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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol.12, ‘Nostalgia’ (2020)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.108

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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'THIS CAN'T BE THE SCENE': NOSTALGIA AND REPRESENTATIONS OF MOD IN *QUADROPHENIA* AND *ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS*

Jamie Zabel

This paper examines critical commentary on The Who's Quadrophenia as well as Colin MacInnes' novel Absolute Beginners and other prose writing to locate the nostalgia for youth culture, specifically Mod, that these texts articulate. Additionally, this paper performs a comparative narrative analysis of Absolute Beginners and Quadrophenia which establishes that these texts speak to Mod/pre-Mod superficiality and its ultimate failure as a subculture rather than its potency as a subcultural form. As a result, a comparison of these two texts calls the nostalgia that the album particularly generates into question.

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface, Colin MacInnes' novel *Absolute Beginners* and The Who's album *Quadrophenia* tell the stories of young white men who find a sense of belonging and identity in the Mod subculture, a way to challenge an overbearing and dominant parental culture. However, in the end, both of the texts' protagonists become disillusioned; the Mod subculture does not offer the belonging or sense of purpose that they thought it would.

Interpretations of these texts and, to some extent, the texts themselves are shaped by particular brands of nostalgia. In *Quadrophenia*, I will be focusing on the nostalgic impulse that resides in the critics and fans of the album. Theirs is a nostalgia that uses the album's narrative to access a particular Mod persona that was, by 1973 when *Quadrophenia* was released, largely extinct. Not only does the album give access to this lost persona, it has also spurred many commentators to idealize and even emulate it. Many who have spoken or written of the album seem to long for a time when Mods were, as Pete Townshend once put it, 'a powerful aggressive army of teenagers with transport'.¹ In *Absolute Beginners*, on the other hand, I will be focusing on the nostalgic impulse residing primarily with the author. MacInnes was in his forties when the novel was published in 1958, and as an adult penning his imaginative observations of a newly coalescing group of stylish, energetic young people obsessed

¹ Richard Weight, *Mod! A Very British Style* (London: The Bodley Head, 2013), p. 269.

with jazz, he exhibits a nostalgia for youth that is intimately bound up with his hopes for the potential of the next generation.² It is important to remember MacInnes' age at the time of writing his novel because while he believes in youth's power, it is a power that is inaccessible to him. Thus, MacInnes' narrator becomes his youthful stand-in, a personification of the energy and potential that MacInnes believes the developing pre-Mod youth culture contains and that he nostalgically wishes he himself possessed.

Despite these interpretations and intentions, the potential and positivity of Mod/pre-Mod youth culture goes unrealized in both *Quadrophenia* and *Absolute Beginners*. When analysed, these texts record the failure, not the success, of Mod as an ideal of youth culture, an ideal propagated by nostalgia and never fully realized because it never truly existed. This failure has rarely been discussed by the critics of *Quadrophenia* and this is in part, I argue, the result of their nostalgic lens. I assert that putting these two narratives into conversation highlights the longing for the past which surrounds both and the subsequent failure of the beliefs on which nostalgia for Mod culture rests.

Before continuing, it is necessary to define the term 'subculture' or 'youth culture'. To Phil Cohen, as quoted by Dick Hebdige, subculture is a 'compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents [...] and the need to maintain parental identifications'. For Cohen, subculture intends to 'express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture'.³ Thus, Mod as a subculture or youth culture sought to create its own, separate reality and find within itself solutions to society's issues. Another definition of subculture useful to this paper is that of Ross Haenfler: 'A relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived "conventional" society.'⁴ This definition points to the rebellious nature of subcultures, the desire to separate from

² The group of young people to which the narrator of *Absolute Beginners* belongs is certainly a precursor to the Mod subculture that began in London a few years after the novel was published. For the sake of accuracy, since the term had not yet been coined, I will not, where possible, refer to the characters in *Absolute Beginners* as Mods directly. I will instead use the term 'pre-Mods' / 'pre-Mod youth culture' or the more generic term 'subculture.' Nonetheless, the reader should be aware that the style, appreciation for jazz, and even the geographical location in London of these characters all correspond to the later Mod movement.

