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UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA AND THE "HERETIC STREAK": THE ORWELLIAN AESTHETIC IN RAY DAVIES' SONG WRITING AND OTHER CREATIVE PROJECTS

The article explores the influence of Orwell's fiction on the creative output of Ray Davies, one of Britain's finest songwriters and the erstwhile frontman of The Kinks, a 'British Invasion' group.
The Davies oeuvre can be placed alongside Orwell's work due to its entertainment value, sharpness of observation and complex, conflicted socio-political sympathies. By balancing utopian visions with dystopian premonitions and by offering regular critiques of the culture they hold dear, Orwell and Davies represent the same tradition of cautious patriotism. They also share a similar aesthetic, communicating their insights through humour, self-mockery and acerbic wit.

Keywords: Orwell, Ray Davies, pop culture, dystopia, utopia

In the opening frame of a documentary on The Kinks, Hugh Fielder, a well-known English music critic, comments: "If George Orwell wrote songs, and was not a member of the socialist party, he'd be writing Ray Davies' songs". He then immediately checks himself: "Sorry, that's a literary allusion, it's probably gonna go whoosh" (*The Kinks Story* 2010: 3'21). Mentioning literature with reference to a British Invasion band is not exactly the done thing: rockers do not usually enthuse over writers, even if they share their love of words. Not long ago for instance, the frontman of Oasis declared that reading fiction is a waste of time, and dismissed the whole publishing business as elitist, since it allows "people who write and read and review books [to put] themselves a tiny little bit above the rest of us" (Gallagher 2013). Yet for Ray Davies, a 2014 inductee into The Songwriter's Hall of Fame, the man who penned most of The Kinks' lyrics and who is a published author himself, literature seems to matter. His songs are peppered with references to classic English texts. The Angry Young Men, Orwell, the great chroniclers of London life – Dickens and Blake – as well as the nation's bard, Shakespeare, have all been celebrated in Davies's song writing, music videos,

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rock operas and literary projects. The ex-Kink also makes appearances at events devoted to literature – the 2014 Dublin Writers Festival, the Stratford-upon-Avon Literary Festival and the Hay Festival are among the most recent examples.

Perceiving himself as a storyteller, particularly one concerned with changing aspects of English identity, Davies is inheritor to a certain tradition of artistic enquiry which has its roots in socially-oriented literature. Orwell is an important part of this legacy, a writer whose visions inflamed the public imagination during the post-war period, a formative time for the future lead singer of the Kinks. In contemporary interviews, Davies points to *Nineteen Eighty-Fo*ur as the book that shaped his outlook on life when he was barely ten years old (Davies 2010). His parents did not allow him to watch the 1954 TV drama based on the novel,[1] so he resorted to reading the original text. This, along with an awareness of the poverty existing in his immediate surroundings, caused him to become "an early realist", who "was not fooled by the promise of the late 50s" (*Ray Davies: Imaginary Man*, 2010: 13'27'').[2] His childhood memories are bitter-sweet, ranging from the excitements of The Festival of Britain, through happy singalongs in a crowded, working-class home, down to the privations of the austerity era and the false optimism of the welfare state. Contrarian from the start, Davies might have taken Winston Smith for his role model when facing the injustice of the Tripartite System.[3] This is how he recounts the moment of failing the eleven plus exam, which at the time meant forsaking the chances of university education in the future:

> I sat at my desk on the day of my Eleven Plus Exam and looked at my paper. I felt that it was more than my intelligence that was being tested. It was my whole being, my whole philosophy, my feelings for the world, my family, my dreams, my hopes and habits were all to be put up for grading by the Greater London Examining Board. I had to decide either to play the game their way, and succeed or fail according to their rules, or take my own route. I decided to settle my own fate. I signed my name at the top of the paper, and did nothing more for the rest of the exam. The room was silent, apart from the anxious scratching of pencils, and yet inside my head was a triumphant explosion, like the opening canon shot of war. I had made my first statement to the world. But it was also like watching opportunity float away on a piece of paper down the river. It would damage me, but at the same time it was a victory. For the first time in my life I realized that it would be a battle between me and *them*. (Davies 1994: 34, emphasis mine)

[1] The Davies family had every reason to be concerned. The adaptation prompted a debate in Parliament due to its upsetting content. The BBC received complaints from scandalised viewers; there were even rumours of a lady who died while watching the teleplay (*The Daily Express*, qtd in Rodden 1989: 275).

