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Getting-into. Queerness at Work in Early Pet Shop Boys

Abstract: Especially in the early phase of their work, the Pet Shop Boys often address queer aspects only casually, hidden and on the sidelines. This supposed renunciation of an offensive, direct political statement, however, goes hand in hand with discrete hermeneutics through which queer topics are marked as an “excentric center.” This essay brings together numerous references of queerness at work in the work – especially from their early years (1984 to 1990).

Keywords: Queerness, pop music, Pet Shop Boys, masculinity, gender, subversion, close reading, deconstruction, mainstream, sexuality

I'm just a failed flaneur / Looking for a gadabout / But where that life is lived / I have
yet to figure out /
There's no one to tell me / No one to catch my eye / Living in slow motion / It's a
long goodbye /
I'm looking for someone / To help me get into here
In Slow Motion (2017)

At the beginning of their career in the mid-1980s, the Pet Shop Boys were seldomly regarded as a decidedly queer (or simply a gay) band, especially outside the UK. It is only since the early 1990s – the songs *Being Boring* and *Go West* play a crucial role here – that queer perspectives of the band's work have received more attention. But where are traces of queerness to be found in the early years and how do these traces address their discussion of queerness? The following text focuses on these questions. The video for the single *Domino Dancing* marks an interesting turning and starting point, so I will begin with a close reading of this song.

After the Pet Shop Boys had reached the No. 1 spot in the British charts with their two previous singles *Always on My Mind* and *Heart*, they released *Domino Dancing* in September 1988 as a teaser for their third album *Introspective* with high expectations of a corresponding chart position. Judging by the previous releases, however, their hopes were disappointed.

1 Practical Introduction. *Domino Dancing*: Everything Is as It Seems

In the music video for *Domino Dancing*, directed by Eric Watson, two young men compete for the favor of a young woman. However, since the woman does not want to choose either the one or the other suitor, a quarrel ensues between the men. It is instructive to watch the Extended Version of the video based on the *Disco Mix* of the song. Although the plot of this version, which is three and a half minutes longer, is ultimately identical to the 7-inch version, the queer shift that occurs on the narrative and visual level is exemplified musically through a passage that only occurs in the *Disco Mix*: About two-thirds of the way through the running time, we hear a 26-second drum break that references, in an astonishing way, a passage of nearly the same length from the 2013 song *Love Is a Bourgeois Construct*, which musicologist Stan Hawkins once called “the 24 seconds of queering the bourgeoisie.”¹ In the latter song, there is a striking break “where the word bourgeoisie is released and looped, phased, flanged and technologically ‘screwed up,’”² which idiosyncratically points to the rejection of a bourgeois understanding of love in order to quite literally and, indeed, musically perform a queer conception of relationship.³ Similarly, in the video for *Domino Dancing* nothing (or everything, depending on how you look at it) is as it seemed after the break. From then on, the two men are no longer in interaction with the young woman but instead perform – at least during the last two minutes of the video – a lustful brawl on the beach with bare upper bodies: On the surface, it is about the favor of the desired woman, but the bodies of the men are staged in such a way that a queer reading is almost mandatory and we are thus actually witnessing a homosexual love scene.⁴

There are other, more hidden references to the character of the relationship being negotiated here (for example, one of the young men and the young woman are reflected in the sunglasses of keyboardist Chris Lowe at the beginning of the video, while at the end we watch the beach scene with the two men in those same glasses). But this did not stop Neil Tennant, the band’s singer, from making an astonishing statement about the content of the video. In the 2006 documentary *A LIFE IN POP* he remarks:

1 Stan Hawkins: *A Very Queer Construct. The Pet Shop Boys in Retrospect*. Unpublished lecture at the conference *Pet Shop Boys Symposium*. Edinburgh (24 March 2016).

2 Stan Hawkins: *Queerness in Pop Music. Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*. New York, NY 2016, 38.

3 This paper is based on a lecture that consisted mainly of a detailed analysis of *Love Is a Bourgeois Construct* and traced a queer reading of the song by playing it from beginning to end. Since this is not possible in the context of a written text, I focus here more extensively on the examples only briefly touched upon in the lecture.

4 The two young men are taken away by the police at the end of the video. For what reason? Because of the scuffle? Or because of something else?

