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Last Night We Dreamt That Somebody Loved Us: Smiths fans and me in the 1980s

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When you laugh about people

Who feel so very lonely

Their only desire is to die

Well, I'm afraid

It doesn't make me smile

I wish I could laugh

The Smiths (1985) 'That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore', *Meat Is Murder*.

Introduction

In the late 1980s a white, working-class boy from the south of England became the first from his family to enter higher education. By 1989 he had survived two attempts by the authorities of the University of Cambridge to move him on to other places of study but was still struggling to fit into its rarefied atmosphere. His undergraduate supervisor was Graham McCann, who would later become, after being pushed out of the university for focusing on such 'unscholarly' topics as Marilyn Monroe and Woody Allen, a widely acclaimed writer on popular culture.¹ McCann suggested the student replace an examination in his final year of study with a research dissertation, 'What are you interested in? What do you know about?'. 'Er ... Manchester United, The Smiths ... that kind of thing', the student replied. 'Why not do something on The Smiths, then? That would certainly be original'. In this chapter I discuss what happened when I did. In particular I focus on the meanings The Smiths had for their

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fans. I discuss how fans often expressed intimate relationships with Morrissey but also intense feelings of loneliness and isolation, even from fellow Smiths fans - a highly individualist form of subcultural membership. I also explore the experience of researching such a community when one is a member.

In *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, US, 1979), Martin Sheen's character 'Willard' narrates:

It was no accident that I got to be the caretaker of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's memory.... There is no way to tell his story without telling my own. And if his story is really a confession, then so is mine.

This study of Smiths fans was conducted in 1989-90, when I was nineteen, clumsy and shy and a Smiths fan myself. It is research I never fully wrote up and did not return to for sixteen years. Why I put it aside for so long forms part of my focus, for there is no way of telling their story without telling my own, and if theirs was often confessional, then so is mine.² All men have secrets and here is mine, so let it be known ...

Well I Wonder

The context to the study was both intellectual and personal. Intellectually, at the time of the research, published studies of fans of popular music were anything but numerous. Sociological research had showed that the musical preferences of young people play a greater role in forming their sense of self and place in society than other areas of mass culture, such as their favourite film genre.³ As Morrissey stated at the time, 'popular music is the last refuge of young people in the world. It's the only remaining art form. There's nothing else that touches them'.⁴ However, in the late 1980s how music touches the lives of young people remained underexplored.⁵ Studies of the political economy of the media revealed the factors shaping cultural production and semiotic analyses explored the meanings of cultural texts, but how popular culture was received was less well known.

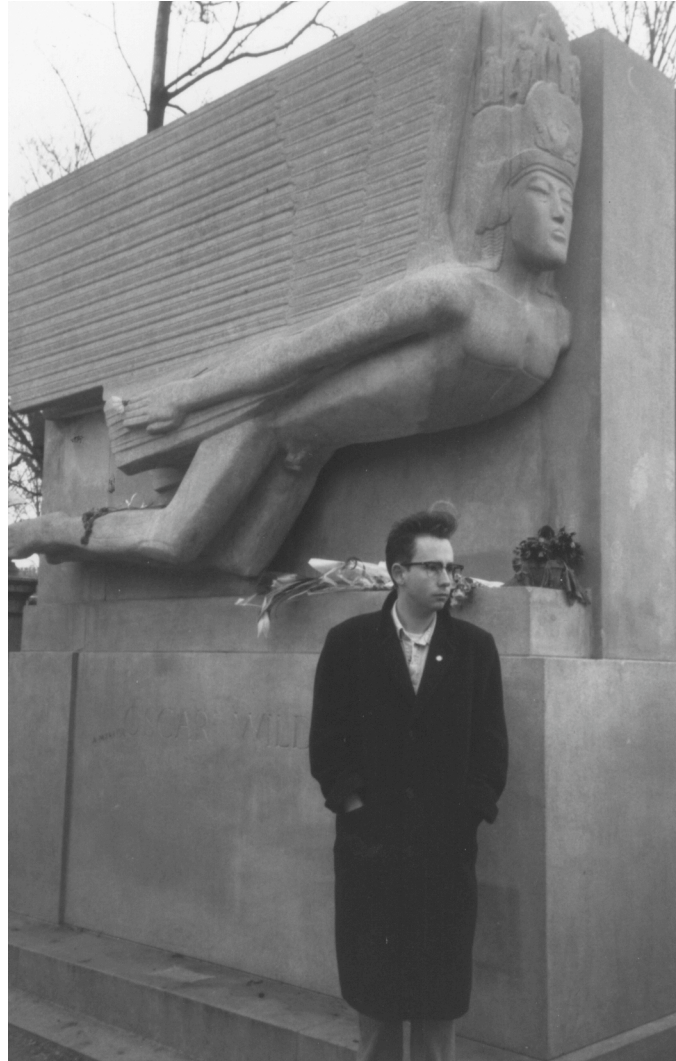
The two principal traditions of work closest to doing so were studies of audiences and youth subcultures.⁶ Briefly, until the late 1970s audience studies had often been influenced by a one-way conveyor belt model whereby meanings were viewed as

