish this text-aging from the non-mediatized bodies and psychologies of Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant. Although text-aging can incorporate their mediated pop star images, narratives and behaviours, I would argue that it relates most centrally to their creative output, thereby focusing on PSB songs, but transmedially including videos, tours, appearances, graphic design/branding and so on, which nonetheless tend to act as paratexts circling around pop music texts.

Text-Aging and Self-Aging as Neoliberal Success Stories: Returning to and Reimagining the "Imperial Phase"

Pet Shop Boys' text-aging has been shaped, in large part, by former music journalist Tennant's creation of the term "imperial phase" to identify the duo's run of hits across 1987–88. In notes to 2001's reissue of the 'Actually' album, Tennant observes: 'I felt at this time that we had the secret of contemporary pop music, that we knew what was required. We entered our imperial phase" (Heath 2001: n.p). The phase is said to end with 'Domino Dancing': "we were very disappointed when it only reached number seven in the British charts. …I thought, 'That's that, then – it's all over'. I knew then that our imperial phase of number one hits was over" (Tennant in Heath 2018: n.p; Lindores 2018: 16). This concept

has “caught on among Pet Shop Boys fans” (Ewing 2010), and a search of the Pet Shop Boys Forum indicates 916 hits for the specific phrase “imperial phase” from 14,220 overall topics involving ‘Pet Shop Boys Discussion’ and ‘PSB Live/Tours’.

Elsewhere, the Pet Shop Boys’ text-aging has been narrated via different phases; *Classic Pop Presents…* divides their career into four decades. The 2010s are represented as a potential shift into aging “gracefully”, only for this to be refuted through a return to the electro dance-pop characteristic of the imperial phase: “The duo’s final Parlophone album *Elysium*… [2012] had implied that, just maybe, Pet Shop Boys were happy to grow old gracefully. The headrush throb of the *Electric* trailer… [2013] was a stark warning: Pet Shop Boys will always cause mayhem… [although] the stately pace of Elysium indicates this decade could have seen a very different Pet Shop Boys evolve” (Earls 2018: 54). Meanwhile, in his book-length analysis of 1993’s ‘Very’, Ramzy Alwakeel enacts the same micro-narrative of “stately” Pet Shop Boys’ pop being disruptively superseded by a return to uptempo brilliance, albeit relocating this twelve years earlier, with “[t]heir 1990 studio effort, the stately *Behaviour*… [suggesting] a band whose members were growing old gracefully as they meditated on absent friends and Shostakovich… It was hard to imagine a new Pet Shop Boys record surfing the crests of the British charts in quite the same way as the duo had done years earlier” (Alwakeel 2016: 9). This time it is *Very* which breaks out of *Behaviour*’s shadow, acting as an “epilogue” to the imperial phase (2016: 14), and provoking long-terms fans’ “sustained, irrational belief that [Pet Shop Boys] could do it again” (2016: 102). Alwakeel argues that

> The extent to which the stigmata remain unhealed was made clear when *Yes* briefly threatened to enter the album chart at number one in 2009. Delirious fans spoke like it was the end of days: it seemed almost fate that this glossy pop record, which in truth bore only a passing resemblance to its elder sibling, was to be the Pet Shop Boys’ *second* second coming. And yet just a few years on, *Yes* has sunk comfortably into the duo’s biography (2016: 102–103).

Far from using Tennant’s notion of an “imperial” phase to bemoan a narrative of decline where text-aging displaces the high-energy 80s Pet Shop Boys with much lower-energy, post-imperial balladry, there is instead a sense here that the “imperial phase” could be

reactivated and restored at any time thanks to the skilfulness of Tennant/Lowe.

Fans might be said to be partially in denial of text-aging here. They are not trapped in some reactionary nostalgia, to be sure, somehow seeking a re-live the glory days. A small number of posters on the Pet Shop Boys Forum are occasionally criticised for appearing to live in the past: "Stop living in the imperial phase… Or, stay there and leave the newer catalog to us"; "you're stuck in their imperial past. And that's fine, as long as you realise their music and creative direction continues to move forward". Instead, the vast majority of long-term PSB fans remain perfectly cognisant of the passing of time, and of manifold changes in the pop music industry. As some critics have argued, any unified "imperial" pop phase may no longer even be possible due to the reduced cultural significance of chart hits and fragmented digital listeners/streamers: "Does the pop moment, as the Pet Shop Boys once mastered it, still exist?" (Troussé 2019: 113). Yet there remains an apparent longing for some new version of the "imperial", whose non-emergence in the UK then has to be recurrently explained away. As noted by Alwakeel, *Yes* (2009) provoked such responses, with its first single 'Love Etc' being identified in *Classic Pop Presents*… magazine as "a very commercial track dripping in hooks":