People say, “The video for *Domino Dancing* is very homoerotic.” Well, yeah, I guess, you can look at two guys fighting and think it’s homoerotic. It wasn’t the intention. The script is simply following the story of the song. The boy’s in love with the girl, but she’s going off with someone else. That’s it. That’s what the video is.⁵ Eric, obviously, had the idea that the two boys would romp in the sea. They’re actually fighting each other. But that imagery is then translated through the modern filter of sort of Calvin Klein ads and things to be homoerotic. I don’t believe the intention behind it was to be homoerotic. But I know no one will ever believe I would say that.⁶

Starting with this example, Tennant then speaks more generally about the queer view on their music, which he does not want to embrace entirely:

Chris and I have a strange naivety [. . .] in that we do things and don’t necessarily think them through that much. [. . .] But people, if they know you’re gay, they will see everything through a gay prism. And I don’t think, I or we look at things through a gay prism. I don’t honestly think we do.⁷

2 Theoretical Introduction. An Invitation to “Get into”: Addressing Queerness on the Side

Thus, the following is certainly not about proving an *intentional* omnipresence of queer topics in the work of the Pet Shop Boys. At the same time, we should not believe the creators unconditionally and underestimate the fact that beyond their status as LGBTIQ* musicians, which manifests itself in the general public primarily through the sexual orientation of the singer, queer topics play a prominent role.⁸ In particular, I will explore *how* these issues are dealt with and will try to understand the fact that they achieved their pop-superstar status as part of a staging that transcends music and text and performs a specifically queer form of masculinity. I focus on the band’s early work from 1984 until the release of the song *Being Boring* (1990), which “became, for many, a song of a lifetime, and for a generation of LGBT people an essential and

⁵ However, it should be noted that contrary to Tennant’s statement, the video actually does not end with the image of a heteronormative relationship and thus does not “follow the story of the song”: the woman is alone; the men are taken into police custody.

⁶ PET SHOP BOYS: *A LIFE IN POP*, Directed by George Scott. UK 2006.

⁷ PET SHOP BOYS: *A LIFE IN POP*.

⁸ The sexual orientations of the band members are certainly irrelevant for the considerations outlined here. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that Tennant had his public coming-out in 1994. Lowe has never publicly commented on his sexual orientation, which music critic Wayne Studer comments on reservedly and shrewdly: “[I]f Chris is indeed heterosexual, he’s certainly done a magnificent job of hiding it all this time.” (Wayne Studer: *Don’t you know that the Pet Shop Boys aren’t really gay? Commentary. Interpretation and Analysis of Every Song by Pet Shop Boys*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/extras/faq/notgay.htm> [last accessed 23 May 2022]).

early monument to a senseless tragedy.”⁹ During this period, the Pet Shop Boys were most successful for a mainstream audience although they abandoned spectacular stage shows and live concerts for most of the time and in television appearances usually stood motionless on stage. This is all the more astonishing when you consider their exhibited grumpiness – the iconic cover of the album *Actually* (1987) immediately comes to mind – the perception of Tennant’s voice as distant, deadpan, even cold, and their age, which is almost suspicious to a teenager audience. Hawkins writes: “All in all, the surplus value of their signature is found in a collision of meaning that contravenes norms as they depoliticize identity categories with great panache.”¹⁰ While Hawkins’ study deals with queerness within a discourse-analytic framework and theories of opacity and temporality, treating the Pet Shop Boys as merely one of many dozens of artists and with songs from only one creative period, I am concerned with a more detailed queer close reading of their early work.

The fact that queer topics have been at stake from the beginning but are nevertheless only visible at the margins and with a certain (unexcited) casualness demonstrates in the theoretical horizon of the essay just how significant the treatment of queerness is for the overall work of the band. Queerness appears in the Pet Shop Boys as an “excentric center.”¹¹ It is not the focus of the work but (especially in their early phase) is mostly incidental and peripheral. At the same time, however, it inscribes a queer shift in the work that cannot be overlooked. So instead of directly addressing and exploiting queerness as a subject and thus adopting a one-dimensional perspective, the Pet Shop Boys allow it to enter it into their work subcutaneously and, thus, to slowly unfold its effectiveness. They enable the audience familiar with queer themes to recognize and classify it as such. However, this discreet coming-out may at the same time for an uninitiated audience serve as an invitation to a getting-into to engage with queer issues.¹²

9 Fergal Kinney: Time Would Come To An End. Pet Shop Boys’ Behaviour at 30. *The Quietus* (26 October 2020). <https://thequietus.com/articles/29089-pet-shop-boys-behaviour-review-anniversary> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

10 Hawkins: *Queerness*, 37.

11 Jacques Derrida: *Memoires for Paul de Man* [1986], trans. by Cecile Lindsay / Jonathan Culler / Eduardo Cadava / Peggy Kamuf. New York 1986, 73.

