

The Blasphemous Grotesqueries of The Tiger Lillies

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At once magical and macabre, the British dark cabaret trio The Tiger Lillies takes us on bawdy, brash, and blasphemous musical journeys that pull us into a world of atmospheric beauty and distasteful sacrilege. Haunting stages in Britain and beyond since 1989, their albums feature unusual odes to the misfits that society discards: drug-addicted schoolboys, lowly streetwalkers, and violent criminals are only some of the band's bizarre and eclectic thematic choices. According to Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, a primary goal of gothic works is the desire to elicit the audience's empathy towards the terrifying inability to escape the personal or national tragedies they address.¹ Marked by a willingness to sensationalise and vulgarise addiction, crime, and violence, the attitude of The Tiger Lillies is never quite empathetic towards their disgraced and disgraceful protagonists. There is nothing innocent about their performances and the laughter that arises is not wholly joyful or escapist, but ultimately disturbing, for it carries with it the guilt of laughing at human misery. The traditional aim of Gothic to provoke empathy is therefore thwarted in the works of the gleefully sombre outfit. Their crude black humour, however, in offering the audience disquieting cautionary tales that revel in impudence and embrace depravity, also confronts us with timely contemporary issues.

At a moment when the relationship between the margins and popular culture— or between the subversive fringe and the politically correct—is being widely debated, the role of shocking, non-mainstream music demands reconsideration, particularly in light of the ethical and political questions it poses about the representation of those who operate on the edge of society. The persistence with which some artists have continued to offer exposure to the underbelly of modern city life allows for the conceptual problematisation of how our societies reconstruct and reappropriate the marginal through a combination of different media. I will address these issues here, focusing specifically on the ways in which The Tiger Lillies promote the circulation of abject otherness using Victorian gothic tropes. Furthermore, given their unique position in the dark cabaret scene and their deliberate breaching of the boundaries between high and low cultural capital, the band constitutes an engaging case study to examine the relationship between elitist and fringe culture in the twenty-first century. My investigation draws on Perry Meisel's pioneering study of pop culture, *The Myth of Popular Culture* (2010), in which the author refutes Theodor Adorno's assertion that the distinction between 'high' and 'pop' art lies in the fact that only the former presents a dialectic approach to culture.² Meisel analyses the American novel, Hollywood, and rock music and contends that pop culture is also fundamentally dialectic.³ Meisel's

focus is on popular (read, mainstream) forms of entertainment, whereas the realm of the underground—the subcultural—is left unexplored. My work advances Meisel's arguments by applying his central idea—that low culture closely dialogues with its sources and with cultural authority—to the analysis of a group of marginal musicians whose work epitomises the coming together (or the violent clashing) of high and low. To this end, I first contextualise and explore the music of the Lillies in its intersection with the Gothic and goth/ic-related genres, such as punk, circus, and cabaret. The subsequent exploration of thematic transgressiveness asks whether such music condones or condemns the complex issues it exposes. In other words, I inquire whether their satirical repertoire contributes to beautify and romanticise human tragedy or can otherwise be understood as a mode of resistance to conformity and supra-imposed official norms.

Performance and Sub/Cultural Space: Dark Cabaret, Punk, and the Gothic

Out of a darkened stage, the figure of a man emerges. He is sporting loose-fitting formal wear—black trousers, tie, white shirt, and waistcoat. His face, covered in white paint, is topped by a black bowler hat that half covers a long, unkempt pigtail. Matching lips and eyes, both thickly rimmed in black, stand out against the thick layers of Pierrot make-up. Accordion in hand, eyes closed, the man moans and gnashes his teeth while crooning lewd tales of perversion that sardonically expose the vices of the world. Subtly delicate and expressive hand gestures echoing Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel complete the trademark look of frontman Martyn Jacques, founder of The Tiger Lillies. His high-pitched Farinelli-like falsetto voice gives the band an operatic tone, a signature style which has made for a series of catchy monikers, including 'the criminal castrato'.⁴ The two remaining band members, double bass player Adrian Stout (from 1995), who stepped in after Phil Butcher (1989–1995) left the ensemble, and drummer Jonas Golland (from 2015), who succeeded Adrian Huge (1989–2012) and Mike Pickering (2012–2015), dress up in similarly unusual retro fashion. There is an air of haggard romanticism to this sad-yet-sinister-looking trio of performers. Their gentleman attire harks back to Victorian mourning clothes but melds with the pathetic garb of the classic hobo clowns from carnivals, circuses, and variety acts. Like the vagabond clowns of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman, the Lillies clash merriment and melancholy.

Formed in 1989, the band developed originally in the context of post-punk music and the early stages of the goth subculture. Significantly, the late 1980s and the 1990s marked a turning point in gothic fiction history, a shift which, Victoria Nelson states, led to an unparalleled hybridisation of gothic cinematic, literary, and musical subgenres.⁵ The female gothic novel experienced a radical re-focus and split into new variants. At the same time, vampire fiction and gothic monster films gave way to a still morose but now brightly coloured

aesthetic that frames self-conscious stories of outcasts. Informed by Burlesque protagonists, Edward Gorey, Charles Addams, and *The Munsters* (1964–1966), it merged with other genres and styles in the alternative scene. The rise in popularity of burlesque shows from the mid-1990s coincided with the revival of circus-related cultural forms and satirical cabaret, which resulted in the profusion of new and darker music subgenres. ‘Goth music’ became an umbrella term for myriad, yet co-related, styles and subgenres, including rock, punk, and post-punk bands (The Cure, Bauhaus, Joy Division, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Sisters of Mercy); neo-romantic gothic rock (Nick Cave, Lacrimosa); dark romantic/folk pop (Kate Bush, Björk, Lana Del Rey); steampunk (Abney Park, Unwoman, The Extraordinary Contraptions); and neoclassical dark wave (Dead Can Dance, Deine Lakaien, Abandoned Toys). The accompanying subculture, from its inception film and music based, morphed as well in the 1990s, specifically in its adoption of a more overtly humorous aesthetic.