unproblematically conveyed from the intentions of cultural producers into cultural products and thence on to their audiences. Studies typically neglected the ways consumers integrated culture into their everyday lives, except in terms of its uses to gratify such needs as entertainment or interaction. During the 1980s a series of qualitative studies influenced by the work of Stuart Hall had begun to explore audience reception, but these remained confined to television audiences.⁷ A second tradition of work comprised studies of youth subcultures, most famously those associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.⁸ These were revealing more about the role played by music in the lives of young people. Above all, they highlighted the active construction of meanings, how young people are not simply passive sponges of media messages but rather actively integrate cultural products into their everyday lives, often altering and subverting their intended meanings. However, considerations of the role of music in the lives of youth were secondary in this work to a focus on whether the youth subculture in question was conformist or rebellious in relation to dominant middle-class culture. More generally, sociological studies of culture typically focused on how cultural activities reflected such identity positions as class, gender or ethnicity, rather than how those activities help shape identities and the ways they are perceived. Thus, what a specific band or cult figure might mean for their fans and the role they played in fans' lives and identities were areas yet to be fully explored. It was time the tale were told.

Why focus on The Smiths? Though 'mass figures' - cultural producers with large-scale commercial success - had received critical discussion, cult figures with a smaller but more intense and obsessive following had attracted less attention. The Smiths were relatively successful commercially, at least in terms of chart placings. Leaving aside compilations, their albums *The Smiths* (1984), *Meat Is Murder* (1985) *The Queen Is Dead* (1986) and *Strangeways Here We Come* (1987) all entered the British charts at number 1 or 2. However, they were anything but 'mass figures'. They released their records on the independent label Rough Trade (though signing a contract for EMI in 1986) and refused to make promotional videos, until 1986 when they agreed to three videos by the controversial director Derek Jarman. Moreover, initially high chart placings reflected less a mass following than the passion of fans eager to possess their latest release. The Smiths were not a mass phenomenon but neither were they simply a minor fad - they were a 'cult' band in terms of the intensity

of their influence on both the subsequent music scene and their fans but one that also managed to reach a mainstream audience. In particular, what made The Smiths and especially Morrissey different is that they articulated an alternative way of thinking and behaving on many of the concerns and issues faced by the young, one not obviously 'alternative' in the way that that label has itself become an institutionalised badge of teenage rebellion. Much of this ran against not only the fads and fashions of the prevailing music scene but also societal norms in general: celibacy, androgyny, a feminised masculinity, anti-commercialism, vegetarianism, dismissal of the standard artistic lifestyle of "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll", republicanism, valorisation of Englishness, and a penchant for such unfashionable accessories as National Health Service glasses and hearing aids.⁹ (It is easy to forget from the perspective of the present that positions now widely accepted, such as vegetarianism, were anything but during the 1980s). In particular, Morrissey's lyrics offered a distinctive voice. One of his own idols, Sandie Shaw, claimed: 'Nobody's ever written songs like that before... He's changed the pop idiom into something that is a social comment, a piece of literature. He's made it okay to actually be a lyricist'.¹⁰

The Smiths and particularly Morrissey were, then, wonderful examples of cult figures. The research was itself also timely. It was only two years since the band had split up. Morrissey was still struggling to develop a distinctive solo image, with a succession of musical collaborators having been quickly dispensed with and plans for a follow up to his successful debut album *Viva Hate* laying temporarily abandoned. The Smiths maintained a strong posthumous presence in the musical consciousness, aided by the release of the live album *Rank* and the UK release of the US compilation *Louder Than Bombs* in late 1988. For example, an advertisement for Pioneer Multiplay CD in *Q* magazine (December 1989) lists Smiths song titles, interspersed by enticements to 'slump back and savour any dirge from any disk in any order'. It was thus a golden opportunity to capture a sense of what The Smiths had meant to fans for whom the band had been a living presence.