12 Of course, the fact that queer traces are the focus of this essay does not mean that the work lacks other topics and readings. Regarding this point German music journalist Jan-Niklas Jäger states: The music of the Pet Shop Boys “takes world- and socio-political events into account, portrays the people affected by them, knows about the history of ideas and the most diverse discourses, deals with identity and sexuality, comments on (mass- as well as sub-) cultural developments [. . .]. The amazing thing is that this complex image is transported in an art form whose quality is defined to a significant extent by simplicity.” (Jan-Niklas Jäger: *Factually. Pet Shop Boys in Theorie und Praxis*. Mainz 2019, 14 [Own translation, D.B.].) An examination of queer aspects of the band in the context of his own biography is provided by Kristof Magnusson: *Pet Shop Boys. Kristof Magnusson über die Pet Shop Boys, queere Vorbilder und musikalischen Mainstream*. Cologne 2021.

In this essay, I deal in more detail with that period of the Pet Shop Boys' career, going on now for more than forty years, which Tennant once described as their "imperial phase," "when they can seemingly do no wrong, when everything they release proves hugely successful and is widely accepted by the public."¹³ It may well have significance for the topic of this essay that he conflates the end of that phase with the song *Domino Dancing*:

I remember driving back from my house in Rye and listening on the radio when it entered the charts at number nine and I thought, "That's that, then – it's all over." I knew then that our imperial phase of number one hits was over.¹⁴

3 1984 to 1986. Queerness, *Please*

West End Girls, released in 1984 as the band's first track and again a year later in a drastically altered version re-produced by Stephen Hague as its fourth single that would make them famous worldwide, is already full of queer traces. The paratactic association of the band's name Pet Shop Boys with the song title *West End Girls*, the fact that the B side of the first *West End Girls* release is a largely instrumental song called *Pet Shop Boys*, and also that the band was originally to be called West End may be just the obvious clues to an ongoing, production- and distribution-related oscillation between male and female, between "boys" and "girls," which continues to materialize vocally, especially in the album version, in the breathy evocations of the "West End girls" and the "East End boys" during the long fadeout. *West End Girls* is a song about social and sexual tensions in mid-1980s London; the West End, particularly Soho, was a district with numerous sex stores at the time and remains an LGBTIQ* center to this day. Numerous lines of the lyrics suggest ambisexual (exchange) acts: "Too many shadows, whispering voices / Faces on posters, too many choices [. . .] Which do you choose / A hard or soft option? / (How much do you need?)" The protagonists have "got no future / We've got no past" and are on their way, "Running down underground / To a dive bar in a West End town," a not-at-all-coincidental allusion to The Dive Bar in Gerrard Street, which actually existed at the time¹⁵ – one of those places of a gay bar scene that they were to sing about in the 1993 track *To Speak is a Sin* shortly before it largely disappeared.

Released after the success of *West End Girls*, the single *Love Comes Quickly* (1986) is a straightforward love song but its initially banal-seeming lyrics take on a much

¹³ Studer: Terms and phrases coined by the Pet Shop Boys that have been adopted by writers. *Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/lists/coined.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

¹⁴ Pet Shop Boys with Chris Heath. *Introspective. Further Listening 1988–1989 (Sleeve Notes)* [2001]. EMI Parlophone 2018.

¹⁵ Pet Shop Boys: *Annually 2018*. London 2018, 22–23.

more yearning undertone when we read them in light of anti-homosexual legislation and a societal mood that largely associates the advent of AIDS with homosexuals:

You can live your life lonely / Heavy as stone / [. . .] Say this is all you want / But I don't believe that it's true / 'Cause when you least expect it / Waiting round the corner for you / [. . .] Taste forbidden pleasures / Whatever you want / [. . .] 'Cause just when you least expect it / Just what you least expect

– as well as the oft-repeated ambiguous line “You can't stop falling.” This reading of *Love Comes Quickly* is underlined by the record cover: It shows only the head of Chris Lowe, who wears a baseball cap from the London fashion company *Boy* with just this inscription. Lowe's eyes are covered by the visor of the cap and are shaded, which allows a remarkable reference back to the lines “Too many shadows, whispering voices / Faces on posters, too many choices” from *West End Girls*.

To read the cover of the first studio album *Please* (1986) as *not* being queer also seems rather absurd. In our context, however, it is more revealing that the image showing the musicians with towels draped over their shoulders, as well as the title of the album and the band name, appear only very tiny in the middle of a huge white space. We can read this design, unusual for the debut album of a pop band, rather as a concealment of the image's clearly homoerotic aesthetics – a concealment, however, that was made visible (involuntarily?) not only by EMI Parlophone's German distribution: Since they obviously didn't trust the original artwork by designer Mark Farrow, who realizes almost all of the band's record sleeves to this day,¹⁶ they inflated the image of the two men with towels to record size.

