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Middle Eight

Effeminacy, camp and sexual subversion in rock: the Cure and Suede

Thomas Geyrhalter

Introduction

In December 1992 the *Melody Maker*, one of Britain's weekly music magazines, ran a special edition focusing on 'sexual subversion in rock'. Initially inspired by the controversy and hype around the new band Suede, the feature also tried to trace a history of the 'sexually ambiguous' in the rock and pop world. Richard Smith, who also writes in the *Gay Times*, gave a short historical account of the significance of gay culture in music, arguing that although 'pop . . . has been absolutely riddled with camp and androgyny, male effeminacy and moral outrage' there have been only very few out gay stars (*Melody Maker*, 12 December 1992, p. 29). On the other hand he notes the emergence of 'ambisexual' acts that celebrate sexual ambiguity and employ imagery 'borrowed' from a gay context, for example Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Take That, and, to a certain extent, even Madonna. As Jon Savage has pointed out pop's flirt with gay subculture:

Even in its inchoate beginnings, pop culture was forced to turn to the sexually divergent or avant-garde, for it was only in the spaces that they inhabited that this new world could be recognised and developed. Pop's relationship to different ideas of sexuality and gender is thus deep and intricate: although it frequently denies it, it is from the milieux and sensibilities of the sexually divergent that pop culture draws much of its sustenance. (Savage 1990, p. 155)

The debate in *Melody Maker* (which took place between, among others, Brett Anderson, singer with Suede, Boy George, members of non-homophobic punk rock band The Senseless Things, 'butch' acting, straight singer Leslie from Silverfish) seems to favour acts like Suede that play with ambiguity and challenge gender stereotypes. The consensus seemed to be that it is more subversive to suggest and flirt with the sexually ambiguous without declaring a fixed sexual identity. The debate culminated in Brett's now often quoted, rather obscure statement: 'I see myself as a bisexual man who's never had a homosexual experience' (*Melody Maker*, 12 December 1992, p. 27), explaining further:

The sexuality you express is not limited to the things you've already experienced . . . The only validation I need for what I do is that sometimes I feel like a woman . . . Most music seems to treat sex as something very straightforward, whereas in reality it's transient and, in lots of cases, completely deviant. (p. 27)

In this article, I want to examine critically what is being said above, as I think it leaves some questions open to ask from a gay viewpoint. As 'deviancy' is being reclaimed and celebrated for a more or less straight-identified music scene and audience, it might be asked how much this is a performance of androgyny or

effeminacy based on a more or less straight fantasy of a gay subculture, that, in fact, has more to do with this fantasy, pointing towards an utopian blur of gender-roles. But is this really as subversive as it claims to be? Is this, to employ a more recent terminology, 'queer'? Or, better, is it 'queer-acting' employed to add an extra exotic element to a performance, in a music business that needs shock-value and exoticism? Whereas a lot of gay people still have to pretend to be what they are not (so called 'straight-acting'), the pop and rock world seems to be allowing the reverse, deliberately employing imagery from a fantasised outcast identity that is played upon but never declared. This releases contradictory messages or codes without the necessity to be coherent, and, in fact, often completely denies the ambiguity when it does not seem to be convenient anymore. Where would one locate authenticity, an uncomfortable term to use in this context, as it is so often used to invalidate gay experience as 'inauthentic' or faked? Is it desirable, from a gay point of view, to have acts that are uncompromisingly committed, 'original' voices coming directly out of a subculture, for example Bronski Beat, Erasure, Marc Almond, k. d. lang, Army of Lovers, to a certain extent even the Pet Shop Boys? Is ambiguity all there is to achieve, or is it 'even better than the real thing'; does closing the debate with a clear distinction of either/or mean the end of creativity or challenge?

I want to focus on the work and especially visual performance (videos, cover art, visual appearance) of two bands that display a comparable approach to androgyny or 'sexual subversion': the Cure, a band that has been going for over a decade and that gradually developed into what might be called a 'rag doll' pantomime show, but who nevertheless have become a worldwide phenomenon; and the aforementioned Suede who have received maximum attention and incredible hype from the media. I want to show in both cases how a conventional heterosexual masculinity is challenged or deconstructed and, further, whether and how a gay reading might come into play, keeping in mind that both bands are not particularly popular amongst gay people in Britain.