> by rights the single should have been more successful. Unsurprisingly, Neil fully agreed; "It should have been bigger! But when you're our age and you've been around a long time, it doesn't matter how good the record is, they're not going to play it! Radio 1 said to us, "It's an amazing record – but we're not going to play it". It didn't fit their youth demographic; they didn't want to introduce anyone new to the Pet Shop Boys (Ravendale 2018: 47).

And when the duo returned to techno and house-influenced albums produced by Stuart Price, in the form of *Electric* (2013) and *Super* (2016), then fans and journalist-fans alike once again sought to explain why sharply produced pop songs had not become major hits: "songs like Twenty-Something [on 2016's *Supe*r] would have been big in a bygone age" (Earls 2018: 55). Indeed, Stan Hawkins argues that there is a convincing fit between Price's detailed, polished production, newly emphasising Tennant's trademark vocals, and Pet Shop Boy's well-established "idiolect" (2016: 39). Here, Hawkins echoes Simon Frith's 80s and 90s valorisation of the duo for their precisely engineered "sense of musical space… [where]

computerized instruments free… sounds from a performance context" (1996: 6). Fans also interpreted Price's albums via the "best-since…" narrative of a return to the imperial phase (Alwakeel 2016: 14 and 100), suggesting on the Forum, "I like to think that we are currently in the Renaissance phase" and "Electric was a massive return to the very top of their game. A fresh, contemporary dance record that contained some of the best work they had produced since the Imperial Phase".

The durability of such concerns is testified to in Fred E. Maus's discussion of the fan "e-mail list" 'Introspective' prior to 1999's album release of 'Nightlife'. Even at the turn of the century, a clear decade after the "imperial" phase, fans were already concerned about Pet Shop Boys' status as creators of commercially *successful* pop music:

> the conventional ideology of authenticity, with its contrast between sincerity and commercialism, was largely absent from the e-mail list. Instead, fans eagerly discussed the prospects of the new album's commercial success, and were full of advice and concern about the most commercially promising selection and marketing of singles. Many list members worried that the album might be disappointing in sales (Maus 2001: 381).

Rather than opposing artistic pop "authenticity" to commercial "selling-out", Maus argues that there is an "undisguised love of commercial success in the values of some devoted Pet Shop Boys fans", and that these enduring fans wish for PSB to avoid becoming solely a "fan band" (ibid). Instead, the fan community seems to have already made the neoliberal move analysed by Jeffrey Nealon (2018), whereby popular music discourses of seriousness are not contrasted to commerciality but are instead rendered wholly integral to it. As Maus summarises: "For many fans, evidently the achievement of early Pet Shop Boys music had two crucial aspects: they created distinctive music that individual fans loved, and they attracted large [mass and commercial] audiences who desired that music" (Maus 2001: 382). Individualized 'uniqueness' and capitalist "success" are thus integrated here in fan accounts of text-aging, making the imperial phase not merely something in the past – where it would support a narrative of decline – but rather something that fans hope they might re-engineer by acting as DIY marketing folk, thereby occupying neoliberal positions as the long-term guardians of Pet Shop Boys' commercial authenticity and (willed) success.

However, the celebration of “imperial” hits, working to define Pet Shop Boys’ output and (assumed) ontology forever after (Ewing 2010), does not belong only to a community of “superfans”. As Nicholas Carah argues in *Pop Brands: Branding, Popular Music and Young People*, artists such as Pet Shop Boys can find new younger audiences and fans precisely by virtue of being closely identified with an era of “classic” pop such as the mid-to-late 80s. As Carah notes, discussing Australia’s V Festival which PSB had performed at in 2007:

> a savvy and ironic nostalgia comes into play around bands such as the Pet Shop Boys… who embody the excess… and hyperreality of 80s and 90s synth-pop. …Audiences deploy discourses of nostalgia to communicate their symbolic capital within their peer network. Being able to use nostalgia ‘correctly’ illustrates a person’s understanding of the historical canon that shapes popular music… The V festival[’s]… reverence for era-defining bands is a distinct element of [its] line-ups (Carah 2010: 29).