Five of the ten full-fledged songs on *Please* are open to queer readings.¹⁷ Besides the aforementioned singles, this is the case with the opening song *Two Divided By Zero*, albeit in a more conceptual way: The album follows a loose storyline, at the beginning of which two people set out on a path that brings them together as a couple at the end. The fact that the two call themselves two divided by zero at the beginning implies, on the one hand, of course, their universal bond and the potential infinity of their relationship (in the end, the mathematical operation $2 \div 0$ is not defined, does not result in a quantifiable value, and is thus infinite in a figurative sense). Beyond that, however, the zero of the title (precisely because it is recited by the machine voice of a pocket calculator) may also refer to the radical, anonymous, and all-encompassing totality of the threat to the (in this reading non-heterosexual) couple's relationship – by a society that forces those two to leave: “I think they heard a rumour / (Divided by, divided by) / Or someone tipped them off / (Divided by, divided by) / It's better to go sooner / (Divided

¹⁶ Cf. Hoare/Heath: *Pet Shop Boys*, 42–43.

¹⁷ Furthermore, *Violence* partly deals with binary gender models. In addition, the songs *Tonight Is Forever* and *Why Don't We Live Together?* also deal with gender-ambiguous relationships and even make this a topic themselves: “The woman in me shouts out / The man in me just smiles.”

by, divided by) / Than call it all off.” That one of the two left a farewell letter that “explained everything” may further support this reading.

While *I Want a Lover* blatantly and hedonistically promotes quick sex adventures (“This is us doing gay disco [. . .]. [I]t was totally a pre-Aids song”), Tennant’s observations about the reception of the ballad *Later Tonight* are highly revealing here: “This is the most gay song we’ve ever written, and no one noticed at the time.”¹⁸ In addition to the refrain that is repeated three times, *Later Tonight* contains only the following verse:

That boy never cast a look in your direction / Never tried to hook for your affection / Dresses like the mod of your invention, tall and proud / He is the head boy of a school of thought / That plays in your intentions, night and day.

It does not make sense to equate the gender of the singer with the gender perspective of the narrator, but in this case, as with the record cover, it is more than obvious to assume a homosexual, in this case impossible, denied, and secret desire in *Later Tonight*.

One of the 7-inch B sides from that period contains the first of countless literary references in the Pet Shop Boys’ oeuvre.¹⁹ Also released in 1986, *Jack the Lad*, a song about empowerment, includes the lines “To feast with panthers every night / You must be careful, Jack,” referencing Oscar Wilde’s remark about his dinners with both politicians and male prostitutes: “It was like feasting with panthers; the danger was half the excitement.”²⁰ The importance of Oscar Wilde for the LGBTIQ* movement and its relationship to mainstream society, especially in the UK, was immense.²¹ Additionally, *Jack the Lad* explicitly features Officer Thomas Edward Lawrence and Double Agent Harold Adrian Russell “Kim” Philby, who were presumably gay, and thus illustrates furthermore the specifically queer orientation that the issue of empowerment takes here.

4 1987–1989. Introspective Queerness, Actually!

“LGBT people [. . .] dominated the disco era.”²² As is well known, the end of the heyday of disco as an independent music genre in the early 1980s also had to do with

¹⁸ Pet Shop Boys with Chris Heath: *Please. Further Listening 1984–1986 (Sleeve Notes)* [2001]. EMI Parlophone 2018.

¹⁹ Studer: PSB songs with literary references. *Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/lists/literary.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

²⁰ Oscar Wilde: *De Profundis* [1913]. In: id.: *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Vol. 2: *De Profundis*. “*Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*,” ed. by Ian Small. Oxford 2005, 130. The positive reference to Oscar Wilde becomes even clearer some years later in the lyrics and video for *DJ Culture* (1991).

²¹ Didier Eribon: *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. by Michael Lucey. Durham 2004, 141–244.