The Lillies were on the cusp of this new cabaret and circus movement that brought back burlesque and speakeasies, as well as *cirque* and *cabaret noir* groups, from the San Franciscan Americana vaudeville troupe Yard Dogs Road Show (1996-present) to Circus Contraption’s (1998–2009) outlandish extravaganzas. More recently, alternative cabaret duo Pustra/Vile-eeen’s Vaudeville (2006– 2009), dark folk pop sister act Vermillion Lies (2006–2009), Britain’s critically acclaimed House of Burlesque (founded in 2010), and Ukrainian ‘freak cabaret’ band Dakh Daughters (formed in 2012) have followed in the footsteps of those early pioneers. These artists are usually grouped under the broad and fluid category of ‘dark cabaret’.

Dark cabaret represents one of the many ways in which goth music evolved, moving from its punk and glam rock roots to a more Romantic-Victorian aesthetic that meshes the sensuous, the seedy, and the sinister. This music and performance style rejects the more experimental and industrial sonorities of post-punk and post-industrial bands in favour of quirkier syncopated rhythms that, in turn, unfold into a plethora of neighbouring and fundamentally fluid—and sometimes one-artist only—categories, such as Victorian- or violin-industrial (Emilie Autumn) and neo-medieval darkwave (Sopor Aeternus & The Ensemble of Shadows). With in-your-face lyric-driven performances, dark cabaret acts blend the smoky, sleazy venues of late-nineteenth-century Montmartre and the heady atmosphere of risqué licentiousness in the 1920s and 1930s German cabarets. Borrowing the gory aesthetics and exaggerated style of Grand Guignol, Jacques and his bandmates offer a show that is neither circus nor variety nor concert, but an uneasy mix of Weillian cabaret, vaudeville, music theatre, and anarchic opera, underscored by chanson, blues, Django Reinhardt’s gypsy jazz, *bal-musette*, German *Lieder*, and punk’s rebellious attitude. In an interview, Jacques mentions Fado, which translates to ‘fate’, as yet another influence.⁶ The Portuguese music genre, renowned for its melancholy style, covers mournful themes

about life's tribulations, namely the sorrows of working-class people, like sailors and prostitutes. Intergenerativity is at the core of dark cabaret. Attesting to its early influences, the creativity of the genre extends to the type of instruments used, which differ significantly from classic punk and heavy rock and include accordion, banjo, xylophone, theremin, musical saw, ukulele, and an upright, rather than electric, bass. Unusual musical arrangements are often paired with carousel-like melodic lines and hushed, boisterous, or operatic vocals that range from the melancholy to the raucous.

The terms 'dark cabaret' and 'punk cabaret' are often used interchangeably. From punk, dark cabaret borrowed its countercultural edge, fuelled by generalised feelings of cynicism and revolt against rules and regulations, along with a pervasive disregard for authority and propriety. From goth, it inherited a penchant for abjection, solipsism, and Romantic melancholia. Cabaret, in turn—a genre long associated with counterculture and politics—provided elements of satire, parody, tragicomedy, and a carefully staged blasé attitude about world affairs. Some artists veer more clearly towards punk, stressing their political inclinations in more vicious lyrics. The Dresden Dolls, Dakh Daughters, Daniel Kahn & The Painted Bird, Marcella and The Forget Me Nots, Rasputina, and The Tiger Lillies illustrate the more anarchist and socially engaged strain of dark cabaret. Natasha Scharf observes that the Lillies draw on musical and visual elements from both goth and steampunk, which comes across in their Victorian/Edwardian-themed, over-the-top performances that favour haunting sounds and heavy make-up.⁷ Perhaps more strikingly than any of their other works, *Circus Songs* (1999) displays the filiation of the Lillies to classic punk culture: the album was co-produced by Siouxsie and The Banshees' bassist Steven Severin, who also played keyboards. Other bands place a greater emphasis on ambiance, performance, and tongue-in-cheek humour. Artists who navigate this darkly playful style include Circus Contraption, Jill Tracy, Clare Fader & the Vaudevillains, Rosin Coven, Birdeatsbaby, This Way to the Egress, and Aurelio Voltaire. Unlike their punk forefathers, these musicians usually leave overt political elements out of the stage.

Longevity, a devil-may-care approach to contentious or straightforwardly taboo subject matter, and an uncanny ability to reinvent themselves with each new project mark the Lillies off from other dark cabaret artists and vaudevillians. The band self describes as a 'unique anarchic Brechtian street opera trio', and their music is often dubbed 'Brechtian punk cabaret', a term coined by Amanda Palmer in an attempt to categorise the sound and style of The Dresden Dolls and distance her band from the gothic label.⁸ The Lillies' Brechtian component manifests in the firm rejection of a type of performance structured around recreating a perfect verisimilitude and thus reproducing the dominant bourgeois ideology. It also comes through in the primacy given to universal problems that originate from situations of social inequality and injustice.

The three-piece band trades in the celebration of misery and debauchery, and their unique combination of music genres, provocative lyrics, and retro appearance have earned them a passionate fan base and cult following. Their fans include Mel Brooks, Monty Python's Terry Gilliam, Simpsons creator Matt Groening, English musician Marc Almond, British actress Miranda Richardson, American photographer Nan Goldin, and Fado singer Mísia. Robin Williams and Edward Gorey were also among their devoted fan base. Dwelling on the dim-lit backstreets of whatever carnivalesque territory lies between Tom Waits, Nico, Klaus Nomi, Tom Lehrer, and Nino Rota, the Lillies deal with an innovative panoply of disturbing themes that plague contemporary life. They create anachronistic, off-beat performances that use the playfulness of dark cabaret to appropriate the historical and cultural legacy of the gothic mode, Victorian England and subcultural life, interacting with it in a creative, postmodern, and self-reflexive manner.