There were, however, not simply intellectual reasons for choosing to research The Smiths. Aficionados who study the photograph above will note this handsome devil wears glasses, appears melancholy, sports a lovingly coiffured quiff, is standing in front of Oscar Wilde's grave in Paris, and has placed a large bouquet of flowers on the tomb. It is a portrait of the author as a young man. Since my early teens I had been deeply affected by the lyrics of Smiths songs. They seemed to speak directly to my situation of alienation and despair, giving voice to my own sense of hope and disappointment, and isolation from my peers. Morrissey's views influenced my decision to become vegetarian and gave voice to my republicanism and anti-Thatcherism. I wanted to know: was it really so strange? Why should such a little thing as a pop band make such a big difference?

Studying The Smiths

The project was for a brief undergraduate dissertation to be completed within a few months alongside my study of other taught courses. However, the scale of the research I threw myself into was a case of overkill. The methodology for the study comprised, first, textual and semiotic analyses of the band's imagery and style, lyrics, album covers, photographs and liner notes. I spent many weeks in the British Library, the National Sound Archive, the British Newspaper library, and the archives of *Melody Maker* and *Record Mirror*, reading every available interview with or article on The Smiths, a corpus which grew exponentially as contacts with other fans revealed evermore obscure sources. Secondly, I attempted to interview everyone connected to The Smiths: the band; managers; musical collaborators such as Sandie Shaw; journalists from music papers such as *Q*, *New Musical Express*, *Melody Maker*, *Record Mirror* and *The Face*; authors of books on The Smiths; radio producers who helped 'break' the band, such as John Walters, producer of the John Peel Show on BBC Radio One; and contemporary performers on the 'indie' music scene, such as Dave Gedge of The Wedding Present. My sometimes naive attempts to gain access to and then interview people of whom I was a fan met with mixed results and is a story unto itself. Thirdly, I embarked on an ethnographic study of (or, to be honest, a pilgrimage to) all the places in Manchester mentioned in The Smiths' lyrics and which I knew were formative in the biographies of the band. Finally, I engaged with fans of the band through written correspondence and a series of interviews. Here, I shall discuss the last of these: studying the fans.

My contact with fans began after I placed a notice in the 'small ads' sections of the *New Musical Express* and *Idols* magazine in late 1989. This advertisement said very briefly that I was seeking fans' opinions about The Smiths for a research project. Within weeks I received over fifty replies from the UK, across Europe, Scandinavia, the USA, Australia and Asia. Some letters were short, simply asking what I wanted to know. Many were long, probably the first essay-length analyses of Smiths fan culture, detailing how they had discovered the band, their thoughts and feelings, and how the band affected their lives. They often included poetry, drawings, photographs, fans' own lyrics, and such esoteric facts as a list of the words etched by Morrissey on the run-off grooves of The Smiths' vinyl singles. I also received copies of a host of fanzines, including *Smiths Indeed*, *Colossus* (both in England), *Coversmiths* and *Stay*

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Handsome (both from Belgium), *Smiths' Ways* (Spain), *Hand In Glove* (Switzerland), *Fragile et Mystique* (France) and *Forever Ill?* (USA).

Fans who answered the advertisement were sent a series of questions about the basis of the appeal of The Smiths, the 'average' Smiths fan, the influence of the band on the fan's views, whether their feelings had changed over time, and how The Smiths compared to other contemporary musicians. In addition, correspondents from overseas were asked about the success of the group, press exposure, general perception of the band, and issues of access to Smiths records in their respective countries. These questions were typically personalised, depending on what each fan had written in their first letter. For those who had already addressed these questions, I further explored issues such as the role The Smiths played in their lives, what the group meant to them, and their relationships with other fans. In this way an ongoing correspondence was begun, often extending over several months via a series of letters. Finally, I also personally interviewed several hardcore fans about their obsession.

What She Said

The responses to my questions were overwhelming. I was suddenly engaged in often lengthy correspondence with over fifty, highly articulate young people. It was as if they had been waiting for an opportunity to express their feelings about The Smiths, as if their desire to share their experiences had hitherto been repressed. In academic terms, the correspondence generated a considerable amount of rich qualitative data. Fans often wrote the equivalent of essays in reply to each question I asked, then without further prompting would quickly write again with supplementary answers to those questions or with answers to their own questions. As one fan put it, 'I couldn't possibly write every single feeling I have for him [Morrissey] onto a piece of foolscap' (David).¹¹ Some enclosed stamped addressed envelopes to encourage me to reply sooner. I was also sent questionnaires to answer myself; as I discuss further below, I was often viewed not as a student researcher but a fellow, and perhaps privileged, fan. It is worth highlighting that this correspondence occurred before access to word processors or personal computers had become widespread. Fans' responses were not hastily written emails or entries on a web-based discussion group; they often took time and great care to hand-write or manually type many pages of

considered thoughts and ideas, for which I retain a strong sense of gratitude and respect. Of all the areas this wide-ranging correspondence covered I shall focus here on two principal issues: how fans viewed themselves in relation, first, to The Smiths and, secondly, to other people. In writing about such issues, there is always a danger of appearing a critical outsider, sneering at the deluded beliefs of weaker minds. As I hope will become clear, that is far from my intention, for what follows applies as much to me as to any of the fans that were kind enough to write to me.