²² Darryl W. Bullock: *David Bowie Made Me Gay. 100 Years of LGBT Music*. London 2017, 3. See also 205–225.

anti-queer sentiments. That the Pet Shop Boys titled their first remix album *Disco*, released in late 1986, was at least regarding to the mainstream market, an unusual move. According to Hawkins, the explicit reference to disco not only provides a link to their “queer utopianism” but also points to the moment of critical and crisis-like masculinity addressed here and pervading the entire work:

The kind of practices adopted within disco culture involved a queer utopianism, and the Pet Shop Boys’ style has turned to this pleasure principle with gender modifications. Tennant’s flamboyant singing style and Lowe’s low-key presence as keyboardist on stage vividly depicted a unique class of male-ness. The experiences of young white men in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s are framed by discourses on “masculinity in crisis”, something the Pet Shop Boys’ narratives address. By promoting aspects of queerness, they contributed to new trends in male expression.²³

One of the classic disco songs is undoubtedly Gloria Gaynor’s *I Will Survive* (1978), a worldwide anthem of the LGBTIQ* movement like no other. The Pet Shop Boys included *I Will Survive* in their program during three concert series: in 1994, as part of the *DiscoVery* tour limited to Australia, North and South America; in 1997, at the *Somewhere* shows at the Savoy Theatre; and finally, on the *Nightlife* world tour (1999/2000), later released on DVD under the title *MONTAGE*. In all these cases, *I Will Survive* functions as a brief opening and/or closing of a medley with another song they first presented in June 1987: *It’s a Sin*.

Mainstream audiences in particular had mostly missed that behind the bombastic musical façade of one of the band’s biggest hits, indeed of the 1980s in general, is the deeply sad story of a young man who, because of his homosexuality, fails with regard to the demands of the (Catholic) Church and his own life. In some respects *It’s a Sin* is the negative mirror to *I Will Survive*: While in the latter song the survival, the victory over the circumstances is at its center, the Pet Shop Boys song ends clearly more downbeat with the lines of the confession of guilt “Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa” performed in Latin, an “Amen” performed by a choir, and a machine-voiced “Zero” (compare the reference to *Two Divided By Zero*). The narrator’s entire existence is overshadowed by “Everything I’ve ever done / Everything I ever do / Every place I’ve ever been / Everywhere I’m going to / It’s a sin” and holds no redemption even in retrospect: “So I look back upon my life / Forever with a sense of shame / I’ve always been the one to blame.” The burning of the singer at the stake in the video for *It’s a Sin* may be an overly drastic representation of the topic – what is more decisive, however, is that the director of the video is British filmmaker and artist Derek Jarman, who had made a name for himself as an LGBTIQ* rights activist and whose films, especially *CARAVAGGIO* (1986), released shortly before *It’s a Sin*, clearly had homosexual issues as their content. Thus, in *It’s a Sin* at the latest, a mosaic of different levels of meaning, production, distribution, and reception is assembled that does not directly name queerness

23 Hawkins: *Queerness*, 42.

per se but circles it so closely that it confronts even the uninformed recipient with an artistic web, with traces of non-heteronormative points of view.²⁴

In this context, it may also be interesting to know which artists the Pet Shop Boys collaborated with in the early years of their career, when they were often still perceived as an unambitious, typical 1980s pop phenomenon: In addition to Jarman, who was later also responsible for the video for *Rent* (1987) and parts of the set design for the *MCMLXXXIX* tour (1989), these include, for example, producer Bobby “O” Orlando, music manager Tom Watkins, singers Dusty Springfield and Liza Minnelli, and DJs and producers François Kevorkian and Frankie Knuckles, all of whom have close ties to the LGBTIQ* community or at least a high standing among queer recipients.²⁵

In addition to *It's a Sin* and the collaboration with Dusty Springfield on *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* which, admittedly, deals with a clearly heterosexual subject on the textual level, there are further songs that can be read as queer on the second studio album *Actually* (1987). The songs the lovesick protagonist listens to in *I Want to Wake Up* clearly identify their desire as homosexual: “I stood at the kitchen sink, my radio played / Songs like ‘Tainted Love’ and ‘Love Is Strange’ / As I listened and the words hit my ears / I cried sudden tears.” They are joined not only by the largely unknown track *Hit Music*, but also by *Rent*, released as a single in October, the fan-favorite and critically acclaimed *King's Cross*, and *It Couldn't Happen Here*, which gave the title to their 1988 feature film. While *Rent* (also largely unnoticed at the time of its release) deals with male prostitution, the other three tracks take up the AIDS pandemic and address the deaths caused by the HIV virus and its effects on social cohesion, especially in *King's Cross*, even in an intersectional perspective.²⁶

Always on My Mind, released as a single at the end of the year, also contains a shift that may be typical because it happens incidentally, but offers a queer reading in the Pet Shop Boys version. The song, made famous by Brenda Lee (1972), Elvis Presley (1972) and Willie Nelson (1982), is the Pet Shop Boys' first ever cover version. “In the early version by Brenda Lee, she sang ‘Boy, I'm sorry I was blind,’ and when Elvis Presley and Willie Nelson covered the song, they sang ‘Girl, I'm sorry I was blind.’ All three of these cases are indisputably heterosexual.”²⁷ In contrast, the corresponding lyrics in the Pet Shop Boys version, analogous to the original but lesser known version by Gwen McCrea (1972), simply read: “I'm so sorry I was blind.”