³ Phil Cohen, 'Sub-cultural Conflict and Working Class Community', qtd. in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 77.

⁴ Ross Haenfler. *Subcultures: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2013), < <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.4324/9781315888514> > [accessed 1 August 2020], p. 16.

society at large because it no longer meets one's needs. Mod affiliates were certainly motivated by this impulse. They wanted to find a sense of belonging and purpose that general society could not offer. The failure of Mod to offer solutions to society's problems or to meet the needs of its members will be analysed in this paper.

PART ONE: LOCATING NOSTALGIA AND ITS SOURCES IN *QUADROPHENIA* AND *ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS*

Critical commentary on *Quadrophenia* is almost universally surrounded by a rose-tinted-glasses type of nostalgia.⁵ This type of commentary results from scant critical analysis of Mod's representation in the album in favour of an idolization of The Who's Mod aesthetic, a consequence of the majority of commentary on the album occurring in magazines or newspapers. That being said, strictly scholarly sources that discuss *Quadrophenia* are not free from this nostalgic bent either. In David Nicholls' article discussing narrative theory in relation to *Quadrophenia*, a generally useful critical treatment of the album, he ends by inserting his highly subjective spin on Jimmy's ambiguous ending in the narrative. While admitting in a footnote that giving his personal opinion is 'dangerously in the direction of narrativization' and that it is possible to form other opinions, he nevertheless states that he believes Jimmy's story ends happily, that the 'inevitable conclusion' from analysing the album is that his 'mind has been healed and he has become whole'.⁶ This is a bold statement given that earlier Nicholls stressed that his article was about musical narrativity, not narrativization.⁷ Nicholls here exemplifies a naivety prevalent in subcultural criticism in which critical distance fails to be maintained due to over-identification with the subculture under consideration. The contrivance of a happy ending implies that he wants to believe that Jimmy, despite his struggles, survives.

Other commentators on the album also stray into overly positive rendering. Stuart Miller describes the album as 'transcend[ing] time and place,' and how 'Townshend's lyrics, with their focus on identity, became a touchstone for countless

⁵ See, for example, David Benedict, 'Modern Rockers: The Who's "Quadrophenia" reimaged.', *Variety*, 4 May 2009, p. 53, and Will Hodgkinson, 'Quadrophenia is still rocking; 20th-century history was set to rock'n'roll, writes Will Hodgkinson.' *The Times*, 17 June 2013, p. 10.

⁶ David Nicholls, 'Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts', *Music & Letters*, 88.2 (2007), pp. 297-315; p. 312n37, p. 312.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 300n16.

adolescents then and later'.⁸ Similarly, in an article in *The Listener* shortly following *Quadrophenia's* release in 1973, John Peel confessed to being fascinated by Mod culture and style after listening to the album. He said, 'by the sheer skill of the writing and the performance [I was drawn] to feeling nostalgia for an experience which, living from 1960 to 1967 in America, I'd completely missed.'⁹ From the beginning, the album gripped listeners and critics with a yearning for the heyday of Mod. Lastly, in *Quadrophenia*, Stephen Glynn recounts how listening to the album not only drove him towards an interest in nihilism and eastern mysticism but also inspired him to adopt the Mod style of the album's protagonist.¹⁰ From this commentary, it is clear that the album inspired an emulation of the Mod style and ethos not only in individuals but in entire groups of people, some of whom were quite distant temporally or geographically from the original Mod movement and could only access it through media like the album and nostalgic articles like those mentioned above. It is little wonder, then, that nostalgia for Mod spread until one could say, like ex-leader of The Jam Paul Weller in 1995, 'Mod will always be around in some shape or form because it's so classic...so ingrained in our culture and history...Mods rule!'¹¹