[2] In *God Save The Kinks* biography, Bob Jovanovic quotes Davies expressing similar sentiments: "From an early age, eight or nine, I saw how unequal the world was and that's kept me the way I am. […] I saw relatives unemployed and was always around adults talking about the way the world really was. Maybe that shocked me" (Davies, qtd. in Jovanovic 2013: 20).

[3] The Tripartite System was introduced in England and Wales on the basis of the 1944 Education Act, which made secondary schooling compulsory and free. However, pupils were tested on their academic aptitude at the early age of eleven. The results determined whether they were sent to grammar schools, secondary modern schools, or technical schools (very limited in number). In effect, the regulation created a socially unjust, two-tier system, according to which most working class children received secondary modern education. Attending a grammar school was a prerequisite for later university study.

The oppressive "them" of the final line of the quote would later feature in many of The Kinks' lyrics. The word usually signifies politicians, bureaucrats or other figures of authority, and sometimes just the unanimous, threatening collective which Davies has always mistrusted: "They built a parking lot on a piece of land/where the supermarket used to stand" (*Come Dancing*, The Kinks 1983), "They're demonstrating outside/I think they're gonna start the Third World War" (*Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues*, The Kinks 1971), "They seek him here, they seek him there, in Regent Street and Leicester Square"[4] (*Dedicated Follower of Fashion*, The Kinks 1966). Like in Orwell's novel, the menace is often painted in the drab hues of post-war Britain familiar from newsreel and propaganda films: "they" tend to be clad in grey, evoking associations with uniformity and dullness. In the *Muswell Hillbillies* album, "the people in grey" come to take the lyrical 'I' away, acting as a militia and ensuring the implementation of absurd laws (*Here Come the People in Grey*, The Kinks 1971). In an angry anthem entitled *20th Century Man*, Davies sums up the experience of living in a state which curtails individual freedom:

I was born in the welfare state
Ruled by bureaucracy
Controlled by civil servants
And people dressed in grey.
Got no privacy, got no liberty
Cos the twentieth century people
Took it all away from me.
(*20th Century Man,* The Kinks 1971)

The post-war British welfare system, designed by the economist and statistician Sir William Beveridge, was based on an idealistic premise: citizens were to be protected "from the cradle to the grave" against "the five Giant Evils of Disease, Want, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness".[5] However, this concept of government involved the collection of huge amounts of personal data and implementation of state control, to which the traditionally libertarian Britons had not been accustomed. Many of Davies's lyrics, both from The Kinks phase and more contemporary ones, address anxieties about the rise of a Big Brother society where individuals feel constantly scrutinized, not unlike the somewhat obsessive protagonist of *Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues*:

Well the milkman's a spy, and the grocer keeps on following me,
And the woman next door's an undercover for the K.G.B.,
And the man from the Social Security
Keeps on invading my privacy,
Oh there ain't no cure for acute schizophrenia disease. […]

[4] The opening of *Dedicated Follower of Fashion* was actually modelled on a doggerel verse from Baroness Orczy's play *The Scarlet Pimpernel*: "We seek him here, we seek him there/Those Frenchies seek him everywhere/Is he in heaven? Is he in hell? That demmed, elusive Pimpernel" (Orczy 2000: 101). In the case of the English mod who is the subject of the song, "they" may suggest a gang of Teddy boys, chasing him in order to pick a fight.