24 After the 2021 broadcast of the Channel 4 series *It's A Sin* about young gay men in 1980s London, perceptions of the Pet Shop Boys song have admittedly changed.

25 These are only names from up until 1989. The list could be completed to include countless people: David Bowie, Elton John, Lady Gaga, Madonna, Kylie Minogue, Wolfgang Tillmans, Rufus Wainwright, Bruce Weber, Years & Years, to name just a few of the better known.

26 Studer: Songs by PSB that were inspired by AIDS. *Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/lists/aids.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

27 Studer: *Always on My Mind / In My House*. *Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/introspective/mind.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

For more than twenty years, American music critic Wayne Studer has been running the extensive website “Commentary,” where he presents analyses of every single song by the Pet Shop Boys. He cannot go into detail about every aspect of the songs (and does not deal specifically with queerness) but provides countless, often overlooked minutiae, and his website has become a comprehensive encyclopedia, a kind of handbook on the band’s work. In reference to *Always on My Mind*, he interprets the aforementioned passage as “an instance of altering gender-specific language in order not to identify the gender of the person being addressed [. . .], thereby avoiding any specific suggestion of the sexual orientation of the singer”,²⁸ more precisely the narrator. It’s just a nice side story that *Always on My Mind* held the traditionally most important Christmas number one spot in Great Britain and denied this place to *Fairytale in New York* by The Pogues feat. Kirsty MacColl, which is repeatedly criticized because of its partly homophobic lyrics.²⁹

Domino Dancing is not only open for queer readings through its video, but on the textual level it contains the recurring lines “Watch them all fall down,” which can be read as a discussion on AIDS.³⁰ *I’m not Scared*, which immediately follows on the third album *Introspective* (1988), contains numerous lines that address the difficulties of openly queer lives: “What have you got to fight? / What do you need to prove? / You’re always telling lies / And that’s the only truth / [. . .] What have you got to hide? / Who will it compromise? / Where do we have to be / So I can laugh and you’ll be free.” Sometimes, it takes Tennant’s voice to read such lines queerly – *I’m not Scared* had initially been given by the Pet Shop Boys to the band Eighth Wonder and their singer Patsy Kensit, who were the first to release the song – which is also firmly demonstrated by the track *In Private*, which the band wrote for Dusty Springfield, who released it as a single in 1989. The lines

Take your time and tell me / Why you lied / I realise that we’ve been found out / This time / We should stand together if we can / But what you’ve planned / Means there’s a difference between / What you’re gonna say in private / You still want my love / We’re in this together / And what you’re gonna do in public / Say you were never in love / That you can remember / [. . .] And what you gonna say / When you run back to your wife / I guess that’s just the story of my life

unfold a more overtly queer scenario in the song’s 2006 duet released by the Pet Shop Boys together with Elton John. Not so incidentally, a little later in *It Must Be Obvious* (1990) the Pet Shop Boys tell of a friendship whose queer expression can only be kept secret from the environment (and in the plot of the song even from one of the two

²⁸ Studer: *Always on My Mind / In My House*.

²⁹ Patrick Strudwick / Luke Turner / Alex Hood: Should the BBC have censored Fairytale of New York? *The Guardian* (19 November 2020). <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/nov/19/should-the-bbc-have-censored-fairytale-of-new-york> (last accessed 23 May 2020).

³⁰ The instrumentation of the original version obscures the depressing and sad quality of the song, which comes out more clearly in the *Alternative Mix* released with the 12-inch record.

people) with difficulty. The refrain “Everyone knows when they look at us / Of course they do it must be obvious” is also a thinly veiled self-reference.

The last point of the “imperial phase” is certainly marked by the album *Introspective*, whose last single release in 1989 was the Sterling Void cover *It's Alright*. One of its bonus tracks, in turn, is not entirely coincidentally the last song released before the striking break that will occur in the Pet Shop Boys' career in 1990. The sparsely orchestrated short track *Your Funny Uncle* is somewhat reminiscent of the earlier ballad *Later Tonight* and autobiographically recounts the funeral of the singer's very good friend, who died of AIDS.