As for *Absolute Beginners*, it is not the critics that evince a nostalgic gaze so much as MacInnes himself through the text. Later in the paper, I will analyse portions of the novel in conjunction with lyrics from *Quadrophenia* to demonstrate their portrayal of the failures of pre-Mod/Mod culture as an ideal but, first, I want to briefly pull moments from the text that speak to its optimism for the movement. For one, MacInnes' narrator believes that his subculture's characteristics naturally lead to positive qualities like racial tolerance, citing Dean Swift and the Misery Kid's love of jazz as the impetus behind their aid during the Notting Hill race riots, a narrativization of the actual Notting Hill Race Riots that occurred in London in 1958.¹² Additionally, in the beginning, he appears to love his subculture and to find acceptance within it: 'So long as you dig the scene and can behave yourself, and have left all [the] crap behind you [...] when you come in the jazz club door [...] you meet all kinds of cats, on absolutely equal terms' (83). The ending scene of the novel also points towards the

⁸ Stuart Miller, 'The Who's Pete Townshend Reimagines the Rock Opera with "Classic Quadrophenia."' *Newsweek*, 8 Sept 2017, p. 169.

⁹ John Peel, 'John Peel on The Who's album "Quadrophenia."' *The Listener*, 8 Nov 1973, n.pg.

¹⁰ Stephen Glynn, *Quadrophenia* (London: Wallflower Press, 2014), p. 4.

¹¹ Weight, p. 386.

¹² Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (London: Allison & Busby Ltd., 2011), p. 255. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

narrator's youthful potential; though there is rampant racism in England, evidenced by the riots, he is the one who will meet a plane full of newly arrived immigrants from Africa with open arms and will make their experience more palatable. These portions of the narrative point to a belief in the power of youth, that they are able to effect some kind of positive change, even if it is only for a small group of immigrants.¹³ MacInnes paints them this way from the beginning when his narrator says 'youth has power, a kind of divine power straight from mother nature' juxtaposing youth with the older generation cast into the lamentable role of 'poor old sordids' who remember 'their own glorious teenage days' and are envious of the next generation (14).

What corroborates the textual evidence and my claim that these aspects of the novel reflect part of the author's mindset is that the idea of youth as a positive force was something that MacInnes genuinely believed in. In his prose work, *England, Half English*, MacInnes commends the next generation for their lack of awareness of class, their 'indifference' to the rules and norms of the 'Establishment' as well as their 'self-sufficiency [...] and instinct for enjoyment'.¹⁴ Writing a footnote to his main text in 1961, he explains that one would often see both black and white English youth being close with each other due to having been in schools together for so long and that those who had been 'kids in the 1950s [...] may be the decisive factor in the new decade'.¹⁵ MacInnes penned these thoughts shortly after the Notting Hill Race Riots of 1958 which indicates that he believed youth had an energy that could and, at times, did result in the potential for more tolerant and inclusive attitudes. MacInnes' evaluation of this developing youth culture shows that he also believed they were creating a culture of enjoyment, a culture that would inevitably result in having a more joyful and generally optimistic outlook.¹⁶ In his prose, then, MacInnes shows a hope for this subculture mixed with a belief in youth's inherent power which mirror the sentiments in *Absolute Beginners*. But while MacInnes is showing hope for the future, for the subcultural movement that would later become Mod, his perceptions are still mired by the blinding influence of nostalgia pulling him backwards. Lest we forget, MacInnes was in his forties at the time of writing his novel and *England, Half English*, one of the 'poor old sordids' that his narrator snidely refers to at the beginning of *Absolute*

¹³ Noting, of course, that 'youth' here does not encompass the immigrants themselves, suggesting that the young are being incorrectly imagined as homogenously white.