He knows I'd love to see him

In terms of fans' relations to The Smiths, it was perhaps naturally Morrissey who formed the primary if not nearly exclusive focus of fans' attention. Through my reading of academic studies of youth subcultures and audiences I had been primed to expect fans to form a social community. In contrast, what Smiths fans focused on was an intimate and one-on-one relationship with Morrissey. In an interview, the singer had claimed that 'lyrically I speak for everybody, or at least I try to'.¹² According to these fans he also spoke *to* everybody, and to everybody *individually*. For example, one fan wrote:

I knew what he was saying, and he was saying it to me. It's like having an invisible friend ... you know he's there, but you can't see him.

(Seán).

Typically, fans described not simply identification with or respect for Morrissey but also a strong sense of personal communication - 'It's as though Morrissey speaks to me through his lyrics' (Jacky) - and of understanding. As Sheila put it, in a sentiment often expressed:

It was so comforting to know that I wasn't the only shy awkward person in the world. I felt Morrissey really understood me.

This apparently personal communication led to a form of empathic bonding between fans and 'their' Morrissey. They often wrote of 'relating' to or 'identifying' with Morrissey's lyrics, especially those describing dejection, loneliness, insecurity and low self-confidence: 'Nearly every song of his says something about me' (Maria). To his audience, it appeared that Morrissey understood them and knew how they felt - he is, they proclaimed, 'one of us' (Maria), 'a kindred spirit' (Peter), someone who 'has similar problems to me' (Claire). This sense of identification was encouraged by

repeated references in Morrissey's interviews to his own background as a fan of pop groups: he was 'a pop fan who became a pop star' (Kathy). Indeed, fans often highlighted how events and feelings described by Morrissey were similar to their own: 'there has been an uncanny similarity between incidents and situations in songs, and my own life' (David). Sometimes this led to claims that he was not singing of similar events to their own experiences but must somehow know them personally. One fan, for example, concluded that 'I think Morrissey must have lived near me in Hastings for a while' (name illegible).

Morrissey was held to know each fan and in turn each fan felt they knew Morrissey. They often felt connected to his personal life and claimed to know his innermost feelings, thoughts and ideas. This was underpinned by a belief that Morrissey's lyrics and interview quotes were reliably autobiographical - knowledge of Smiths songs could thereby enable fans to know him personally:

Morrissey is a close personal friend ... I've probably heard / read more of Morrissey's views / ideas and know more about him than most people do about even their closest friend.

(David)

Unsurprisingly, relationships with Morrissey were thus described in intense, intimate and often heartfelt terms:

He is the brother I never had, the father figure I always longed for and the friend I always wanted. I love him.

(David)

Such feelings were not unknown to Morrissey himself. Though encouraging fans to regard him reverentially by repeatedly referring to his 'apostles' or 'disciples', Morrissey complained in 1984 that 'Many of them see me as some kind of religious character who can solve all their problems with a wave of a syllable'.¹³

I want the one I can't have

Fans' feelings of intense intimacy were, however, cross-cut by a sense of Morrissey's aloofness. Despite being 'a close personal friend' who knew each individual fan, he remained somehow always a little distant and unknowable - there was always more to discover, something was being held back: 'His personality is a secret which he has

managed to keep private' (Paul). Morrissey was thereby often viewed as what Schickel describes as an 'intimate stranger'.¹⁴ The theme of 'knowing but not knowing' or intimacy and strangeness was often repeated across fans' responses:

Morrissey is an open book. ... we got to learn more and more about him. And yet, throughout all this peeling off of layers, it seems as though we know nothing about him at all

(Séan)

For such fans, Morrissey appears to have perfected the art of transparent mystery, a quality Walter Benjamin defined as the essence of the cult image:

True to its nature, it remains "distant, however close it may be". The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance.¹⁵

Although interviews with Morrissey had appeared with remarkable frequency in the music press throughout the 1980s, there remained somehow a sense that little was still known about him; as the music journalist Mat Snow put it, 'he told them a lot but suggested a great deal which he wasn't telling'.¹⁶ Partly this reflected Morrissey's talent for reinventing, revising or obscuring his past. Authors such as Nick Kent complained of constant interference in their research from a panic-stricken Morrissey.¹⁷ Similarly, a typical initial response from his colleagues and associates to my own enquiries was that offered by Sandie Shaw: 'I know nothing about the man that I want to discuss'.¹⁸ It also partly reflected the way Morrissey embodied contradictions and confusions; as one fan perceptively highlighted, he was 'supposedly depressive yet dancing wildly on stage, lonely yet surrounded by ardent admirers, miserable yet witty' (Kathy).