The Cure

The Cure are often categorised as the figurehead of the Goth movement, an often sneered-at youth cult, favouring a morbid drag-like appearance, for example black clothes, eyeliner, white powdered face etc., and a rather effeminate, passive attitude. It is hard, however, to put the Cure into any category. The band started out as a rather slow and already quite effeminate punk band with the ironically titled debut 'Boys Don't Cry'. They soon went through a particularly gloomy phase, culminating in *Faith*, a classic Goth album, and the uncompromisingly pessimistic and whining *Pornography*; their appearance was low-key, the music monotonous, whining and bleak. Unable to go anywhere from there they suddenly came back with a much poppier and extravagant appearance and music. Singer Robert Smith wore a massive hairdo and deliberately thick and improperly applied lipstick and eyeliner, looking both infantile and moody, his high-pitch voice and music both eccentric and 'over-the-top'. This was, from that time until now over a decade later, to become the iconic Robert Smith look as the Cure became an internationally successful phenomenon, a band that millions could identify with. As Andrew Mueller in his concert review for the 'Wish' tour in 1992 observed:

The Cure are still getting the vote of the self-styled outsider, the kid who thinks that no one could possibly understand. However . . . the more you try to be different, the more you look like everyone else . . . a fine display of the inevitable Smith wannabes tonight. Mostly male . . . they're everywhere you look: plughole mascara, tent-shaped shirt . . . hastily tousled hair and haplessly applied lipstick . . . when any of the legion lookalikes do catch each other's artificially sunken eyes, they look away, embarrassed. It's like being at a party where a 100 girls have turned up wearing the same dress. (*Melody Maker*, 2 May 1992, p. 42)

It is important to note that this style is in many ways a reverse of the traditionally male heterosexual look towards a deliberately chosen sexual ambiguity; even though it is generally assumed that the majority of these boys are heterosexual, this visual code might allow some gay teenagers or those confused about their sexual orientation to play out something like a fantasy identity, to be, or appear to be, different from what they are supposed to be, even when it results in the impression that being different is not really that individual. It might be argued that this is still more or less straight-identified, Smith's unashamed and deliberate display of androgyny and eccentricity, a straight exaggerated effeminacy seems still remarkably unconventional, even for the music business. (Visually, the only comparable point of reference would be Culture Club; in fact, members of the Cure have reputedly been mistaken for Boy George.) This visual style and imagery, arguably the standard image for Goths worldwide, does not seem to be borrowed from any gay subculture or drag tradition; it is its own subculture (together with, among others, Siouxsie and the Banshees).

Smith seems to accentuate those parts of his appearance that denote subversion: his thickly painted red lips appear in a frighteningly close shot on the cover of the infamous *Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me* album (Smith explained later that it was more about swallowing people; this is something that will reappear in the videos). He says about his choice of make up:

I don't put my lipstick on properly because people would think I was doing it for reasons of vanity whereas I do it for reasons of theatricality. I used to wear red lipstick all around my eyes and all around my mouth when we were on stage so that I'd sweat and it'd all run so it would look like someone had punched me in the mouth and my eyes were bleeding. (Thompson and Greene 1988, p. 79)

Another major aspect of Smith's appearance is his hair, or better, his hairdo which deliberately looks as if he just woke up from a wild dream or, better, like some androgynous monster out of a strange dream. When he cut it off, appearing in the *Cure in Orange* concert film in a wig that he threw into the audience during the opener, he caused uproar among Cure fans worldwide.

His constant referral to dressing up ('Dressing up to kiss/dressing up to be all this') or exotic animals ('I'm a polar bear'; 'Caterpillar girl' (*The Top*), 'Like cockatoos' (*Kiss me . . .*) suggests an exaggerated sense of play, of wanting to be something different and obscure. Although he constantly refers to himself as a happy, normal person in interviews, his persona has increasingly become shrouded in mystery; this is underlined by his alleged habit of lying in interviews, telling weird stories for teenage magazines.