¹⁴ Colin MacInnes, *England, Half English* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1961), p. 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

Beginners (14). The youthful, often unrealistic energy and purpose with which MacInnes endows his narrator makes the character the antithesis to the supposed stagnancy of the elder generation, a generation with which MacInnes must associate himself. The narrator, thus, functions as a tool of nostalgic wish-fulfillment, giving MacInnes an opportunity to act out what he might have done if he had come of age in the 1950s. Again, the influence of nostalgia for an earlier time, in this case, an earlier life moment, leads to idealization and even idolization which makes this youth culture out to be the divine manifestation of progress, blurring the reality of its more problematic associations.

Despite the idealization that occurs in interpretations of *Quadrophenia* and in MacInnes' representation of youth culture, the ideal of youth is unravelled in both narratives. As I will show in the next section as regards *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes' nostalgic hope for youth, while prevalent in his writings, is written alongside an awareness, conscious or not, of their flaws. In *England, Half English*, this awareness is evidenced by his admission, albeit grudgingly, that what he termed this youth culture's 'happy mindlessness' could leave them vulnerable to 'crypto-fascisms of the worst kind'.¹⁷ Critics of *Absolute Beginners* have addressed this negative reality; for example, Nick Bentley highlights the young characters' slavish dedication to consumer products, like their need to acquire the right clothing and music to remain an accepted member of the subculture.¹⁸ He also addresses the Wizard's betrayal of his generation's potential by saying that the character 'pervert[s] the liberatory potential of youth culture [...] from a discourse of equality towards a negative empowerment that resubjugates black culture [...] [and empowers] white working-class youth'.¹⁹ Critics of *Quadrophenia* often lack a similar awareness. What is concerning about the lack of critical attention paid to the darker undercurrents of Mod portrayed in *Quadrophenia* is that it leaves key aspects of the album unaddressed. MacInnes' nostalgia, insofar as it exists in his narrative, does not go unquestioned. As the author of the text, he is held accountable by those who critique his work; for example, Alan R. Goldberg questioning MacInnes' naivety in envisioning his narrator 'as the one potent force in society'.²⁰ The next section will attempt to close this gap by comparing

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁸ Nick Bentley, 'The Young Ones: A reassessment of the British New Left's representation of 1950s youth subcultures.' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8.1 (2005), pp. 65-83; p. 77.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

²⁰ Alan R. Goldberg. 'Reviewed Work: *Absolute Beginners* by Colin MacInnes.' *Books Abroad* (Summer 1961), p. 289.

Quadrophenia's narrative to that of *Absolute Beginners* to show the problematic tendencies of this Mod/pre-Mod youth culture in both of them.

PART TWO: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *QUADROPHENIA* AND *ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS*

I: 'FASCISTIC CODES' AND CUSTOMS²¹

An investigation into the narrative similarities of *Absolute Beginners* and *Quadrophenia* provides insight into the problematic aspects of the Mod subculture portrayed in each. First, the Mods/pre-Mods of *Quadrophenia* and *Absolute Beginners* respectively are portrayed as having a strict aesthetic code as well as rigorous requirements regarding acceptable behaviour that suppress individuality and make it difficult to belong. In *Absolute Beginners*, the narrator experiences shame about enjoying the *H.M.S. Pinafore*, a comic opera considered 'square and soppy' by other young people, with his dad (159-60). He also refuses to tell the Hoplite, a member of his subculture, about his attendance at the performance, both of which suggest an inordinate pressure to outwardly maintain a certain persona (159-60). This persona, while certainly pre-Mod in terms of fashion and outlook, has a variety of names in *Absolute Beginners* including 'digg[ing] the scene' (83), 'know[ing] the scene' (64), and being a 'swinging character' (73). The most important goal, according to the narrator, is to avoid becoming a 'mug[:]' the vast majority of squares who are exploited' a term that he uses to describe a number of people that he would not dare to emulate, including his conformist half-brother Vernon (18, 42). In addition, his need to wear his 'sharpest, coolest ensemble' to any 'teenage party,' speaks to the pride he takes in his appearance but also to the requirements he must follow to maintain his reputation (134).