Though often claiming to have the most extensive and intimate knowledge possible, fans were left wanting more, proclaiming:

I found him fascinating, but I couldn't quite make him out, despite reading anything about him I could get my hands on!

(Sheila).

Though Walter Benjamin famously argued that 'the age of mechanical reproduction' had removed the aura of authenticity associated with cultural *products*, one could

argue that such an aura remains or has been transferred to cultural *producers*. This fuels a hunger for more knowledge of the ‘real’ person behind the public persona. In our correspondence, fans often declared such sentiments as ‘I often wonder what a day in Morrissey’s life is like’ (Jacky) and asked me questions about all areas of his everyday life, including whether he ate cereal for breakfast or preferred showers to baths. I would argue this phenomenon may be the case for ‘mass’ and not just cult figures. The hunger for insight into the private lives of public figures, even those associated with banal and mediocre cultural achievements, as evinced by the contemporary media obsession with so-called ‘celebrities’ would suggest so.,. What perhaps distinguishes the cult figure from the mass figure is the source of this interest: the fans themselves rather than the media. Moreover, for fans of The Smiths this combination of intense connection and distance was in sharp contrast to how they viewed other contemporary musicians. One of the questions I asked was about their perceptions of Dave Gedge, lead singer of The Wedding Present, often portrayed by the contemporary music press as Smiths fans’ second favourite band and whose songs painted a similar landscape of suburban life and adolescent love lost. Though often also fans of The Wedding Present, their responses made clear that they admired the group rather than seeing them as intimate companions. The fans’ opinions of other, more commercially successful bands were far less generous.

Fans thereby expressed admiration of others, but *possession* of Morrissey. As popular music helps one to assert or adopt an identity it becomes an integral part of that identity. It is not so much the records that fans feel they own as it is the performers themselves. Morrissey was ‘their’ Morrissey. To not know something about him was, in a sense, to not know something of themselves. In similar fashion to how the culture industry ‘perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises’, a situation in which ‘the diner must be satisfied with the menu’, Morrissey’s talent for pregnant suggestion, beguiling transparency and clothed nakedness in his lyrics and interviews left fans wanting more.¹⁹ His passionate articulation of alternative views bolstered this sense of possession through the influence he had on fans’ views. Many stated Morrissey had changed their outlooks or brought out hitherto hidden aspects of their personalities, inducing them to adopt anti-royalist stances and to have at least tried vegetarianism. Such changes were described in quite dramatic terms:

He completely changed me within weeks. In the past year I have gone from being quite normal to an indie-freak, dyeing my hair and in general doing anything to be different.

(Claire)

Such attribution and internalisation encourages feelings of possession, and possession encourages personalisation. Mick Middles, for example, explained that after his book on The Smiths was published he received at least twenty letters containing personal threats.²⁰ His criticisms of The Smiths were viewed by some fans as deriding their own values and outlook on life and not simply their favourite pop group. Commitment to a pop star is one of the earliest commitments one might make; in the case of cult figures, the experience is particularly intense. One is what one identifies with.

I won't share you

In contrast to their expressed feelings of personal intimacy with Morrissey, fans' descriptions of relations with other people, even other Smiths fans, were often couched in terms of loneliness and isolation. Repeatedly, fans wrote of their sense of disconnection from family and peers. Often this sense of difference fixed on their love of The Smiths - the band represented a shibboleth distinguishing those who understood from those who could not, and thus affecting relations with others:

When I first 'got into' Morrissey I was going out with this lad but I dumped him because he was very different to Moz and myself.

(Maria)

If Maria is similar to other fans, it would not have been enough for 'this lad' to profess that he liked Morrissey, for 'Morrissey is someone you either love or hate. You can't just like him' (Joanne). Moreover, as Maria suggests, loving Morrissey was also, for many, to be *like* him.