Described as 'Queen Victoria's worst nightmare', they would have been, on the contrary, a fond dream of the 'genius/lunatic Marquis de Sade', as Jacques mentions. 'And I am sure Salvador Dalí would love us', he adds.⁹ These remarks encapsulate the sublime world of The Tiger Lillies—a controversial and sarcastic den of creativity and scandal, where it is easy to discern a profusion of artistic, cultural, and literary influences. Musical intergenericity or, to use Adorno's term, 'dialectic' is, as noted, a key feature of dark cabaret.¹⁰ In the work of the Lillies specifically, dark cabaret's constitutive eclecticism in terms of generic cross-fertilisation is tightly interwoven with a structural intertextuality and intermediality. In agreement with Lars Elleström, I take 'media' to be an inclusive term that encompasses all art forms.¹¹ In this respect, the oeuvre of the Lillies proves exceptionally inter-textual and intermedial, combining poetry, philosophy, history, and literature with music, circus, cabaret, theatre, puppetry, film, and photography. *The Gorey End* (2003), nominated for a Grammy in the Best Classical Crossover Album category, features the Kronos Quartet, known for working across a broad range of musical genres, and pays homage to the output of American writer-illustrator Edward Gorey, celebrated for his black-and-white, pen-and-ink drawings depicting uncanny narratives in Victorian and Edwardian settings. High and low fuse, for instance, in *Die Weberischen* (2006), a collaboration with Austrian playwright Felix Mitterer about the family of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's wife, and in *Either Or* (2013). The album commemorates Søren Kirkegaard's bicentenary and draws inspiration from the philosopher's eponymous book *Either/Or* (1843), which analyses human experience through the lens of aesthetics ('Either') and ethics ('Or'). The detailed account of a man's relentless pursuit of pleasure in *Either's* last section, *The Seducer's Diary*, resonated particularly well with the Lillies, whose album's accompanying live show, the 'Either/Or Cabaret', brought together philosophy and 1937 Shanghai, a city which at the time thrived as one of the world's

centres of cabaret culture.¹² Track number fourteen on the album, 'Forget About Us', references the Bible and another nineteenth-century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche:

Beat up Nietzsche's Superman
Slaughter now the holy lamb
Through clenched teeth hear me hiss
Slash your wrist Capitalist.¹³

Besides the explicit critique of capitalism, the direct reference to Nietzsche is also significant for the influence Nietzschean philosophy has had on goth music and the goth lifestyle. Moreover, in the words of William Farina, Nietzsche acted as 'the patron saint' for the reinvention of German *Kabarett* at the turn of the century. Cabaret pioneers Otto Julius Bierbaum and Ernst von Wolzogen, inspired by Nietzsche's philosophical theories, aspired to elevate German variety shows, then known as *Tingel Tangel*, in order to differentiate them from their Parisian counterparts.¹⁴ *A Dream Turns Sour*, released on 28 June 2014, marked the hundredth anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. This album stands out for being based on real-life events and using poems written by World War I British, American, and Canadian soldiers who died on the battlefield. This is arguably the Lillies' bleakest album and the first for which Jacques did not write the lyrics. The rendering of Isaac Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump', displays the same kind of haunting anguish present in Siouxsie and The Banshees' 'Poppy Day', from the album *Join Hands* (1979), which also takes the topic of the First World War as its inspiration and opens with the grave sound of tolling bells. Extending their expertise far beyond the recording studio and the theatre stage, the Lillies developed an original music score for E. A. Dupont's newly restored *Variété* (1925). Heavily censored at the time of release, the film tells a tale of infidelity, jealousy, and murder set in the eccentric world of carnivals and circuses. In addition, the band's postmodern blending of different media, texts, and high and low cultural codes has resulted in projects as diverse as Nan Goldin's photographic suite *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (2011), for which the Lillies provided a live soundtrack, and *Devil's Fairground* (2019), an album set in post-soviet Prague that marks the 30th anniversary of the Lillies and combines thematic debauchery with waltzes, klezmer ballads, and the Czech Berg Orchestra (known for its unconventional choice of venues). The Lillies have also succeeded in bringing together their 'low' musical idiom and 'high' cultural spaces, such as the British Library, where they were invited to perform in 2017, as part of the 'Harry Potter: A History of Magic' exhibition.

Shockheaded Peter (1998), a theatrical production based on Heinrich Hoffmann's children's book of cautionary tales, *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), is particularly rich in intermedial co-relations. The musical received international acclaim and performed to sold-out venues all over the world, marking a turning point in the career of the London-based trio. The wider exposure of the play also prompted the few extant English-language academic criticism on

the Lillies, which, as far as I have been able to ascertain, remains limited to *Shockheaded Peter*. Jacques tweaked Hoffman's stories slightly to make them even more grisly and cruel: whereas the disobedient children in Hoffman's original poems are violently punished but some survive, in the play they all die. The stage production offers a paradigmatic example of the dynamic processes involved in the intermedial works of the Lillies. Here, we find a visual, verbal, and musical representation of a literary work that, through performance (inclusive of the studio album, *Shockheaded Peter: A Junk Opera*, and live theatre shows), effects the transformation of one medium (literature) into different intersecting media, which inter-act both in the sense of Wassily Kandinsky's synaesthetic *Bühnenkompositionen* (stage compositions), which combine sound, movement, shapes, and colour, and in the Wagnerian sense of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whereby—ideally—all arts would come together under the aegis of music. Other interconnections make this play especially relevant and dialectic: *Struwwelpeter's* stories and accompanying illustrations have had a lasting impact on pop culture and influenced, for instance, the work of Edward Gorey and Tim Burton. Scissor Man, the gruesome anti-hero from 'The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb', inspired the figure of Edward Scissorhands, who visually appears as a mixture of Shockheaded Peter and Scissor Man.