Jimmy shares similar concerns in *Quadrophenia*'s 'Cut My Hair':

Why should I care
If I have to cut my hair?
I've got to move with the fashion
Or be outcast.²²

²¹ Weight, p. 270.

²² 'Cut My Hair', in The Who, liner notes to *Quadrophenia* (London: Track Records, 1973).

These lyrics touch on Mod's strict aesthetic code, a code that had to be maintained if a Mod was to avoid being tossed aside by their social group. These portrayals conform to actual lived experiences of Mods as well as those who rejected the subculture for this very reason. In Weight's book, *Mod! A Very British Style*, he presents several of these viewpoints. 1970s Mod Eddie Piller called Mod's extreme focus on style 'strict fascistic codes that apply to dress and ideas' while Humphrey Ocean, who played bass in a band that opened for The Who in the 1970s, said 'I was never a Mod [...] I slightly mistrusted [them] because [...] it was a code, and I was intrinsically rebelling against that'.²³ 'Cut My Hair' moves on to show an even more open anxiety about not fitting in with Jimmy lamenting that he has to maintain this persona against his parents' wishes and that he is 'work[ing himself] to death [...] [for] kids that hardly notice [he's] around'.²⁴ This concern about being accepted is also felt by the narrator in *Absolute Beginners*, as mentioned above, and is symptomatic of a subculture that, as Simon Reynolds notes in *Retromania*, was obsessed with 'being ahead of the pack... through the cultivation of special knowledge: what to wear, where to go, the new dance steps'.²⁵ A constant awareness of what is new and fashionable as a prerequisite to being accepted by one's peers would prompt the kind of exhaustion Jimmy exhibits in the above lyrics. These moments depict Mod as an unfeeling and almost cruel subculture in contrast to the nostalgic vision engendered by critical commentary on the album or by MacInnes' narrator's earlier assertions about the democratic acceptance of his subculture. These depictions, one would think, would more likely resist a need to emulate rather than encourage it.

In another song, 'I've Had Enough', Jimmy shows pride in his Mod aesthetic; his jacket is 'cut slim and checked', his hair is neat, he rides a 'G.S. scooter', and wears a 'wartime coat', i.e. the Mod parka.²⁶ This pride is similar to the pride MacInnes' narrator has in his 'full teenage drag' and its capacity to irritate his half-brother Vernon (40). And yet, this pride is short-lived and quickly gives way to exhaustion and disillusionment as the aesthetic demands of Mod prove to be too much for Jimmy:

²³ Weight, p. 270, quoting Eddie Piller and Humphrey Ocean.

²⁴ 'Cut My Hair'.

²⁵ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 257.

²⁶ 'I've Had Enough', in The Who, *Quadrophenia*.

I've had enough of dance halls
I've had enough of pills
[...]
I'm finished with the fashions
And acting like I'm tough
I'm bored with hate and passion
I've had enough of trying to love.²⁷

As for MacInnes' narrator, as seen above, his belief in the essential democracy of his subculture is troubled by the pressures he experiences which make it necessary to hide parts of who he is from those around him. Additionally, as is made increasingly evident as the novel progresses, many members of his subculture, including his best friend, the Wizard, end up being frighteningly and disappointingly apathetic or even hostile to his desire to fight against racial injustice suggesting that racial tolerance is not, in fact, a value inherent to his subculture (267-68). The codes and rules of this Mod/pre-Mod youth culture further subjugate their members, repeating rather than resisting the ways in which they perceive themselves as subjugated by the dominant society. This undoes the very difference and separation that subculture as a form promises.