5 1990 and Onward. Addressing Queerness

The memory of that friend precisely marks the beginning of a new creative phase, which is also characterized by the much more explicit addressing of queer content in lyrics, music, and performance. The fourth album *Behaviour* (1990) is introduced by a song almost seven minutes long, with which the Pet Shop Boys “gave voice to an entire generation of gay men who to that point and afterward had managed to survive the AIDS epidemic”³¹ – *Being Boring*, “a melancholic review of the past and all the things and close people that got lost along the way,”³² “looks at the biggest of themes – friendship, loss, the passage of time [and] allows people to hear themselves, and to see their lives reflected back at them.”³³ This elegy to a friend, also at issue again in 2019's *An Open Mind* (“When you don't belong there / You don't care what they think / But you know what you want”), is at the start of a series of more explicit queer references:

The sexually charged interpretation and linking of U2 and Frankie Valli in *Where the Streets Have No Name (I Can't Take My Eyes Off You)* (1991), the swan song to a gay utopia *Go West* (1993), the remix of David Bowie's *Hallo Spaceboy* (1996), the coding of bisexuality on the album *Bilingual* (1996),³⁴ the coming-out song *Metamorphosis* (1996), the dialogue performed with Kylie Minogue between a gay father and his daughter in *In Denial* (1999), the Village People pastiche *New York City Boy* (1999), the storyline of the musical *Closer to Heaven* (2001), the Eminem-goes-gay-fantasy *The Night I Fell in Love* (2002), the openly bisexual orientation in the *Possibly More Mix* of

31 Studer: *Being Boring*. *Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/behaviour/boring.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

32 Norman Fleischer: “Behaviour” Turns 30. Reflections On The Legendary Pet Shop Boys Album. *Nothing But Hope And Fashion* (21 October 2020). <https://nbhap.com/sounds/pet-shop-boys-behaviour-anniversary> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

33 Kinney: *Time*.

34 Cf. a literary adaptation Thomas Meinecke: Pet Shop Boys. In: id.: *Feldforschung. Erzählungen*. Frankfurt 2006, 27–45.

Did You See Me Coming? (2009), the depiction of the situation of homosexual men in the early 1960s in *Odd Man Out* (2013), the song-cycle about Alan Turing *A Man from the Future* (2014), the addressing of homophobia disguised as freedom of expression in *Oppressive (The Best Gay Possible)* (2014), the gay and lesbian setting around Berlin's subway line U1 in *Will-o-the-wisp* (2020), and the queer marriage in *Wedding in Berlin* (2020) are indeed only the most obvious traces of queer topics on the textual level. In addition, there are adaptations and quotations of works by LGBTIQ* artists, such as the new soundtrack to Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (2005), the inclusion of a motif from Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* in *All Over the World* (2009), and the paraphrasing of Marcel Proust in *Memory of the Future* (2012). The cover versions of *Girls & Boys* (1994), *If Love Were All* (1994), and *Try It (I'm in Love with a Married Man)* (2003) as well as the videos for *Was It Worth It?* (1992), *Paninaro '95* (1995), *A Red Letter Day* (1997), and *Winner* (2012) would be as worthy of mention here as almost the entire album *Very* (1993).³⁵

A wide variety of queer traces and queer readings culminate, so to speak, in the first one-and-a-half minutes of the single *Love Is a Bourgeois Construct*, a song I briefly dealt with at the beginning of this essay. Here, different musical levels already overlap, all of which more or less can be read in a queer way. The production very obviously bears the signature of British producer Stuart Price, who had previously worked with Kylie Minogue and Scissor Sisters. However, his most famous and commercially successful collaboration was probably with Madonna on her 2005 album *Confessions on a Dancefloor*, whose lead single *Hung Up* he produced, among others, and which is immediately invoked by the musical entry. The melody is a direct quote from Michael Nyman's piece *Chasing Sheep is Best Left to Shepherds*, which Nyman wrote for the soundtrack to Peter Greenaway's *THE DRAUGHTSMAN'S CONTRACT* (1982) – a film that (among many other things) deals with the inversion of gender roles and sexual frustration. Very early after its release, *Chasing Sheep is Best Left to Shepherds* was used in the soundtrack of Jean Daniel Cadinot's gay porn movie *STOP SUNRISE* (1984). Nyman's piece, in turn, is based on Henry Purcell's opera *King Arthur, or The British Worthy* (1691), from the third act prologue, which has gained some pop cultural relevance because another piece from it, *What power art thou . . .*, based on the same bass line as here, has become known as *The Cold Song* (1981) by Klaus Nomi. This is the cultural and pop-historical background of the first ninety seconds of the song that appeared on the 2013 album *Electric*. Hawkins notes of this accumulation of disparate tracks: "Indeed, [the Pet Shop Boys'] idiolect comprises a range of musical criteria that encompass attitude, generation, ethnicity, and class. It is the accumulation of such ingredients that defines the Pet Shop Boys' act."³⁶ This musical foundation

³⁵ Ramzy Alwakeel: *Smile If You Dare. Politics and Pointy Hats with the Pet Shop Boys*. London 2016. See also Jäger: *Factually*, 97–117.