In displaying an intricate syncretism of intertextual and intermedial references, of which the examples above represent only a small fraction, the Lillies play on Gothic's affinities with a vast paraliterary and paracinematic tradition that both reinforces and yet also strives to transcend the division between elitist and alternative culture. Moreover, they incite their viewers and listeners to reflect on the usefulness of this dichotomy at the same time as they provide examples of songs and music-based projects that seem to have already surpassed or discarded that distinction, such as *A Dream Turns Sour*. The usefulness of this dichotomy, that is, the affirmation of their position as a non-mainstream musical act, allows them consistently to refuse conformity while also providing them with the artistic leeway necessary to bridge the gaps between high and low. Henk Oosterling argues that intermediality 'reconfigures [...] the arts, politics, and science, especially philosophy[,] enhancing an experience of the in-between and a sensibility for tensional differences'.¹⁵ The gaps between the arts—the in-between spaces—accentuate our interpretative role. Listening to a Tiger Lillies album is an exercise in critical reflexion. The Lillies have put together a sort of game where the listeners are invited to spot the many scattered references. The web of relationships between media, their fusions, overlaps, and dialogues with different sets of texts engages our intellect and requires an active mode of listenership, encouraging us to revisit the postmodernist blurring of traditional distinctions between high and popular culture. More pointedly, it opens up the way for us to thoroughly reassess this relationship and its presumed antinomies in our globalised world. This creative

intermediality and its co-related mode of participatory listenership might help understand why the Lillies continue to attract audiences after thirty years.

Among other nominations and awards, *Shockheaded Peter* won the 2002 Olivier Award for Best Entertainment and Jacques was awarded Best Performance in a Supporting Role. This is as close as the Lillies ever got to the mainstream. In effect, these and other accolades have failed to legitimise the Lillies as a viable commercial product, making us ponder the tensions underpinning the celebritisation mechanisms that shape and perpetuate existing hegemonies. In high-profile award ceremonies, defined by N. Anand and Mary R. Watson as ‘tournament rituals’, dark cabaret, steampunk, and other punk- and goth-derived music genres have not followed in the footsteps of previously uncomfortable (which is to say, polemical) genres like rock and rap music.¹⁶ They remain consigned to the alter-native milieu. The most obvious reason behind this is the bluntness they flaunt. Rather than providing a series of coded readings to address debasement and discriminating practices against the lower classes, the Lillies never opt to euphemise their subject matter. Jacques, in fact, seems to nurture a severe dislike for all hagiographic depictions of everyday life:

I don’t want to write about ‘boy-meets-girl-and-everybody’s-happy’. I write about life on the street. I come from the streets. I’m not going to start writing about white middle class people. I’ve always had friends who were drunks, junkies and prostitutes – I’ve always been interested in people of character.¹⁷

He tours the world playing songs about ‘anything that doesn’t involve beautiful blonde girls and boys running at the meadow’—dystopian songs that explore metropolitan life-worlds from the standpoint of the sinful and hedonist misfits within.¹⁸ From their earliest recordings on cassette, *Bouquet of Vegetables* (1989) and *Little Death* (1991), later compiled on the album *Bouquet of Vegetables: The Early Years* (1999), the prolific band has consistently retained its outsider’s edge and treated audiences to an artistic trajectory that offers a continuum of blasphemous projects dealing with all sorts of vices. The outcasts that Jacques croons about are not your usual suspects. In his acerbic poems, we find representations of all that is odious, despicable, and downright unlawful. The demi-monde is a reality Jacques knows well, having spent seven years living above a strip joint in Soho. Among the extensive list of gross offenders and wayward women, there are arsonists, cannibals, paedophiles, necrophiliacs, and rapists in *Cockatoo Prison* (2010); a tall man (‘a giant through and through’) who protects one kid by murdering his three bullies (‘Bully Boys’ from *Shockheaded Peter*); a violent sanguinarian murderer (‘Maria’ from *Bad Blood and Blasphemy*, 1999); a self-destructive demimondaine who dies at the hands of Jack The Ripper (*Lulu: A Murder Ballad*, 2014); an amputee transvestite prostitute (‘Aunty Mabel’ from *Farmyard Filth*, 1997); and an alcoholic double amputee (‘King of the Gutter’ from *Devil’s Fairground*). The recurring theme of post-war life, decadence, and amputation is reminiscent

of Otto Dix's triptych painting *Metropolis* (1927–1928), which depicts a severely stratified Weimar Germany—a degenerate place where crippled veterans, street prostitutes, high-class courtesans, homeless beggars, and the bourgeoisie coexist but never mix. In turn, the purposely contentious subject matter built around an assortment of misfits recalls Randy Newman's cynical outsider songs of the 1970s, whose melodies also draw on blues, jazz, rock, and cabaret. From a song about a predatory stalker that prepares for a sexual assault ('Suzanne') to 'Davy The Fat Boy' (an orphan turned into a sideshow attraction) and the 1977 album *Little Criminals*, which contains a tender ditty about a child murderer ('In Germany Before The War'), we find in Newman's work a similar fondness for caricature and metaphor, as well as a fearless willingness to satirise estranged figures.

The gothic aesthetics abhors restrictions of all kinds and goth or gothically inclined music, as Isabella van Elferen, Justin D. Edwards, and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet remark, comprises lyrics about pain, drugs, rebellion, death, alienation, irony, and anything pertaining to the trespassing of boundaries.¹⁹ The Lillies campify these themes and, in so doing, take them to the extreme. No topics are off limits: 'Killed My Mother' (*Live in Soho*, 2007) is a tale of matricide, rape, vampirism, and dismemberment, while the titles 'Masturbating Jimmy', 'Kick a Baby' (both from *Urine Palace*, 2007), and 'Murder is easy' (*Ad Nauseam*, 1995) are blatantly self-explanatory. Fairy-tale characters are not spared—Cinderella appears as a crack-addicted prostitute in *Sinderella* (2009)—and neither are animals. Zoophilia and bestiality make up the subject matter of *Farmyard Filth*, which contains the infamous lines 'I love a little hamster up my rectum' ('Hamsters') and 'I want to have sex with flies' ('Flies'). There is also a sweet love tune about a sheep named Wellington ('Sheep'). The band returns to this topic in a sister song to 'Sheep', titled 'Behind Baa's' (*Cockatoo Prison*). This time, however, the story moves from 'Sheep's' more platonic desires to actual sheep shagging. If we listen beyond the obscenity, we quickly realise that the song deals with a serious issue: 'I must now be punished for what you call a crime / While you will slit a sheep's throat, eat her with your wine'. Hypocrisy recurs in every Lillies project as one of society's vilest ailments.