[5] See the UK's National Archives website for an overview of the Beveridge Report, and extracts from the text: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/attlees-britain/five-giants/.

They're watching my house and they're tapping my telephone,
I don't trust nobody, but I'm much too scared to be on my own
And the income tax collector's got his beady eye on me,
No, there ain't no cure for acute schizophrenia disease.
(*Acute Schizophrenia Paranoia Blues*, The Kinks 1971)

A similar sense of oppression emerges from Davies' first prose narrative, *X-Ray* (1994), which is of a cross-genre between a science fiction thriller, an autobiography and a social history. It takes place in the dystopian near-future when Raymond Douglas Davies is an aged recluse (in his late sixties/early seventies, so the present of the tale has passed by now). An Orwellian entity named The Corporation commissions a young archives clerk to publish a report on the old rocker who remembers Britain's post-war past and has retained an independent spirit, which makes him potentially subversive. The clerk feels that his progress in extracting the memories from his interviewee is under surveillance, so he plunges into a paranoid state, exacerbated by hallucinatory fits during which Raymond Douglas Davies appears to inhabit his body. The Corporation's methods of controlling people are not as straightforward as those of Ingsoc in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but it is implied that it has significant financial power and is wrapping its tentacles around London by buying it up. At first, it seems to be some shady publishing industry (it possesses the rights to The Kinks' music and now wishes to bring out the frontman's memoirs), but soon it is revealed that it has also paid for the clerk's upbringing and education, demanding absolute loyalty in return. It controls its employees' health, prescribing medication when they fail to toe the line: in the corporate society everyone must remain a conformist. The Corporation dictates the fashion and promotes a uniform lifestyle; it even owns the pubs so there is no possibility for the rock veteran to enjoy social life outside the Konk Studios (his place of residence and perhaps the last bastion of resistance against the overwhelming mediocrity).

While the sinister atmosphere of Davies' book immediately brings to mind *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there is another of Orwell's texts whose echoes can be detected in the story, namely *Coming up for Air*. The parts containing the old rocker's memoirs are pervaded with a yearning for a bygone age when relationships seemed less superficial and tea came in leaves rather than factory-produced bags. Like Orwell's George Bowling, Raymond Douglas Davies realizes that whimsical nostalgia is ultimately a blind alley, and yet he holds on to his memories to protect himself from the increasingly mechanical quality of life and "totalitarian commonness" (Davies 1994: 1). His preoccupation with the past and the quirks of Englishness is also an act of perversity, as was the concept album issued by the Kinks in 1968, *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society.* At the time when most British bands were exploring psychedelia and the harsher sound of progressive rock, the Davies brothers proclaimed themselves to be worshippers of England of the good old days:

We are the Village Green Preservation Society
God save Donald Duck, Vaudeville and Variety
We are the Desperate Dan Appreciation Society
God save strawberry jam and all the different varieties
Preserving the old ways from being abused

Protecting the new ways for me and for you
What more can we do?
(*The Village Green Preservation Society*, The Kinks 1968)

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek outburst of nostalgia for the English pastoral was partly caused by the fact that the Kinks were banned from touring America[6] and Ray Davies decided to make the most of what his country had to offer. Not popular upon release, the album gradually gained recognition and is now considered one of the most influential in the group's oeuvre. Along with *Arthur* (*Or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire*) (1969), *Lola Versus Powerman and the Moneygoround* (1970), and *Muswell Hillbillies* (1971), it changed the image of the Kinks from that of a hard-rocking singles band to a quintessentially English ensemble. As Keith Altham, a rock press journalist, has noted, when other British musicians were copying American styles, "Ray was really the first person to come along and write from *his* own cultural experience, being English and being born in London, and writing from his own life" (Altham, qtd. in Jovanovic 2013: 151). The result was an idiosyncratic mixture of Merry England celebration, balanced by off-kilter humour and wry social commentary. The Kinks' lyrics became even peppered with Cockney rhyming slang, so it came as no surprise that the music press would react with comments such as "Ray Davies is Pure Britannia" (*The New Musical Express,* qtd. in Jovanovic, 2013: 175).