II: A PROBLEMATIC FOUNDATION

Connected to Mod's aesthetic and subcultural codes is the need for awareness that those codes are based on the cultural appropriation of black music, style, and lifestyle. Not only does this appropriation and the lack of accountability for it in both *Absolute Beginners* and *Quadrophenia* problematize a nostalgia that idealizes the Mod subculture, it also gives light to how erasure, conscious or subconscious, is one of the consequences of the nostalgic gaze. In LeRoi Jones' *Black Music*, he talks about the origins of jazz, that it is a

continuous part [...] of the historical and cultural biography of the Negro as it has existed and developed since there was a Negro in America [...] the notes mean something; and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967), p. 15.

Regarding Billie Holiday in particular, an artist that the narrator of *Absolute Beginners* expresses an admiration for, Jones talks about the ‘final hopeless agony’ expressed in her music, the power of her voice (‘none of you cats would dare cross her’), and connecting these expressions to her later work expressing ‘a landscape of black need, and perhaps, suffocating desire’.²⁹ Jazz and its emotional force are thus irrevocably tied to the experience of African Americans in America, an experience that white British teenagers would struggle to imagine. However, this does not prevent one of the most overt acts of cultural appropriation in *Absolute Beginners*, the narrator listening to Billie Holiday because she had ‘suffered so much in her life she carries it all for you’ which makes him ‘quite the cheerful cat again’ (32). He is using the pain of another human being to make himself feel better, not to mention one whose experience was intimately tied to the struggles and oppression of a culture he is not a part of. This is symptomatic of the predominantly white Mods commandeering jazz music and its aesthetic. As Norman Mailer points out in his now extremely contentious essay ‘The White Negro’, ‘in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.’³⁰ MacInnes and *Quadrophenia*’s critics’ idealization of a subculture which co-opts the legitimate emotional expressions through music by another ethnicity for their own gain must be questioned.

But this ‘cultural dowry’ was not just the music to which the Mods listened. It was also black style and the adoption of black experience as a template for how to live on the ‘margins’ of society. Both MacInnes’ narrator and Jimmy separate themselves from their parents and the lives of their childhood in order to find a place in this margin, in Napoli and Brighton respectively. As Hebdige points out, Mods used ‘an emotional affinity with black people (both [in Britain] and, via soul music, in the U.S.A.)’ to separate themselves from dominant culture, ‘an affinity which was transposed into style.’³¹ This was not only because they enjoyed the music but also because, for them,

the Black Man was a constant, serving symbolically as a dark passage down into an imagined ‘underworld [...] situated beneath the familiar surfaces of life’

²⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁰ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), p. 340.

³¹ Hebdige, p. 53.

where another order was disclosed: a beautifully intricate system in which the values, norms and conventions of the 'straight' world were inverted.³²

Simon Reynolds calls this attitude of the Mods toward African Americans 'a white British fantasy of American blackness', fantasy being the operative term.³³ Mod idealization of black experience as a template for nonconformist existence is an erasure of the actual lived realities of the people they attempt to emulate. Black people in 1950s/1960s Britain and America were subject to severe discrimination and oppression. In Britain particularly, working-class West Indian immigrants were alienated from regular British society and subject to unemployment and poor housing conditions while also being the targets of police.³⁴ The Mods believed in a sanitized version of blackness, a version where fashion, music, and lifestyle had no underlying ties to harsh realities of oppression. The nostalgia that surrounds the Mod subculture depicted in *Absolute Beginners* and *Quadrophenia* forgets the origin of Mod style along with the other problematic aspects of the subculture. The distance, generational in the case of MacInnes or temporal/geographical in the case of *Quadrophenia's* critics, distorts the past, making positive qualities stand out and negative ones fade into the background. This distortion is why nostalgia is so corrupting to critical interpretations of a text and to the conclusions that can be made about a text. *Quadrophenia*, for example, contains only one offhand mention of black people at all, 'though they worked [they] still got the sack', despite the origins of Jimmy's fashion and lifestyle.³⁵ The impetus among commentators to nostalgize the Mod subculture that *Quadrophenia* and *Absolute Beginners* reimagine is what impedes a corollary critical commitment to accountability. Critics have too often recycled the very nostalgia these texts attempt to stimulate. In doing so they have failed to give due inspection to how the nostalgic impulse operative in these texts skews, distorts, and erases the contribution of oppressed voices and communities to subcultural history.