Their low, marginal status exempts the group from abiding by normalising and normative discourses about otherness and abjection. The gothic imagination nurtures and feeds off the abject in all its transgressive potential, and the unglamorous abject body that Julia Kristeva describes, with all its unpoetic and tabooed orifices and excrements, is the playground of The Tiger Lillies.²⁰ Lust, death, and the dark alleys where they meet are the themes they cherish the most, and through them the band articulates the close connections between grotesquery and politics, which are at the core of Bakhtin's theories on the carnivalesque. The Bakhtinian carnivalesque recognises an inherently humorous and political quality in the grotesque body, for it is always excessive and challenges restrictive normative boundaries.²¹

Freakery and carnival tropes are the focus of the albums *Circus Songs* (1999) and *Freakshow* (2010), but abjection is not exclusive to these neo-Victorian freaks: it extends to every character that meanders in the prolific imagination of Martyn Jacques. There's the couple of drug addicts in 'Junkie' (*Cockatoo Prison*) who kill their child ('I left it in the cupboard, left it in filth to die'), the 'putrid smell' of corpses in 'Rotten Flesh' (*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 2012), seagulls that feed on 'last night's vomit / while another murder victim in the gutter slowly bleeds' in 'Luis Miller' (*The Sea*, 2003), and old people with their shit-stained sheets in 'Old Gracefully' (*The Brothel to the Cemetery*, 1996). These grotesque bodies are intimately connected to camp and the Gothic in their excessiveness. The trio pairs verbal punk-goth shock tactics with provocative performances that gesture towards Bowiesque campiness, which moves the shows further down the cultural hierarchy. Once described as 'a cross between Krusty The Clown and Dame Edna Everidge', Jacques lends his lyrics and performances certain characteristics that Mark Booth singles out as pivotal in camp-style, such as a 'shameless insincerity', a commitment to the marginal, a pervasive cynicism, and a penchant for caricature.²² In a video for 'Gin' (from *The Gorey End*, 2003), for instance, a song about an alcoholic who perishes from indulgence, a curvaceous woman in a low-cut, leopard-print dress holds a bottle of gin between her breasts and leans forward, time and again, to pour its contents into the glass she is holding. Camp allows for unpretentious mocking and turns the musical numbers into self-parody. The Lillies appropriate camp but taint it with abjection and turn it gothic, thereby subverting the style's typical 'celebration of human nature'.²³

Another recurring theme in the band's work is the very gothic desecration of the sacred. Profanity, one of Bakhtin's carnival elements, is a common device for exploring relationships between individuals and raising timely questions about politics, tradition, and faith. Album after album, there are satirical elements that deliberately parody biblical material, which makes their work highly polemical vis-à-vis the more conservative members of the public. 'Heaven to Hell', from *The Brothel to the Cemetery* (1996), is about a man who, although in heaven, is 'as unhappy as hell'. It describes God's tinsel heavens as a sanctimonious place infected by classism ('The angels look down their noses / Because I'm from a different class') and ruled by a dictator ('And God, he's a miserable bastard / He's always making up rules'). 'Piss on your grave' (*Two Penny Opera*, 2001) describes biblical mass murder and grave desecration, whereas in 'Save Our Souls', 'The Vatican's a brothel, its chief pimp the Pope' (*Here I am Human*, 2010). Before a show at a church in Islington, scheduled for Good Friday, the Lillies issued the following press release: 'What better day could there be to hear songs such as 'Banging in the Nails', 'Jesus', and 'Hell' and what more appropriate place for such a performance. So grab your crown of thorns, polish your nails and head down to Union Chapel for a night of bizarre and blasphemous balladry'. It was not long before the show was

cancelled. This anecdote attests to the band's unwillingness to sugar-coat or compromise their work for profit or public approval. This defiant attitude is best illustrated in 'Banging in the Nails' (*The Brothel to The Cemetery*), the one song that has attracted the most negative attention so far:

I'm crucifying Jesus, banging in the nails,
And I am so happy, because old Jesus failed.
I'm crucifying Jesus, nail him to the cross.
The poor old bastard bleeds to death and I don't give a toss. I'm bang, bang, bang,
bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, banging in the nails.
[...]
I'm crucifying Jesus, in my piss he bathes.
I think I am a pervert, I think I am depraved
I'm crucifying Jesus, beat him to a pulp,
I stick my organ in his mouth and on it he must gulp.

After hearing 'Banging in the Nails', Edward Gorey sent a large box of his unpublished stories to the Lillies, who set some of them to music for what would become *The Gorey End*.²⁴ This boisterous composition about crucifying Jesus provides hilarious moments of controversial religious satire which somewhat recall the sing-along crucifixion in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, 1979), although in terms of thematic irreverence, it is perhaps closer to *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (dir. Peter Orton, 2005). The trio is unafraid of ethical, moral, or ideological reprobation and champions the demented merriment of debauchery by refusing to sanitise their language.

The disenchanting songs Jacques croons or belts out could be best described as satirical and serialised sketches of life, in the tradition of the great French chansonniers, such as Aznavour, Brel, or Barbara. They depict everyday urban life within the framework of capitalist globalisation, dealing with how the less powerful relate to those who have power and how the oppressed relate to the ruling class. These perverse tales, delivered with humorous and theatrical performances, offer extreme narratives of life at its lowest points, in effect unglamorising the hidden or unseen elements of contemporary societies. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Cold Night in Soho* (2017), an album in which some of the social problems that surface in the trio's vast repertoire receive some of their most provocative and poignant articulations. It draws inspiration from the years Jacques spent in 1980s Soho and it was the band's first album in a decade not connected to a theatre show.²⁵ My reasoning for singling it out concerns three particular aspects: its autobiographical tone and its thematic and aural consistency. The soundscape of *Cold Night* is clearly distinct from their previous collection of Soho songs (*Low Life Lullabies*, 1998). Overall, the tone is less mordacious than usual; it

is not as morose as the tear-stained chords of *A Dream Turns Sour*, but the singer-narrator's voice comes through as less detached from the reality it describes. There is a feeling that we are listening in on a private conversation, a mournful goodbye to days long gone.