Going on a journey back to his roots, Davies composed a number of lyrical vignettes which evoke the simple pleasures of his working class boyhood: fishing trips (*Sitting by the Riverside,* The Kinks 1968), playing cricket and smoking cigarettes behind the garden gate (*Do you Remember Walter?*, The Kinks 1968), courting a girl after Sunday school (*Village Green*, The Kinks 1968), holidaying with parents "in sunny Southend" (*Picture Book*, The Kinks 1968). Songs in the style of *Autumn Almanac* (The Kinks 1967), about tea-drinking, gardening, Sunday roast and morning toast proliferated in The Kinks' late 1960s/early 1970s repertoire, emphasising the band's pride in their social origin:

I like my football on a Saturday
Roast beef on Sundays, all right
I go to Blackpool for my holidays
Sit in the open sunlight
This is my street and I'm never gonna leave it
And I'm always gonna stay here if I live to be ninety-nine
'Cause all the people I meet, seem to come from my street
And I can't get away because its calling me, come on home
Hear it calling me, come on home!
(*Autumn Almanac*, The Kinks 1967)

Such images would easily agree with Orwell's aesthetics: he too celebrated the Englishness of ordinary men and women, describing their everyday joys, petty concerns and limited horizons

[6] The ban, introduced as a result of "bad luck, bad management and bad behaviour" (Davies 2015), lasted from 1965 to 1969.

with humane acceptance. All the same, his fondness was not entirely uncritical. It is similar with Davies, who possesses what the early commentators defined as "the heretic streak", the inclination to love his countrymen's idiosyncrasies but agonise over them nevertheless (Crouse 1969).

The understanding that any utopia must inevitably bleed into dystopia has led the Kinks' frontman to produce countless sympathetic depictions of idylls gone awry. Many protagonists of Davies' songs approach their unenviable fate with good humoured resignation. A poor woman who has bought a hat like Princess Marina's "wears it while she's cleaning the windows […] and she don't care" (*She's Bought a Hat Like Princess Marina's*, The Kinks 1969). A man saddled with mortgage debts feels happy in his modest home, because he's "reached [the] top and [he] can't get any higher" (*Shangri-La*, The Kinks 1969). An employee forced to take a break from work is trying his best to enjoy it:

Lying on the beach with my back burned rare,
The salt gets in my blisters and the sand gets in my hair,
And the sea's an open sewer,
But I really couldn't care,
I'm breathing through my mouth so I don't have to sniff the air.
(*Holiday*, The Kinks 1970)

By focusing on the common man "under attack from a variety of economic, social and cultural forces" (Gildart 2013: 142), Davies again charters the territory previously explored by Orwell in such novels as *Coming up for Air, The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying.* Despite the grand illusion of the age of affluence and the pervasive conviction that "Britons have never had it so good"[7], the spectrum of opportunities available to "a plain simple man /of a plain simple working class position" (*Arthur*, The Kinks 1969) appears disappointingly narrow. One can either aspire to greater social mobility and risk losing authenticity (for instance, by becoming a "dedicated follower of fashion" or a "plastic man"), or one can chose the life of an outcast or eccentric, and remain on the margins of society, much like the tramp figure[8] depicted in *Sitting in the Midday Sun:*

Everybody say I'm lazy
They all tell me get a job, you slob
I'd rather be a hobo walking 'round with nothing
Than a rich man scared of losing all he's got
So I'm just sitting in the midday sun
Just soaking up that currant bun
Why should I have to give my reasons
For sitting in the midday sun? […]

[7] The opinion first offered by the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan when addressing a Conservative Party convention in Bedford in 1957.

[8] The tramp who appears on *Preservation Act 1* album evokes associations with Orwell's observations on the underclass contained in *Down and Out in Paris in London*.