III: DISAPPOINTED EXPECTATIONS

Beyond the problematic nature of Mod style and the near-impossible aesthetic and lifestyle standards members of the subculture had to attain to remain accepted

³² Ibid., pp. 53-54.

³³ Reynolds, p. 257.

³⁴ Hebdige, p. 36.

³⁵ 'Helpless Dancer', in The Who, *Quadrophenia*.

members, the subculture also proves itself to be an impotent force in both *Absolute Beginners* and *Quadrophenia* and not the potent or positive one that MacInnes hoped for or that *Quadrophenia*'s critics portray. In *Absolute Beginners*, this is clear from the riots not having a greater impact outside of Napoli and the narrator's inability to obtain wider media attention to counteract the racial injustices he has witnessed (263-66). In fact, narrative authority to interpret the circumstances of the riots has already been co-opted by Amberley Drove, the quintessential 'mug' who opposes everything the narrator stands for and who is quick to downplay the riots' importance (234). It is also clear in the circumstances of the ending. As I mentioned earlier, MacInnes positions his narrator as being a final hope for welcome for the newly arriving African immigrants but this welcoming unravels the very rebellion that the narrator came to the airport to accomplish. Not only has he failed to create wider change in attitudes towards black Britons, he is also, ultimately, unable to hold to his intention to leave England behind for a more racially tolerant shore. He remains stuck in England, stuck in the racist and disheartening country that he wished to abandon, and while we cannot be sure that he does not leave, his statement that 'we're all going up to Napoli to have a ball' suggests that he has accepted the role of gracious host on behalf of the arriving African immigrants and is returning to his neighbourhood with them rather than leaving the city (285). Perhaps this choice of ending was MacInnes' attempt to resurrect the youthful ideal but, in these final moments, his narrator's role as the imaginative rendering of this ideal is overthrown by his unwillingness or inability to act.

This longing to leave but the inability to do so is very much present in *Quadrophenia* as well. In 'Drowned,' Jimmy laments that he has not 'seen quite enough of the world' and pleads 'let me flow into the ocean [...] let me get back to the sea [...] set me free'.³⁶ In this lyric, Jimmy exhibits the same longing to leave England that MacInnes' narrator does through his thwarted attempts to escape to Brazil (281). While Jimmy does technically leave England's shores, his journey is stopped at 'The Rock', a small formation of rock in the ocean not far from the beach in Brighton, and his fate from that point on is uncertain.³⁷ However, the ultimate impotency of Mod in the narrative of the album occurs in 'Bell Boy' where Jimmy encounters Ace Face, the lead Mod who used to be Jimmy's standard for what was cool and who is now working

³⁶ 'Drowned', in The Who, *Quadrophenia*.

³⁷ 'The Rock', in The Who, *Quadrophenia*.

as a bell boy at a hotel.³⁸ Not only has Jimmy been alienated from his Mod community but he now sees Mod's promised potential for subverting dominant power structures for what it is: a lie. The complete degradation of this person that Jimmy had once wanted to emulate is evident:

Bell Boy, I got to get running now
Bell Boy, keep my lip buttoned down
Bell Boy, carry this baggage out
[...]
Always running at someone's heel
[...]
Spend my day licking boots for my perks.³⁹

Whatever agency Ace Face and Mod had, which is given only a brief mention in the line 'remember [...] the doors we smashed,' has been obliterated.⁴⁰ Ace Face now finds himself having to keep his mouth shut and bow and scrape to make a living, a reality that is the catalyst for the next song on the album 'Doctor Jimmy', Jimmy's pill-up rampage. As with MacInnes' narrator, the potential energy of this subculture to change something, even the societal circumstances of their own members, culminates in little more than a failed rebellion. The nostalgia pervasive in commentary on *Quadrophenia* does not easily allow for an acknowledgement of this failure.