Soho's history lends itself particularly well to the deranged imagination of the Lillies. A well-known entertainment district since the latter decades of the 1700s, Soho garnered a reputation for international cuisine and fashionable artisanry and shopping. It became the epicentre of London's bohemian life, its winding streets teeming with masquerade balls, exhibition centres, concert halls, gambling, and high-class demimondaines. The nineteenth century, however, brought along a different type of reputation. From the mid-1800s through to the start of the First World War, the district became increasingly more proletarian and cosmopolitan, as well as a refuge for anarchists and political dissidents.²⁶ Between 1816 and 1825, the upper classes, eager to contain the economically declining and morally disreputable area, designed Regent Street, which architecturally demarcated the Mayfair highbrows from Soho's working-class lowbrows, a separation that Jacques and his bandmates unfailingly make evident.²⁷ This boundary did not deter people from enjoying the multicultural pleasures of Soho, a meeting point—albeit a sometimes turbulent one—between the 'rich and poor, unschooled émigrés and Bloomsbury literati, moral purity campaigners and libertarian anarchists, undercover police and dance hostesses, fascists and anti-fascists, queers and heterosexuals, Italians, Jews, Greeks, Americans, Germans, Swiss, black GIs, and white Britons', as Judith R. Walkowitz observes.²⁸ The cholera outbreak of 1854, which left at least 600 Victorian Sohoites dead, and the widespread poverty that ensued lowered the social status of the area further.

In the twentieth century, cheap eateries, drinking clubs, and lodging houses multiplied, while variety theatres, dance halls, and the sex industry faced accusations of indecency that led to regular police investigations and raids.²⁹ During the 1960s and 1970s, Soho pioneered 'lunchtime' theatre, while at night its clubs catered to post-war British youth culture, which included Punks and the New Romantics. With new state regulations in the 1970s and 1980s rent prices spiked, pushing local businesses out and causing a surge in homelessness. It was in this abandoned and diseased Soho of the 1980s that Jacques lived, befriending its erratic denizens. 'Soho – magic syllables!', wrote Thomas Burke in 1915. 'For when the respectable Londoner wants to feel devilish he goes to Soho, where every street is a song'.³⁰ A wicked song, no doubt. Jacques documents these devilish feelings in aural tableaux that recount the history of Soho through the unfortunate stories of its dwellers. From the 1980s, the Miscellaneous Provisions Act and the progressive gentrification of Soho forced many establishments, especially unlicensed sex shops and adult entertainment businesses, to close down and the last infamous bastions of bohemia, Madame Jojo's and the 12 Bar Club, saw their licences revoked in 2014 and 2015, respectively.³¹ Already in 1915, Burke had

warned that a fake Bohemianism would ‘spoil Soho’ and lamented the invasion of the district by ‘the girl-clerk and the book-keeper’.³² The concerted clean-up of its trademark sleazy image dictated the disappearance of old Soho in the twenty-first century.

In *Cold Night*, the musical mastery of the Lillies creates highly visual and textured compositions that illustrate the rich history of Soho’s lowlife: the hedonistic existence; the dividing line between high and low; the prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts who lurked in its alleyways; and, above all, the permanent struggle for economic and biological survival. The wannabe celebrity in ‘Heroin’, who Jacques taunts with destructive advice—‘If you want to win / Take heroin’—reappears, in a way, in ‘Screwed Blues’, in the shape of a tramp who is ‘going for the OD’ because he has ‘had enough of this pain’. The powerlessness to overcome Soho’s vicious circle of failure, misery, violence, and death is the album’s thematic thread. Since there is no stopping the ‘Ticking of the Hours’, chronic drunkenness provides a way out (‘Let’s Drink’). ‘Soho Clipper Blues’, in turn, conjures up images of bleak London streets, where ladies of dubious virtue meet with men of contemptible morals and are mercilessly punished for their indiscretions. Soho is styled as a space of waste, victimisation, and deviance. In this disillusioned world, ‘I wouldn’t know’ constitutes the only answer for a series of questions—How do we save the very poor, the pushers, thieves, whores, the starving? How do we stop the violence, the hate, the wars, disease, and famine?—in the album’s eponymous song.

From the opening track, the Lillies take a heavily critical stance towards the passivity of political (and metaphysical) authorities, warning us that God’s corrupt ‘Salvation Army’ cannot rescue such sinful souls and thus parades through Soho merely to highlight that its people are far beyond redemption. The plaintive piano and backing vocals set the haunting backdrop for ‘The First Day’, which confirms God’s abandonment of humankind. Since neither man nor divinity can save the Sohoites, any attempt to avoid spiralling into oblivion is futile. ‘Go’ exposes the harsh arbitrariness of daily life, recounting how—at any time and at any age—death is always at your doorstep. The song harks back to the band’s ‘Crack of Doom’ (*Bad Blood and Blasphemy*), which adverts: ‘so your life’s been a success / And you have pleasure in excess / Don’t worry it will all end soon / The crack of doom is coming soon’. The satirical grotesque here forces us to face up to the abyss of ultimate meaninglessness that besets our gritty existence. The eerie sounds in ‘Just Another Day’ and ‘In the Winter’, two painstakingly melancholy meditations on (the end of) human existence, reflect the passing of the seasons and the ‘icy death’ that winter brings. The lyrics describe a sense of uneasiness and world-weariness that shows how decadent and imprisoning reality is. The title track, ‘Cold Night in Soho’, is a sorrowful introspection that captures, in just over nine minutes, the slow death of the district through the story of an abused streetwalker, an old friend of Jacques’s who was murdered by her punter. Backed by Stout’s bass and haunting

bowed saw, the expressive vocal nuances and dramatic rendition build in intensity until the music drops to a low, ominous tone and Jacques at last utters the prostitute's name—'Tiger Lilly'.