I've got no home, I've got no money
But who needs a job when it's sunny?
(*Sitting in the Midday Sun*, The Kinks 1973).

Perhaps a third option would be to emigrate, like the eponymous protagonist of *Arthur*, preferably to Australia or some other promised land, aboard *The Supersonic Rocket Ship* where "nobody has to be hip", "there'll be equality and no suppression of minorities" (The Kinks 1972). However, when one notes that the latter song may reference the promise of Concord and what it eventually came to, the trust in the possibility of utopia as conjured up by Ray Davies must once more be undermined.

The Kinks' ultimate engagement with Orwellian dilemmas occurred in the early 1970s when they began diversifying into theatrical projects. Several of their concept albums were then brought to life on stage, among them *Preservation Act 1* (1973) and *Preservation Act 2* (1974). They grappled with the question of power and corruption in an imaginary land of *Preservation*, ruled by a capitalist dictator called Mr Flash who is overthrown in a military coup by an equally threatening Mr Black. While the first of the villains destroys the country for profit, indulging in property speculation and getting the village greens concreted over, his successor is a puritanical fascist who maintains an iron grip on society with the help of his stormtroopers:

We are the new centurians,
Shepherds of the Nation.
We'll keep on our guard
For sin and degradation.
We are the national guard
Against filth and depravity,
Perversion and vulgarity,
Homosexuality.
Keep it clean.
(*Shepherds of the Nation*, The Kinks 1974)

Despite their somewhat Pythonesque atmosphere, the two Acts of *Preservation* "accurately analysed the forces unleashed by the 1960s – neoliberalism, post-deference aspiration, reactionary moralism – that Margaret Thatcher was able to resolve and harness to catastrophic effect" (Troussé 2012: 81). Once again, Davies's social commentary seemed fraught with the same contradiction that can be detected in Orwell: the ambivalence between sympathy for the ordinary people betrayed by politicians and the mistrust of all collective endeavour.

Concise in his song writing, Davies has always been wary of offering solutions to the social and political challenges he describes. In a recent Internet chat with fans he confesses: "[M]y general feeling about politics is that if you have a message, send a telegram. Don't be too preachy" (Davies 2015b). This avoidance of partisan rhetoric may be the reason why the rock poet's observations, while growing out of a specific cultural context, can simultaneously appear timeless and relevant to contemporary audiences. Asked about Orwell on the same occasion, Davies confirms his influence on his generation and then comments: "was he a great

journalist or a great novelist? Perhaps to be a great journalist in the modern age you also have to be a great entertainer?" (Davies 2015b). Indeed, this final assessment best sums up the connection between the two Englishmen.

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UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA I „ŻYŁKA HERETYCKA": ORWELLOWSKA ESTETYKA
W TEKSTACH PIOSENEK I INNYCH PROJEKTACH ARTYSTYCZNYCH RAYA DAVIESA

Artykuł omawia wpływ pisarstwa Orwella na działalność artystyczną Raya Daviesa, wybitnego autora tekstów muzycznych i niegdysiejszego lidera grupy The Kinks, zaliczanej do „brytyjskiej inwazji" lat 60. ubiegłego wieku. Popkulturowy dorobek Daviesa można dobrze zestawić z osiągnięciami Orwella choćby ze względu na wyrafinowany dowcip, trafność obserwacji społecznych oraz niejednoznaczność i skomplikowanie poglądów politycznych. Równoważąc utopijne wizje dystopijnymi akcentami oraz poddając krytycznemu namysłowi brytyjską kulturę, która jednakowoż jest im niezwykle bliska, Orwell i Davies wydają się wpisywać w nurt „ostrożnego patriotyzmu". Zauważalne jest też podobieństwo ich „heretyckiej estetyki", opartej na autoironii, kostycznym humorze i krytycznym dystansie.

Słowa kluczowe: Orwell, Ray Davies, kultura popularna, dystopia, utopia