In similar fashion to the paradox of intimate strangeness, being a fan of The Smiths provided a source of collective identity but of a highly individualist kind. The strong (if shifting and constantly negotiated) external boundary to be found around any

distinctive youth subculture was here echoed *within* the subculture - the line was drawn around the individual rather than the group. What often attracted fans to The Smiths was their ability to capture a sense of difference and alienation. So the basis of shared attitudes and attributes among fans was paradoxically that each felt alone in the world. As one fan observed, 'there's a lot of lonely people in this country - bedroom recluses - He is one of us' (Maria). However, as this quote suggests, Smiths fans were not simply isolated. Those I corresponded with and interviewed quite often (though not always) revealed a healthy social life. Like many other similar groups with shared interests, they also formed a loose network of associations through fanzines, meetings and other gatherings. In 1989, for example, over one thousand people attended the Smiths Convention, a series of events and tours around 'Morrissey's Manchester'. Each fan may have felt lonely but they were not always alone. Moreover, there was an expressed bond among fans:

There is a kind of love and comradeship that I feel whenever I see someone who is wearing a Smiths T-shirt ... you feel safe as if you know them. You know that they are probably very shy and vulnerable like yourself.

(Claire)

Indeed, many wrote that fellow fans were very friendly, easy to talk to and sociable. However, for all this professed camaraderie, fans still maintained their unique sense of displacement; for example:

I know there are many other wandering souls scattered about the place who feel this as well, but I feel different.

(Séan)

Similarly, in response to questions about an 'average Smiths fan', fans typically claimed 'I don't think it's fair to say there's an "average Smiths fan"' but would then go on to offer such characterisations as 'a male ... probably in his mid-late teens, who's a bit shy and unaware of himself, not very successful with girls and probably quite lonely ... fairly intellectual' (Sheila).

Fans' feelings of identification with Morrissey were, therefore, not always reflected in feelings of identification with other fans, something regularly reflected in their letters by a strong distinction between 'real' fans, such as themselves, and those who were mere 'clones'. Fans were thereby able to enjoy the sense of solidarity given by the

common interest of fan clubs, fanzines and so forth while presenting themselves as individuals and different. They shared what studies of youth subcultures refer to as ‘maps of meaning’ but often each felt alone within this community. Reading fans’ letters was like hearing a chorus of voices singing a similar tune but each feeling they sang their own song solo - a shared singularity underpinned by feelings that they alone ‘identified with’ Morrissey. What Pierre Bourdieu describes as the cultural struggle for social distinction was thus underpinned by a particularly individual and personalised sense of belonging.²¹ To adapt an expression of Marx, fans described a subculture-in-itself but not a subculture-for-itself. Lest all this sound a deliberate strategy of self-promotion by fans wishing to attain distinction, I should emphasise that this sense of difference was not simply celebrated but also the cause of pain, frustration, depression and resentment. As the intensity of the correspondence highlights, and as many fans made clear in their letters, loneliness was the last thing they wanted. For many followers of The Smiths at this time, then, being a fan was to be deeply involved in an isolating experience - making it a highly charged and personal affair.

I Started Something I Couldn’t Finish

I have focused on only two issues arising from the correspondence of fans, itself but one aspect of the research as a whole. However, this focus is useful for understanding a further issue: the experience of conducting this kind of research on this kind of subculture, especially when you are one of its members. For the written results of all my research only touched on the issues I have explored here. Though I spent a considerable length of time analysing the rich data I gathered, relatively little of this work appeared in the undergraduate dissertation I submitted to the university.²² Instead, it focused more on the images presented by The Smiths. The voices of fans had been, if not silenced, then forced into the background. Furthermore, I did not return to the data for another sixteen years, when finally prompted by the conference that gave birth to this book. This repression of the voice of the fans resulted from a combination of academic politics and the intensity of my own experiences in conducting the research.

In the late 1980s writing about the experiences, feelings and thoughts of fans of an ‘indie pop’ band was not readily acceptable academically. As a lecturer at my university made plain to me, ‘Writing about lonely listeners is not academic work’. Cultural studies may have flowered but, in mainstream sociology, research into popular culture was often not considered a scholarly endeavour. As my supervisor, Graham McCann, put it, ‘[t]hey approach it as if they were talking about child sex abuse or various forms of sodomy in public schools’.²³ At the University of Cambridge a course in the sociology of culture and media is now well-established. At the time of my research, however, finding a course under which the dissertation could be submitted was problematic. Eventually, it was allotted to one entitled ‘Deviance’. That the fans were then backgrounded in the finished product was not, however, simply the result of institutional conspiracy. It was easier to submit a dissertation centred on textual analysis, but this is not a simple case of suppression by the powers-that-be. More importantly, I found it extremely difficult to write about the feelings, thoughts and experiences of fans of The Smiths.