Here, Pet Shop Boys’ “imperial” phase is redefined in a different way to the long-term fans, acting not as a desired “return”, but as “era-defining” for younger audiences. Such listeners were not even alive in the 1980s, and could not have “been there” in order to claim “retroactive subcultural capital” (Hills 2015: 109), but Carah argues that via an engagement with “what these bands ‘mean’ within the archive of popular music”, nostalgia for that which could not have been experienced in its original moment “comes from the audience’s acquired cultural capital… [and] enables them to discern different notions of authenticity and enjoyment in relation to a variety of musical performances” (2010: 31). In this reading, text-aging is suspended via an archival value that can move across generations thanks to a commercially legitimated flow of pop-musical cultural capital. Nealon ponders whether Bourdieusian economic capital and cultural capital are in danger of collapsing together in a neoliberal context (2018: 102) – as if anticipating this, Carah’s argument suggests that neoliberal, commercial success can (at least in the domain of pop music) be translated into cultural capital provided that it is also aligned with era-defining cultural status. And it is this blend that, as Ewing (2010) notes, defines Tennant’s discussion of the “imperial” moment.

Journalist-fans have also reimagined the imperial phase in a specific way, by reflexively linking it to stages in the life course, and to forms of generational consciousness

(Hills 2017a). For example, writing in the programme for 2016/2018 'Super' gigs, Dorian Lynskey argues that during

> their first few years Pet Shop Boys permanently altered many fans' conception of what pop music could be. …If you were a teenager, as I was, these songs spoke of the mysteries of the grown-up world in a language you could understand. If you were older, they showed that pop could grow up, too, without sacrificing any of its loud, bright pleasures (2018: np).

Reflexively said to bridge stages of the life course, these are songs that nevertheless do not merely fit into its normative phases, bringing adulthood into teenage lives, and youthful "bright pleasures" into adult identities. Rather than broader neoliberal processes of extensive consumerism and "midlifestylism" leading to a "blurring of what appeared previously to be relatively clearly marked stages" of the life course (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 372), it is instead Pet Shop Boys' music that is granted the hyperbolic agency here to achieve just this.

Contributing to the art magazine *Frieze*, Michael Bracewell similarly muses on his own generational identity through Pet Shop Boys' songs:

> For myself, born in the dusk of the 1950s… my generation's coalescent event was pop. The songs of Pet Shop Boys comprise, for me, a great dynastic novel of those who grew up through the twilight of modernism to inhabit a new machine age. And now, crossing a road, seeing my ageing reflection in a shop window, I am truly thankful for the life-affirming beauty of those songs: their fun, passion, wit and truth in the face of both darkness and light, youth and, amazingly, old age.
> *'They called us the pop kids / 'Cause we loved the pop hits/*
> *And quoted the best bits / So we were the pop kids – I loved you'* (Bracewell 2018: 34)

The "flashback" reminiscences of 2016's 'Pop Kids', which have themselves been placed in a songwriting lineage with other PSB tracks by journalist-fans (Beaumont 2018: 27; Earls 2018:

57), are here positioned as if they convey Bracewell's own memories (Duffett 2013: 229). Again, a marked symbolic equation is enacted by the writer – this time, a playful collapsing together of text-aging and self-aging as PSB seemingly and smoothly give voice both to Bracewell's experience and his generation's. The neatness of this writerly equation, like Lynskey's composed account, indicates a more introspective, rationalised appreciation of pop. As Andy Bennett has set out, in relation to aging audiences for popular music:

> a modified reading of the affective scene is arguably called for. Such a scene may express itself through more introspective gestures, such as the retention of a generational mindset whose most physical manifestation comes through the consumption of particular media (2013: 60).

Lynskey and Bracewell are both narrating versions of Pet Shop Boys' relationship to different generations of fans, including those with retroactive subcultural capital like themselves who are able to recount appreciating the "imperial" hits back in 1987 and 1988. What was mainstream, commercial pop culture in the late 80s has taken on fan-cultural value over time, given its historical exclusivity and absolute inaccessibility to later generations of fans, as well as to "nostalgic" younger audiences accumulating well-tutored cultural capital instead. Given the fan-cultural value of having "been there", it is unsurprising that BBC repeats of *Top of the Pops* (*TOTP*) from 1987 have sparked discussion at the Pet Shop Boys Forum, e.g. "We're already at June 1987; before we know it, the imperial phase will be over!" and "It looks like [BBC DJ] Mike Smith's run on TOTP and the Imperial Phase… end [at] about the same time".