The Cure's videos display a delicious sense of camp, playfulness and hysteria. Unsatisfied with their early videos, Smith contacted Tim Pope and after seeing his video for Soft Cell's *Bedsitter*, Pope went on to direct all the Cure's videos, managing successfully to translate their music and attitude into television.

Pope's video for 'Why Can't I Be You?' features the band dancing in various dresses and costumes, apparently in a deliberately bad imitation of the dance routines of 1980s teeny band Fivestar. Smith appears dancing in a strange tourist costume through a pair of massive red lips, while drummer Boris Williams suddenly appears in vampire drag emerging from the dark void of Smith's lips in a close shot. The video has the playful atmosphere of a children's carnival or dressing-up party, although being a more bizarre and distorted version. 'Why Can't I Be You?', indeed, the viewer might ask. (Apparently Smith wrote the song when inspired by a fan asking him just that question.)

Their most famous video, *Close to Me*, opens with a view from inside a wardrobe into the countryside, while its doors slowly close. As the wardrobe falls down into the sea, one sees the interior of the wardrobe with the entire band crammed inside upside down among the clothes and, when they have fallen into the sea with water creeping in, Smith sings in a particularly low-key whisper how he wished he 'stayed asleep today'. Gradually they swim out of the closet into the camp underwater world, featuring a massive cuttlefish with a strange hostile face that constantly holds Smith trapped by one leg.

The Cure's videos deal with a heightened sense of claustrophobia by opening up interior secret spaces (the wardrobe, the freakshow, the bedroom). What seems significant is the deliberate display of the hidden, private, furtive, narcissistic, the weird games of the subconscious that always might have a sexual meaning or undercurrent. Smith's closets reveal bizarre drag shows (especially in the case of the wardrobe, that is literally associated with clothes), a sense of playing around with costumes, appearance and, ultimately, identity, which is constantly threatened and played upon. At the end of the *Why Can't I Be You?* video Smith slips out of his children's teddybear costume only to reveal that he is in 'proper' drag underneath.

All this daring perversity affirms, for me, that the Cure were somehow always on my side, making that question of sexual orientation almost irrelevant. Gay or straight, the Cure allow themselves and their audience to pose and behave differently effeminate. They represent a certain detachment from the ordinary, the opening up of a secretive subjectivity, displaying a distinct sadness or melancholy that understands the position of the outsider, 'lost forever in a happy crowd' (*Faith*), 'sharing the world with slaughtered pigs' (*Pornography*), dreaming 'while all the other people dance' (*Charlotte Sometimes*).

Suede

'Have you ever tried it that way?' Suede, *Pantomime Horse*.

While the question of definite sexual identity is rendered almost irrelevant with the Cure, Suede actively refer to and flirt with existing traditions of the sexually ambiguous – the most obvious icons here being 1970s glam-rock Bowie and Morrissey and The Smiths, who display a heightened awareness of surface, role playing, and their inherent potential subversiveness. Like Morrissey, Suede emphasise Englishness as a repressive, potentially perverse attitude towards sexuality. They celebrate London as an inherently sexual experience: 'To Brett, London was big, swinging, punky, sexy, dangerous and depraved, the ultimate metropolis' (*Melody Maker*, 2 January 1993, p. 9); 'England's a giant web of perversity, repressed sexual-

ity, and shyness' (Brett quoted in *Melody Maker*, 26 December 1992, p. 41). But whereas Morrissey was keen to release enigmatic messages that remained ambivalent and could be interpreted in multiple ways (making himself quite unpopular with songs like 'National Front Disco'), Suede seemed to be determined right from the start to pose as queer, perverse and 'on the edge' as possible. Brett's feminine voice that tends to go high and sound almost like a woman's, his lyrics that employ 'he' instead of 'she' when singing about his lover, and his androgynous appearance are a radical departure from the overtly masculine look and music of then trendy American 'grunge' bands. He seems to embody a (straight) journalist's dream of a camp queen. As *The Face* observes:

Tall, skinny and clad all in black with his affected walk, he does a good parody of a young Quentin Crisp . . . 'Did you know he's Prince's mum?' the band snigger from just within earshot. 'I'm the guy from the Sandeman Port advert', retorts Brett in high camp tones, turning his head and grinning at them. (March 1993, p. 93)