The rapidity with which the modern city's structures and surfaces mutate often challenges our capacity to grasp and communicate ongoing histories. Jacques makes us pause and look. His propensity to concentrate almost entirely on Dickensian characters or the type of decadent gutter dandies that populate the works of William Burroughs taps into representations of a doomed social idealism. It also calques upon fears regarding the other and their incorporation into commodity culture. The notion of 'contamination', so central to the Gothic, is key to understanding the generalised and deep-seated idea that difference is to be feared and combated, whether it be through forced evictions, imprisonment, abuse, or negligence. The other embodies a different form of cultural capital that is at odds with more traditional bourgeois values. We can trace the pervasive allure of otherness, specifically where it melds with crime, monstrosity, and disfigurement, to Victorian society's fascination with voyeuristic pastimes, such as circuses, dime museums, freak shows, and penny dreadfuls. The appeal of otherness, in its manifold iterations (religious, sexual, physiognomic, psychological, or ethnic), has carried over from Victorian low entertainment into the twenty-first century's hyper-mediatised culture. The other's necessary non-conformity to a dominant culture's standardised codes of behaviour or propriety has become a noteworthy feature of our post-millennial culture. The guilty indulgences of the Victorians have turned into generalised discourses that make up our social fabric. What were then parlour topics, whispered words, and naughty nights out in Soho, now reverberate through an endless multiplicity of tabloid stories, gossip columns, reality TV shows, slogan t-shirts, and online posts.

Promoting the dialogue of our postmodern world with its subcultural others breeds a new cultural space in which visibility is accorded to specific problems, but in which voyeurism becomes normalised. Social media in particular has helped rekindle humankind's fascination with the eccentric, the monstrous, and the liminal. Hashtag activism and media-driven campaigns that aim to expose a plethora of centuries-old prejudices and discrimination, from gender-based violence to social inequality, religious hatred, and ageism, have taken over our daily lives. These platforms, however, have also helped promote the commodification of the others and aliens within the twenty-first-century cultural mainstream. Channels such as Barcroft TV have intensified voyeurism to an extent that Victorians could have only dreamed of. In so doing, they have created a network of voyeuristic complicity that both condones and incentivises the objectification and fetishisation of difference. This could be regarded as a direct result of our postmodern gothic culture's 'vampiric' logic of commodification, fetishisation, and mass consumption, where,

as Rosi Braidotti claims, monstrous or teratological others acquire the status of cultural icons.³³ In this global capitalist context of supply and demand, where otherness has, much like in Victorian times, become a profitable business, the musical tales of the Lillies prove especially timely and productive. In tailoring neo-Victorianism to their particular interests as performers, the other appears as the site of patriarchal violence, sexploitation, promiscuity, oversexualisation, vices, or societal neglect, revealing important sociopolitical tensions. Historically associated with practices of exploitation and marginalisation, the Lillies inscribe otherness with new cultural and symbolic functions. The anachronistic sentiment of the Soho songs (along with Jacques's falsetto) makes evident an incisive attack on the mass-mediated celebrity culture that consumes and accessorises the other and on the ruling classes which continue to ignore the outsider's voice.

Jacques captures the real-life experience of inhabiting the city's long-evolving and increasingly gentrified structures by mobilising the tropes of decadent capitalism—the scoundrels, the losers, the whores, and the maniacal killers. Aldis Gedutis calls this angle the 'brothel perspective', which he relates to Brecht's radical imagination and the impossibility of utopian thinking.³⁴ Utopian thinking, I argue, is not only impossible in the sordid sanctuary of the Lillies, but the very notion of utopia is ridiculed and destroyed. I contend that the destruction of utopia is effected via the deployment of radical humour. The reliance on dark parody, sarcasm, burlesque, and satire—framed by scatological humour—makes visible and audible a mischievous parade of gothic tropes that shake up conventions as a way to zoom in on the woes and hardships that continue to affect destitute citizens. Braidotti's pertinent question as to how one can 'free difference from the negative charge which it seems to have built into it' has a clear, if problematic, resolution in the work of the Lillies.³⁵ Contemporary societies are unable to cleanse difference of this negative charge through policies or awareness campaigns, so the celebration and appropriation of that negativity—the extreme carnivalisation of difference—paired with a radical humour that blames the audience for complicity seems to be the only way, in a dystopian postmodern world, to eventually free otherness from stigmatisation. The radical humour of the 'brothel perspective' therefore constitutes the definitive antidote and weapon of dark cabaret artists against the hegemonic relations at play in postmodern societies.

The transgressive themes the lyrics express, it should be noted, do not translate into radical discourses meant to trigger revolt and revolution, but serve as corrosive anthems to the underbelly of metropolitan society, where we find both victim and perpetrator. The choice to make the other-as-victim and the other-as-criminal the thematic motifs that underpin their work, the oeuvre of the Lillies gains in shock value for often presenting violence and despair without attempting to side with the victims or directly holding power structures accountable. Overtly, these are not songs of disapprobation or accusation but sound more like objective

observations on a hostile reality. Indeed, the fact that the singer-narrator disempowers abject bodies by mocking their predicament in a way reifies their marginal position. Such a seemingly detached outlook provokes an ambivalent response, which complicates the audience's rapport with the text and its subversive potential. Yet, these unreliable narrators, in the tradition of Randy Newman and Patrick McGrath, should be enough to warrant a closer and more critical analysis of the content of each song. The power of carnivalesque humour lies precisely in its potential to awake the (radical) imagination and realise a Brechtian breaking of ties with acritical representations of reality. The song 'Satan Does You Bless', for instance, from the album *Here I am Human*, inspired by François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–1564), describes a world turned upside down in which 'Charities take money from the very poor / The crowds all boo the player who a goal has scored / The more nervous the moment the less it makes you stressed [...] If someone is disfigured at them you must stare / And in polite society now everybody swears'. The associated show, a collaboration with Prague's Archa Theatre, Czech director Jiří Havelka, and Irish dramatist Jocelyn Clarke, added the topics of plastic surgery and body hair removal to the performance. 'Desolation Song' (*Hamlet*, 2012), in turn, laments the apathy of the rejects vis-à-vis institutionalised powers:

They play on you a marionette
They control you all is set
Pull the strings and watch you dance You really didn't stand a chance.
If you were strong
If you could fight
If you could see
The day from night
If you could make out
White from black
Then they could not you attack.