Complicating Approaches to Self-Narrative in Fan Studies: 'Emplotment' *and* Counterfactuals

Self-narrative has been a significant approach in sociological approaches to aging and fandom (Harrington, Bielby and Bardo 2011: 579), as well as being drawn on in fan studies more widely (Williams 2015). However, I want to argue that narrative-based theorisations of aging and fandom have, to date, been somewhat one-sided. Mark Freeman's work on "hindsight" identifies two dimensions to this: "'emplotment', the

experience of times past now being seen as parts of an emerging whole, or episodes in an evolving story”, and a very different sense of

> “‘How *could* I?’… “What was I *thinking*?” “If only…” These are the sorts of moments we want back, only to arrive at the… realization that they are gone, forever. …Through hindsight I have not only achieved a measure of insight, I have taken a step, however small, in the direction of moral growth. …Hence the second part of my thesis: *hindsight plays an integral role in shaping and deepening moral life* (Freeman 2010: 4–5).

What Freeman views as a personal moral exercise, Anthony Giddens analyses as an essential element of modern social activity: “In a post-traditional social universe, an indefinite range of potential courses of action… is at any given moment open to individuals... Living in circumstances of modernity is best understood as… the routine contemplation of counterfactuals” (1991: 28—29). Self-narrative cannot therefore simply be a matter of emplotment (as important fan studies’ work such as Williams 2015 has implied); it also involves what Molly Andrews terms the “narrative imagination” in everyday life (2014: 3 and 11). Forming part of this stance on aging – albeit not one that has yet fully filtered into fan studies – William Randall sets out the value in narrative gerontology of a person’s “good, strong story” (2014: 367). Randall views this as facilitating “narrative openness” rather than foreclosure, where one’s biographical narrative can feel stalled, especially (though not only) in later life. By contrast, openness can be achieved through “things like life review or reminiscence… [in] normal conversation” (2014: 368), enabling a “good, strong story” of the self to be “open to alternatives—alternative interpretations, alternative selves—at every turn” (Randall 2012: 13). Like Giddens, Randall stresses how narrative reflection makes us “aware of the lives we haven’t lived... our *possible* selves or “possible lives”…, the… self-now versus selves-then, self-as-narrator versus self-as-character, self-as-knower versus self-as-known” (2012: 13). Thus, although such narrative imagination of counterfactual selves can be a matter of moral growth, as per Freeman’s arguments, the process can also be viewed as a more general component within self-narrativisation, albeit one that fan studies has arguably yet to adequately explore.

It might be objected that aging fans’ counterfactuality is likely to be articulated with

specific levels of cultural capital (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 383), but PSB have arguably always been aligned with expressions of middle-class British identity, whilst their emblematic "Pop into Art" status further cements them within middle-class taste cultures – Tennant spoke at the Royal Academy of Arts, for instance, on May 3rd 2019. This is not to argue that Pet Shop Boys' cultural status as "art" has progressed without contestation; on occasions, high culture's journalistic gatekeepers have firmly refused to recognise PSB cultural capital (Carroll 2016: 131).

In line with a fan interpretive community that's seemingly keen to explore alternative, branching versions of text-aging and "texistence" (Harrington and Bielby 2018: 411), each issue of *Annually* published by Pet Shop Boys (in 2017, 2018 and 2019) has included fan letters submitted on the subject of "what if" counterfactuals. Tennant and Lowe are asked "If you weren't in the Pet Shop Boys, what would you think of the Pet Shop Boys?", to which Neil Tennant responds:

> It would depend… on who I was. If I was a member of the public, and not in the music business, I probably wouldn't think that much of them really. Unless I was some sort of fan. But I'd notice and I might be quite impressed by the fact that they seem to hang on in there (Heath and Pet Shop Boys 2017: 56).