A last parallel between the narratives of *Absolute Beginners* and *Quadrophenia* which questions a nostalgia about the pre-Mod/Mod youth culture are the protagonists' rejections of the subculture and its emptied values that occurs near the end of both. Mod has revealed itself to be callous, superficial, and, ultimately, impotent. By the end of the album, Jimmy is completely disillusioned with his Mod lifestyle and flees to 'The Rock'.⁴¹ It is also around this time, according to the narrative accompanying the album, that Jimmy pushes Ace Face's scooter over the side of a cliff, a symbolic rejection of his Mod identity and the potential that he once saw in the subculture.⁴² This moment has a parallel in *Absolute Beginners*. Before the narrator

³⁸ Christopher Ketcham, 'Fiddling About Becoming a Man.' *The Who and Philosophy*, ed. by Rocco J. Gennaro and Casey Harison (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 77.

³⁹ 'Bell Boy', in *The Who, Quadrophenia*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ 'The Rock'.

⁴² Ketcham, p. 77.

sets out to try and help the victims of the riots, he leaves behind his Vespa even though it had just helped him and the Misery Kid escape arrest (265, 258). He also does not seem particularly devastated by the Vespa later being stolen (276). Like Jimmy, the narrator's subculture has revealed itself to be a disappointment and the symbol of the subculture, the Vespa, must be left behind. These two actions, more than anything else, should question the inherent value ascribed to Mod as a subculture. While MacInnes believed in the developing pre-Mod youth culture, its lack of agency along with its flaws do not escape the narrative and lead to his narrator's rejection of it. As for *Quadrophenia*, commentators' tendency to believe that Jimmy has a happy ending and to focus on the allure of Mod obscure Jimmy's disappointment and the equally possible conclusion that he has been so alienated from the community that he thought would accept him that he contemplates suicide.⁴³ At the very least, Jimmy kills his Mod persona and his hope in Ace Face's agency all in the single moment that he pushes the scooter off the cliff. The Mod dream is dead; its superficiality, cruelty, and lack of agency make it so. And yet, there is a persistent refusal to acknowledge this fact among critics of *Quadrophenia*. The nostalgic impulse may always shape interpretations of the album, but it is an impulse that must be set aside in order to analyse the album and its various connotations in its totality.

CONCLUSION

Nostalgia and the distortions that it creates is often doomed to fail because it relies on a desire for something that is irrevocably lost. As Susan Stewart says in her analysis of the cognitive mechanisms behind the collection of souvenirs, 'the nostalgic is enamoured of distance...[and] nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss.'⁴⁴ This distance is something that MacInnes and critics and listeners of *Quadrophenia* share. MacInnes is distanced in age from the youthful subjects of his novel and critics of *Quadrophenia* are distanced in time from the 'golden age' of Mod. Whether it is memories of lived experience or of an imagined one, it is difficult to accurately assess the viability and truth of situations we do not have ready access to. I bring greater attention to the nostalgia residing in critics of *Quadrophenia* not because their nostalgia is any greater or less than MacInnes'—that is, of course, a difficult value

⁴³ As supposed by a few critics e.g. Ketcham, p. 86 and Richard Harrington, 'The Who's 4-Star "Quad"', *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1996, D2.

⁴⁴ Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), p. 145.

judgement to make—but because their nostalgic lens prevents a truly objective critique of the album taking into account all the aspects of the Mod persona. A questioning of one's own perceptions and the extent to which one is affected by nostalgic impulses is essential in subcultural studies to maintain critical distance and to avoid the naivety that so clearly presents a danger to the unbiased study of subcultures and the media produced by and about them.

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