Today students conducting research projects attend lectures in research methods, learn about ethics and must submit forms to committees overseeing their work. Research such as that I conducted would have to be approved by an ethics committee before it could even begin. When I was researching, however, I knew little of the personal impact of different research methods and even less of ethics. However, perhaps nothing could have prepared me for the kinds of intense responses I received and especially for how they triggered and echoed feelings of my own. I should emphasise that I do not want to underplay the sense of joy, the wonderful wordplay, use of irony and sheer fun expressed in many of the letters I received. Moreover, many showed a level of perceptive insight that scholars of cultural studies would have envied; for example:

Morrissey is the antithesis of macho ... This, I believe, has great appeal to females, who are directly victimized by rock and pop images, and to males, who are victimized by the pressure to live up to that kind of roughness and omnipotence.

(Mariana)

Against the common conception at the time of the average Smiths fan as miserable and melancholic, it was not all doom and gloom. The Smiths and Morrissey clearly brought sweetness and light into the lives of many of their fans:

He [Morrissey] demonstrates how somebody who is supposedly a bumbling introvert can adopt a defiantly confident, dogmatic figure on stage ... and as such is an inspiring, 'life-affirming' person.

(Francis)

The Smiths were also a source of considerable comfort. Morrissey was perceived as 'a spokesperson for anybody who felt insecure, lonely, dejected and lacking in self-confidence' (Paul) and to feel that you are not alone, that you are not the only one who feels this way, is a positive experience that should not be underestimated.

While a source of comfort, Paul's quote highlights the kind of experience that was being comforted. Abuse from a violent father, thoughts of suicide, loneliness, isolation from peers, bookishness often considered aberrant within a working-class environment, alienation from middle-class educational institutions, a deeply felt failure to fit the profile of the average teenager, all these and more I knew only too well. The letters I received touched often on such issues, things I had barely begun to come to terms with myself. I read heartbreaking accounts of unrequited love, suicide attempts and self-harm, often prefaced with the words 'I've never told anyone this before but ...'. Sometimes fans believed that because I was doing this research at Cambridge University I must somehow be important, officially sanctioned and know Morrissey personally, so they felt they could write to me as if writing directly to him. Alongside requests for jobs at *New Musical Express* and personal introductions to Morrissey, came confessional, intensely personal accounts of lives often very much like mine. In short, the identity relations whereby fans felt intensely and intimately involved with Morrissey within a wider context of isolation from other people was reflected in an often intimate language describing deeply personal issues.

It was far more than I could handle at the time. I was meant to be conducting a brief piece of research, an undergraduate dissertation to be completed alongside my study of five other courses. I had embarked on a project far bigger than was necessary. For someone also going through the emotional turmoil of experiencing relationships for the first time, trying to make the most of having left home, in an environment in

which it was made clear I did not fit, the letters became overwhelming. Faced with my final exams in June, I let the correspondence fall away, something for which I still feel regret and sorrow. Insightful, articulate, too close to home and too near the bone, the fans gave me something that I won't forget too soon. Indeed, the box of their letters has remained with me, wherever I have gone, finding a home in Cambridge, seven addresses in North London, Cambridge again, Leicester, Stoke-on-Trent, Wollongong in Australia and now Sydney. Though my intellectual interests changed, I could not bear to leave the box behind, though until the conference I could not bear to open it. The box became something akin to that of Pandora - I feared what I would find of myself within.

The Story Goes On

In conclusion, I have described how fans of The Smiths at the end of the 1980s often expressed perceptions of Morrissey as an 'invisible friend' who spoke to each fan individually but also as an intimate stranger one could never fully know, alongside feelings of a sense of isolation from other people, even fellow fans. This combination of seemingly paradoxical feelings, I argued, engendered a particularly individualist form of subcultural membership and a sense of personal possession. In short, being a Smiths fan was an intense experience. I also described the unexpected consequences of researching one's own kind, particularly in the face of such intensity.

Like all real-life stories, this one never ends. At the conference that gave birth to this book, another delegate glanced at my name badge and then proceeded to introduce himself. He was Peter, one of the fans who had written to me sixteen years before. Over lunch he recounted how his life had changed since writing the letters I still possess ...marriage, a career, children. I couldn't help thinking what a terrible mess I'd made of my life. I still feel alienated from many my own age. Nicholas Currie (the pop singer/songwriter 'Momus') told me in an interview that the secret of Morrissey's success was to capture the sense of what it is like to be adolescent and to have maintained it. Morrissey's commercial success is perhaps my personal failure. Deeply romantic and too easily bruised, I still seem a little strange. Perhaps one

reason I had not returned to this research was that I remain in some ways one of those who had written to me - the malady lingers on.