Longevity is assumed to be valuable to enduring PSB fans, along with a lack of staleness – by "hang[ing]… in there", Pet Shop Boys refuse to surrender to the stasis of "narrative foreclosure" as well as yet again refuting any text-aging "narrative of decline". Indeed, it is striking that even in the 1990s, Tennant was already musing about the possibility of leaving the music business after an imagined "number-one greatest hits" album: "I couldn't face going down the slippery slope" (Heath 1993: 221)

Reacting to the 2018 *Annually* crop of fan letters, Tennant fields a question about how different their "career would have been, had the first version of 'West End girls' been as successful as the re-recorded version?":

> It first came out in June or July '84, and "West End girls" came out again at the end of October 1985…. But that year was a very essential year, because I realised, dealing with Epic, that you had to have a manager… Also, …a record

company doesn't appreciate you unless they've paid a lot of money for you. And… EMI had to pay a ton of money for us, so they were obviously going to give it a good go (Heath and Pet Shop Boys 2018: 58)

2019's *Annually* features a fan query centring on Bobby O., the producer who worked with PSB before they broke through with their first number 1 hit: "Do you keep in touch with Bobby O? Do you think if you wouldn't have met him, you would have made it as Pet Shop Boys?". Here, Lowe and Tennant both reiterate the same response: "He's a fundamental part of the story" (Heath and Pet Shop Boys 2019: 64).

These latter fan questions circle around the issue of career achievements, and the life course as defined through neoliberal (commercial, productive) "success" (Clack and Paule 2019: 5). Such an emphasis on neoliberal versions of "success" – chart hits equated with economic as well as pop-cultural status – again distinguishes this construction of successful text-aging as highly distinct from gerontology's emphasis on biomedical definitions of aging (see Rowe and Kahn 1987). And in place of desiring an "imperial" return, fans ponder whether, under slightly different circumstances, the "imperial" phase might never have happened – pop success may have arrived too soon, or perhaps not at all. An ironic narrative "openness" is engaged with (Randall 2012), not in terms of life review, but instead through more everyday investigations of reimagined text-aging and, implicitly, self-aging – what if PSB had been something other than their remembered/archived pop-artist selves? The question which hangs over these fannish counterfactuals is who would these fans have been without the duo's authentic *and* commercial – that is, ideologically neoliberal – success story? Here, fan self-narrative and aging touches, introspectively and via knowledgeable (fan) cultural capital, on alternative possibilities of self-identity had "texistence" unfolded otherwise. Fans' counterfactuals nevertheless preserve "transworld identity" (Gallagher 2018: 11); PSB continue to exist, testifying to their obvious affective centrality for fans, but different events (including different members of the duo, in the first *Annually* question) swirl around them and threaten to disrupt, or preserve, their neoliberal narrative of commercial career success.

Conclusion: Neoliberalized Text-Aging and Shifting Discourses of Fandom

I have sought to retheorise issues of fandom and the life course via an engagement with neoliberalism, drawing on the work of Clack and Paule (2019) regarding neoliberal emphases on productive “success”, and Nealon’s (2018) analysis of popular music fan discourses operating at the core of neoliberalism’s personalised, commercialised authenticities. Taking the classic pop of PSB as my case study, I have shown how discourses of their “imperial phase” have been used by enduring fans to combat text-aging whilst refuting any reactionary sense of nostalgia in relation to self-aging. At the same time, this “era-defining” pop music has taken on archival status as a form of cultural capital for contemporary younger audiences (Carah 2010). And it has been read reflexively as part of a generational identity by journalist-fans who “were there” as teen pop fans in the 1980s (Lynskey 2018). Finally, I argued that fan studies’ focus on self-narrative and aging needs to address imagined counterfactuals as well as discursive “emplotment” (Freeman 2010: 4), something that has begun to be studied in narrative gerontology (Randall 2012), yet remains largely absent in prior work on media/music fans and everyday life (Andrews 2014: 3), as well as being under-explored in fan studies more generally.

Discourses of fandom have themselves shifted across Pet Shop Boys’ career, with the 2016 album *Super* arriving, perhaps not coincidentally, in a new era of pop superfans. Life course stages, too, have arguably become more blurred since the neoliberal 1980s, with the extension of the “third age” discursively repressing any individualized decline and embodied/cognitive failure in favour of “successful” lifestyle consumerism (Pickard 2019: 222–223), just as the Pet Shop Boys’ fan interpretive community also typically seeks to ward off a narrative of decline for their fan object, and looks forward to new successes, and exciting new ‘returns’ to pop form. Neoliberalized text-aging here, then, becomes an analogue of and for the third age itself in the realm of popular music fandom.

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