Moreover, his onstage appearance and performance is increasingly perceived as a hysteric sexual ritual. As *The Guardian* observes:

Anderson minces on, wearing a woman's white lace blouse knotted at the front and trousers slung low to reveal the most hyped hipbones, the most lusted after navel in British pop . . . Girls faint and sob . . . one of them gasps: 'I love him! He's a sex god from heaven!' (3 April 1993, p. 27)

But most astonishing is Suede's singing about gay rather than straight sexuality, perceiving the sexually bizarre and ambiguous as the less straightforward, more glamorous or romantic, while deliberately leaving their own position open. In one of the first interviews, before their debut single was released, Brett announced in the opening sentence:

My fantasy has always been to have a song about some bizarre sexual experience in the Top 10 . . . a song that people are going round singing and then it suddenly dawns on them what it's about . . . what a powerful, brilliant thing that would be . . . It's probably something to do with a personal touch of perversity. I've just always been fascinated with the idea of subverting the masses. (*Melody Maker*, 25 April 1992, p. 28)

Looking back on this statement now, it seems amazing that they actually made this fantasy real. Suede have, since then, received maximum attention from the music papers and, more recently, from the rest of the press, as one of the most hyped and critically acclaimed acts in years, and the critical consensus now seems to be that they actually live up to it. The third single, 'Animal Nitrate', went straight into the Top 10. The title, apparently, is a double pun, referring to both Poppers (Amylnitrate) and gay cruising at 'nite'. The lyrics, although almost incomprehensible in the song when sung, are widely quoted and also printed on the inner sleeve of the album. They deal with gay sex, the age of consent, hints of S&M, domestic violence ('What does it take to turn you on, . . . ? Now you're over 21? Now you're animal's gone? . . .'). The video was immediately found unsuitable for minors and banned from the Saturday morning broadcast video programme, *Chart Show*. It shows the group performing inside a council block flat: after a quick, manic shot through a concrete balcony the camera switches through a door into a darkened, fantastically decorated room, not unlike the secret spaces of The Cure's videos. Brett performs his special, oft-mentioned and ridiculed, ritual of banging the microphone on his hip while dancing. When they performed live at the Brit Awards in front of millions of people (as the only band who did

not win any nominations), one could actually hear the sound of the microphone when it beat his hips, while his tiny women's top gradually slid off. The performance was later described as 'glam terrorism'.

Their choice of album cover art is part of the same strategy. Being an old fan of The Smiths and their famous covers featuring, old, sometimes homoerotic photographs, Brett has reportedly looked through piles of photo books to find suitable pictures for Suede's covers. Their first single, 'The Drowners', features Veruschka, a female model, on whose skin a male suit and tie is painted, sitting on a chair with crossed legs, a hat, male stubble and a slightly disturbing look in her/his face, a pistol in one hand, a phallic cigar in the other, pointing upwards from the crotch, where it is held, like an erect penis. The overall impression of fakeness and sexual confusion is underlined by deliberately ugly and tacky colours. The *NME* re-enacted it later for a cover shot showing Brett with a loose shirt and tie painted on his naked chest. (If the point of the 'Drowners' cover is to confuse the model's gender, one could ask whether the *NME* shot implies that Brett's body is female.)

For their debut album, Brett chose a picture initially published in a book of lesbian photography, *Stolen Glances*, featuring two naked women kissing, one of them in a wheelchair. Photographer Tee Corinne refused permission to reproduce the whole picture for the cover, in order that the two women could not be identified, so they took only the close shot of the heads of the two women kissing in warm, brownish colours, a very sensual and provocative picture. It is reminiscent of the 'Pop against Homophobia' campaign's T-shirts featuring same sex couples. In the first week of its release it has already provoked moral outrage by right-wing family value campaigners 'Family and Youth Concern', complaining about the 'promotion of homosexuality' implied in the choice of cover. As a spokesman for the band told *The Pink Paper*: 'The group is heavily into positive, strong images and they hold the belief that no sexual preference should be discouraged' (*The Pink Paper*, 4 April 1993, p. 2). Considering the fact that this was generally talked about as the most eagerly awaited and hyped album in years, going straight into Number 1 of the Album charts and reaching Gold on the second day of its release, this stance on the positive representation of homosexuality is extremely powerful.