But the story also goes on ... in conversation Peter floated the idea of attempting to contact those fans who had written to me, or at least who had been fans of The Smiths back then. Whatever happened to these boys and girls least likely to? Do the feelings of isolation from peers and friendship with an intimate stranger continue or are they a teenage phase people grow out of? Do those fans still dream that somebody loves them or did they come to replace such dreams with real friends, families and colleagues? Do these things take time? In describing how their feelings had changed over the years, the fans I corresponded with had already hinted at such developments:

My feelings for Morrissey began to change after I started University.

For the first time, I had good, close friends.

(Sheila)

Are the most impassioned songs to lonely souls so easily outgrown? How does fandom evolve over the life course? These are not simply personal but significant sociological questions. They ask whether cult figures in popular music serve as a pressure valve for teenage discontent prior to adult assimilation, whether alienation is replaced by integration or finds different forms of expression, and whether popular music retains its power for identity formation throughout life or becomes more of a lifestyle consumer choice. Such questions remain of considerable significance for us all and reach from the structure of society to the innermost sense of ourselves. I shall leave the last word (for now) to a fan:

All our lives people will wonder about existence and the need for the warmth generated from another human being ... Some people feel so shy and awkward that they think they could not communicate with another human being and that others could not possibly feel the same insecurity. Yet, I believe that there are thousands of people that share that same cold, hard core of loneliness ... Yours, with avid sentimentality, Julie.

¹ G. McCann, *Marilyn Monroe: The body in the library* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); G. McCann, *Woody Allen: New Yorker*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

² I wish to thank the Smiths fans involved in the study, those figures in the pop music industry who kindly agreed to be interviewed, Alexandra Lamont for help and support, and Graham McCann for showing how a real rebel flies under the radar.

³ See, for example, D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style* (London: Methuen, 1979); S. Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, leisure and the politics of rock 'n' roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); S. Frith, *Music For Pleasure: Essays on the sociology of pop* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

⁴ M. Middles, *The Smiths: The complete story* (London: Omnibus Press, 1988), p. 31.

⁵ Here I am reconstituting the historical moment of my research. Studies of fans have subsequently grown in number. See, for example: L.A. Lewis (Ed.) *The Adoring Audience: Fan culture and popular media* (London: Routledge, 1992); W. Brooker & D. Jermyn (Eds.) *The Audience Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002); and M. Hills *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002). Nonetheless, compared to studies of television audiences, the role played by popular music in the lives of fans has still received *relatively* little scholarly attention; as Williams (2001: 223) put it, 'little work within popular music studies has engaged directly with those who consume, listen to and use popular music as part of their everyday lives'. See C. Williams 'Does it really matter? Young people and popular music', *Popular Music* 20: 223-242.

⁶ The following is a necessarily brief sketch of the intellectual state of play at this time; for more expansive accounts see any of the now numberless introductions to cultural studies.

⁷ See, for example, D. Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (London: BFI, 1980); D. Hobson, *'Crossroads'* (London: Methuen, 1982); I. Ang, *Watching 'Dallas': Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985); D. Morley, *Family Television: Cultural power and domestic leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986).

⁸ For example, S. Hall, and T. Jefferson (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

⁹ Prior to 1986 the British National Health Service provided (where needed) free glasses to low income groups and the young. They were unfashionable and the source of ridicule among children. In 1986 the policy was changed to offering vouchers instead of providing glasses. Morrissey did not need glasses.

¹⁰ Interview with the author, February 1990.

¹¹ All quotes from fans are from correspondence with the author, late 1989 - early 1990. For reasons of anonymity I have not given full names, but retain first names to enable fans to recognise their contributions.

¹² Quoted in I. Pye 'A hard day's misery', *Melody Maker* (3 November 1984), p. 31.

¹³ Quoted in I. Pye 'A hard day's misery', *Melody Maker* (3 November 1984), p. 31.

¹⁴ R. Schickel, *Common Fame* (London: Pavilion, 1985).

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1992), pp. 236-7.

¹⁶ Interview with the author, November 1989.

¹⁷ See N. Kent 'Dreamer in the real world', *The Face* (61, May 1985).

¹⁸ Interview with the author, February 1990. This response did not preclude expansive discussion once an interviewee's initial caution was declared - the topic of Morrissey was thus both unapproachable and inexhaustible.

¹⁹ T.W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1976), p. 139.

²⁰ Interview with the author, January 1990.

²¹ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

²² K. Maton, *What Difference Does It Make? Sociology, popular culture and the cult figure*, unpublished undergraduate dissertation (University of Cambridge, 1990).

²³ Quoted in C. Landesman, K. Maton and T. Young, Opening editorial, *The Modern Review* (Autumn 1991), p. 4.