As theatrical ironists, the Lillies steer clear of facile moralising, but the anti-establishment tone of their works makes us ponder the complexities subtending capitalist market systems, gendered privilege, classism, abuse, and religion.

'Many people have an almost psychotic dislike of the festive season. We thought we'd dedicate a show to that group'. The show Jacques is referring to was called 'Suicide for Christmas'.³⁶ The Tiger Lillies do not cater to mainstream tastes, but instead marshal our centuries-long fascination with the illicit and the taboo. The raw viscerality of Jacques's lyrics is devoid of any strategic (read, commercial) concessions to the societal demands of post-millennial feminism, political correctness, and religious propriety. He proposes an approach

to life in postmodern societies that recognises the integral role of the scandalous and the grotesque in structuring our cultural and political landscape while bringing forth the complex relationship between high, popular, and alternative cultures. Rather than playing the high off against the low, the avant-garde, intermedial, and intertextual harmonies of the Lillies seem to tie a knot between the two realms, encouraging the audience to reassess the dialectical interchanges between them. In so doing, they help us understand the Gothic as part of an evolving language that revises the relationship between high and low formats. In fact, I argue, our understanding of cultural resistance requires a new critical approach to low forms. Sincerity, social engagement, and a shift in retrograde morality paradigms lie somewhere between the dyadic relationships of the subtle and the vulgar, high and low, philosophy and bawdry.

In each new project, the Lillies tackle contentious subject matter with renewed energy and punky humour. Their works revel in impudence and dissect the tropes of abjection in our culture's imagination, in the process paying homage to society's foul aliens. Their subcultural haven of deviance is nevertheless more than a twisted candy shop for transgressive behaviour, concerned with selling ironic re-enactments of degrading fetishism and violence. The world of the Lillies is not black and white; it holds up a selective mirror to society: one that makes visible what we relegate to the shadows and brings us face to face with the people we hurriedly pass by on the street. The songs allow for an exploration of how the Gothic and related genres use satire as a mode of interrogation to offer a radical questioning of complacency and oppression based on differences in physiognomy, gender, age, occupation, or sexual orientation. Their off-putting characters therefore embody universal problems that remain unresolved or unaddressed, their life stories as timely today as they were thirty years ago, when the band first started playing in Soho pubs. Much like the strenuous life conditions of the 'people of character' they portray, the songs of the Lillies offer a rich avenue for scholarly debates about the global city and its unsung dwellers, about precariousness and aesthetics, disabled bodies and abjection.

The songs function as pieces of dissent through camp, spectacle, and comedic mocking. Christian Gutleben points to the unlikely pairing of fun and fear, humour and the Gothic, stating that the 'fearful riddles of life can be exposed lightly and playfully – in particular through intertextual and metatextual games. In other words, [...] [f]un does not cancel fear, it does not even alleviate it. Fun simply strikes a different attitude with greater self-consciousness and self-derision'.³⁷ The radical self-conscious humour the Lillies master and the sheer outrageousness of some of their songs should prevent them from being taken literally, forcing instead the audience to develop their own critical views on the lyrical content. Their work invites self-reflection. The fact that most of their characters are so completely over-the-top hinders pathos (or emotional identification), creating a Brechtian

Verfremdungseffekt or distancing effect. The easy response of hurt puritanical sensibilities is blatantly out of place here. Central to this discussion is the broader issue regarding the place of comedy in contemporary societies. The oeuvre of the Lillies raises key questions about the ethical dimension of dark humour, thus contributing to current debates about the role of the comic and the politically correct. Their in-your-face sardonic humour is radical because it draws attention to the ills of society in a manner unfiltered by distorted ethics or political correctness. Carnavalesque laughter is a political strategy: it is not about avoiding seriousness but about accountability. Derisive humour serves to accuse us, the audience, for laughing and participating in shameless mockery. The performers and the audience are thus faced with the ethical dilemma of continually exploiting disability, deformity, depravity, and decadence, replicating degrading Victorian discourses of ownership and scopophilia.

Our 'politically incorrect' pleasure is often steeped in taboo, prejudice, and gender bias, so shaming it and classifying it as 'incorrect' might ultimately lead to a strengthening of the status quo. Doris Lessing notes that 'The most powerful mental tyranny in what we call the free world is Political Correctness, which is both immediately evident, and to be seen everywhere, and as invisible as a kind of poison gas'.³⁸ The insidious intolerance the politically correct perpetuates is destroying our freedom to create and critique. It is creating an all-encompassing panopticon, where it is no longer those in power that watch, police, and punish, but where everyone shares the role of observer, observee, and executioner. Songs that are deliberately ridiculous should be read as either pure entertainment or as cautionary narratives that, in all their glorious aberrance, lay bare the idiosyncrasies of the world we share. More importantly, in a world where the comic is increasingly policed by both humans and machines, The Tiger Lillies show us that unbridled freedom to expose and critique is alive and well. They show us that the agendas of political correctness which are redefining morality often devolve into prejudice and propagate mechanisms of (self-)censorship. Our chance for redemption and for answering the plight of minorities lies in the underground lairs of defilement that are unafraid to challenge generalised hypocrisy.

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