As Richard Smith notes: 'Just at the very point when Morrissey has tired of flirting with faggotry along comes someone who is bold enough to sing on their first release about "lying back and taking it" ' (*Gay Times*, March 1993, p. 35). He goes on saying that, to him, Suede matter and Brett's celebration of gay sexuality is a welcome break from the anxiety and homophobia of people successful in the music business (remembering Jason Donovan's libel action against *The Face* who claimed he was gay). One could almost say that Suede's amazing success was based on their reputation for flirting with being queer 'outsiders'. Early reviews in the music press focused extensively on what they perceived as 'camp' in Suede. One feature started with a lengthy history of 'camp', relating it to Brett's performance and appearance, saying that he was 'prettier than any girl' (*Melody Maker*, 13 June 1992, p. 16). Another one compares Brett to 'the enigmatic geezer from poetry class who won prizes and you called a poof, but secretly resented and maybe idolised' (*NME*, 1 August 1992, p. 46). Brett himself says about his outlaw status at school:

They always called me 'queer' . . . I always quite liked it actually, because when you're insulted by someone you consider a complete piece of shit, how can that be an insult? I

always enjoyed the attention of being excommunicated from the lads' gang. (*Gay Times*, March 1993, p. 34)

If queer politics is re-defining the insult placed upon you into an affirmative gesture of defiance, one could argue that Brett is actually as queer as you can get, insofar as he has had the first-hand experience of homophobia and turned his queer reputation into something he is proud to re-enact and parade.

But I still have a problem with his representation of homosexuality as a bizarre, sensationalist fantasy from a still more or less straight identified point of view. When Brett, at the end of 'Pantomime Horse', repeatedly chants the closing line with his theatrical voice: 'Have you ever tried it that way?', one is tempted to ask: 'Well, have you?' or 'Why haven't you?' Another significant detail in the public persona of Suede is that their drummer, who never spoke in interviews, later came out as a 'bisexual man who never had a heterosexual experience', (*NME*, 20 February 1993, p. 25). He also revealed that most of their fanmail presumes that he is the straight one, because he is the one with the short hair, whereas the suggestion is that it is the other way around. He has recently been in trouble over statements he made on the radio on the subject of the British age of consent for gay men of 21, claiming that he never bothered about the law.

But how far away is Suede's style from that of the gay scene? The British Indie music scene out of which Suede appeared has not many points of contact with the gay scene and vice versa. While I personally find Suede's approach of crossover interesting and exciting, I am not sure whether it works for others. The only level where I see Suede to be truly subversive is amongst teenagers, who have not got access to the gay scene or do not know very much about it, but are confronted with homophobia on an every day level. We cannot expect people in the gay scene to find Suede as subversive or respond to them with the same hysteria as the music press.

Conclusion

Music is an important political form especially for a youth audience, as it carries multiple identities and styles, and creates an alternative world where reality is rewritten and deliberately reversed. This is especially true for so-called cult bands, whose worship provides the fan with a distinct alternative identity, that has to be defended and suffered for.

From a gay perspective, music seems both glamorous and restrictive, insofar as one is constantly confronted with both compulsive heterosexuality and compulsive camp sensibilities that refer to sexual diversity rather than enforce conformity. The Cure and Suede are two successful acts where a traditional heterosexual masculinity is questioned and left aside for a more experimental approach that arguably challenges existing stereotypes. Whether this is enough, or whether it simply reinforces a 'new' masculinity and new stereotypes is still an open question. There is a constant disappointment to be experienced from a gay perspective, as these so called radicals 'come out' as normal heterosexuals, revealing that their act, that promised more, was just an act, therefore commodifying the flirt with the sexually diverse. The question remains why pop music applauds the subversiveness of sexual diversity, as seen from a straight perspective, rather than the out gay performer. But this leads back to the definition of queer. Ultimately, every-

body can be queer, as long as sexual conformity is challenged. Queer, in fact, is much more about confusion and subversion on all available levels than about having an explicit, fixed sexual identity. So maybe acts like Suede and The Cure should be celebrated for what they are doing and who they are, rather than dismissed for what they could have been.

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