³⁶ Hawkins: *Queerness*, 40.

is then followed by a five-minute swan song to bourgeois, heterosexual desire, ending with that queering of the word *bourgeoisie* already mentioned at the beginning of this text. The German singer Andreas Dorau published the song *Liebe ergibt doch keinen Sinn* in 2017, which states: “Liebe ist, wenn man genau hinguckt / Nichts weiter als ein bourgeois Konstrukt.”³⁷

Finally, I would like to refer to an interesting conclusion drawn by Studer, who has already been quoted several times here. He collects *10 things the Pet Shop Boys did to commit career suicide in the U.S.*, and lists, among others, the release of the *Disco* album, the topic of the song *Rent*, and finally the video for *Domino Dancing*: “Now we’re really getting down to it – the final days of the Pet Shop Boys’ tenure as major U.S. hit makers. [. . .] [D]espite its heterosexual veneer, the video’s blatant homoeroticism [. . .] was just too much for the bulk of their American fan-base to handle.”³⁸ Studer’s list ends with Neil Tennant’s coming-out. Certainly, these are pure speculations, but it cannot be denied that with increasing visibility of queer references, the mainstream success of the Pet Shop Boys begins to wane, not only in the United States of America.

6 Conclusion: Queerness as an “Excentric Center” in Early Pet Shop Boys

The overarching subject of most of these passages can be described as a crisis of masculinity in a heteronormative sense: “This is achieved by employing the musical codes of dance-pop and sewing them into a style that offsets queer masculinity against the more conventional male representation found in the music industry.”³⁹ The easily accessible surface, the mainstream sound, the at times militaristic beat, the extensive lack of emotion and expression of the musicians, especially at the beginning of their careers, only allow the queer view of masculinities to gleam.⁴⁰ Hawkins points out that one “might say that the Pet Shop Boys’ songs depict a Dionysian sonic universe that indexes a desire that undercuts normative and naturalized stereotypes” and that “their queer aesthetic is spatially organized in studio productions that reference a cultural context that exudes incandescence.”⁴¹

37 “Love is, if you look closely / Nothing more than a bourgeois construct.” [Own translation, D.B.].

38 Studer: *10 things the Pet Shop Boys did to commit career suicide in the U. S. Commentary*. <http://www.geowayne.com/newDesign/lists/suicide.htm> (last accessed 23 May 2022).

39 Hawkins: *Queerness*, 38–39.

40 Jäger: *Factually*, 16: “Their multidimensionality makes them a band for the masses as well as a band for the minority.” [Own translation, D.B.].

41 Hawkins: *Queerness*, 42.

In this essay, I have attempted to gather the many traces and references to queer-ness in the work of the Pet Shop Boys in order to demonstrate the apparent obviousness of the band's status as queer beyond the sexual orientation of the musicians *in the work itself*. In doing so, I have focused in more detail on the early period, in which there is comparatively less direct addressing of the issue. These rather incidental, hidden figurations, which are sometimes not recognizable at first glance and do not want to proclaim a direct socio-political message, nevertheless fulfill a hermeneutic and, in a broader sense, utopian function in their marginalization: They are that “defective cornerstone” which, according to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, is “always already at work in the work,” “not at the center but in an excentric center, in a corner whose eccentricity assures the construction of the system.”⁴²

To understand themes and traces as an excentric center means, on the one hand, to grant them a character constituting the work as a whole. It is essential, in the words of American literary critic Paul de Man, that one also listens

[. . .] to what is being said obliquely, figurally, and implicitly (though not less compellingly) in less conspicuous parts of the corpus. Such a way of reading is by no means willful; it has its own constraints, perhaps more demanding than those of canonization.⁴³

On the other hand, the rather indirect way in which these topics are performed is a departure from a one-sided, logocentric readability. By constantly circling queer topics, they invite one to venture a getting-into (rather clandestinely and cautiously, in deliberate contrast to publicly coming out) without being pinned down to it.

It is all the more ambiguous when, in (presumed) cluelessness, their last real hit single to date, *Go West* (1993), has now been lustily intoned for decades in the world's soccer stadiums, of all places: “Who would have thought that an obscure Village People song covered by the Pet Shop Boys would become the song of football. It's fantastic. I think it's our greatest achievement.”⁴⁴

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⁴² Derrida: *Memoires*, 72–73.

⁴³ Paul de Man: Reply to Raymond Geuss. *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983), 375–382, 380.

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