

Reinfandt, Christoph: "Brexit Music: Studies in Alienation by Sleaford Mods and Kate Tempest." *Hard Times* 100 (2016): 65-72.

# Brexit Music: Studies in Alienation

## by Sleaford Mods and Kate Tempest

Christoph Reinfandt

Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) schreibt über Sleaford Mods und Kate Tempest, die sich musikalisch mit dem Brexit auseinandersetzen.

At the time of writing this column, some nine months after the Brexit vote, the British music scene still seems to be in a state of shock. Apart from exasperated Twitter reactions, a Google search for the key words 'Brexit' and 'music' only yields results that point to the practical implications for the music industry or touring musicians; programmatic musical reactions are conspicuously absent. While the election of Donald Trump led to the sustained musical activism of *30 Days 30 Songs* and *Our First 100 Days*,<sup>1</sup> the British music scene's response to Brexit so far seems to consist of *Brexit: The Musical*,<sup>2</sup> a never-ending string of parodies on

YouTube, and business-as-usual at the Brit Awards.

Can that be all there is? Well, no, and the following observations will address two quite impressive engagements with the conditions under which the Brexit vote could come about. Perhaps not surprisingly, both rely heavily on spoken word performances embedded in rhythmically charged music. More surprisingly, both are definitely not hip-hop or grime but establish a 'white' parallel idiom, which addresses Brexit-related social problems from a slightly different angle. Despite this shared frame and a shared acknowledgement of the influence of Mike Skinner and

The Streets on their work, however, the artists in question, Sleaford Mods and Kate Tempest, seem to be quite different. Sleaford Mods have been hailed as "[o]ne of the more surprising musical success stories of the past couple of years," given that the Nottingham duo's "modus operandi might best be described as one middle-aged man shouting at the audience while another presses play on his MacBook"<sup>3</sup>. From these ingredients, the Mods created their own genre of somewhat primitivist electronic post-punk working class rap. Kate Tempest, on the other hand, "made history, transcending the line between poetry and music"<sup>4</sup> with her debut album *Everybody Down* in 2014.

She was then just twenty-nine and already had two successful productions of plays (*Wasted* in 2011 and *Hopelessly Devoted* in 2013) as well as two acclaimed volumes of poetry (*Brand New Ancients* and *Hold Your Own*, 2013 and 2014, respectively) under her belt and a novel featuring the characters from *Everybody Down* in the making (it came out in 2016 as *The Bricks that Built the Houses*). All of this will probably count as 'sophisticated'. In



Sleaford Mods live



Kate Tempest live

their most recent offerings, however, the takes of Sleaford Mods and Kate Tempest on Brexit Britain eerily converge: on the one hand, Sleaford Mods' *English Tapas* approaches the state of Britain from below; as in the rest of their *oeuvre*, all the tracks clearly adopt working class or even, as Alasdair Gray puts it in one of his short stories, 'casualty class'<sup>5</sup> perspectives; many of their songs' protagonists have clearly lost their position and bearings in society and live a life devoid of hope. Kate Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, on the other hand, approaches the state of Britain from above; it employs the literary device of a virtual observer reminiscent of a withdrawn authorial narrator. At the beginning of *Let Them Eat Chaos* this invisible narrator is established in direct reader address, and both narrator and addressee tumble onto a street corner in London from outer space one night at 4.18 a.m., from where they proceed to engage with those inhabitants of the surrounding houses that happen to be awake at that moment. But let us begin on the ground.

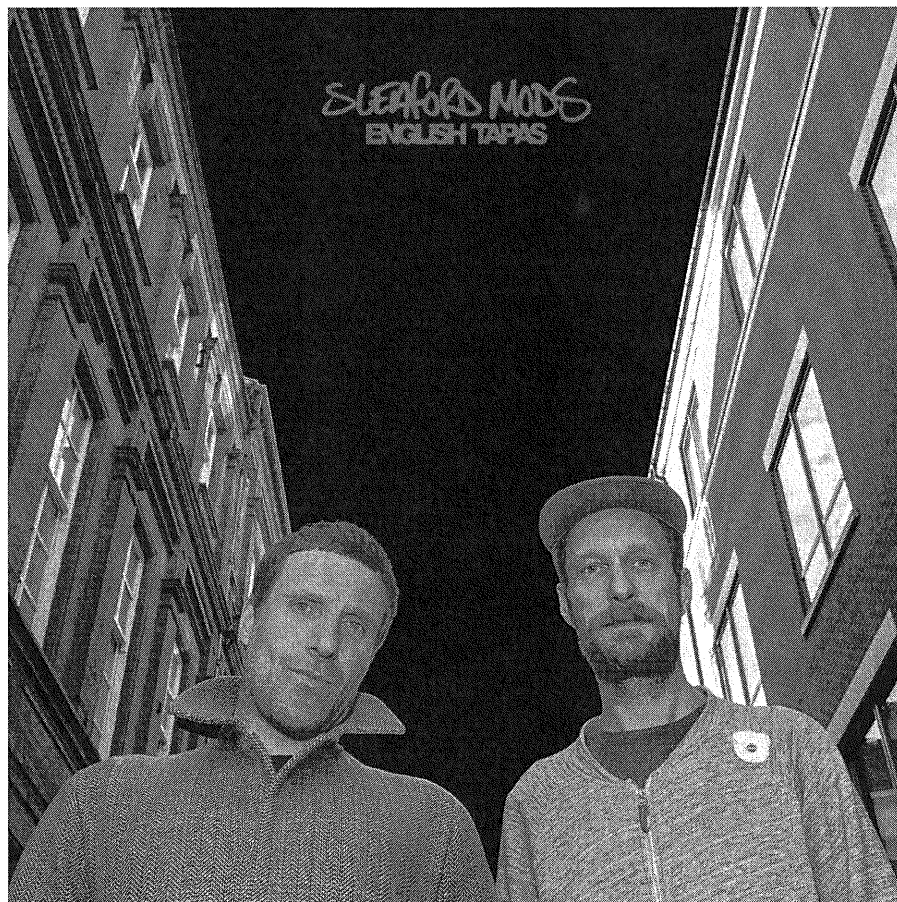
### Invisible Britain Made Audible: Sleaford Mods

Ever since Sleaford Mods wordsmith and vocalist Jason Williamson joined forces with producer Andrew Fearn in 2012, the duo has been on a steady rise with their successful and critically acclaimed full-length records on the Harbinger Sound label (*Austerity Dogs* 2013, *Divide and Exit* 2014, *Key Mar-*

*ket* 2015). In the wake of this success they were then signed by the legendary Rough Trade label, an iconic key player in the independent business, where they have so far put out an EP (*TCR*) in 2016 and their full-length debut *English Tapas* in 2017. All these records present Williamson in his 'shouting at the audience'-mode, though this should perhaps be more precisely observed: on the evidence of the film documenting their 2015 tour, *Invisible Britain*, he is

not so much shouting *at* his audience but providing a forum for the audience to shout out his lyrics *with* him. So it is by no means clear to what extent the stage persona of Williamson can actually be separated from the characters that he projects in his lyrics, or from the people who are shouting them with him, for that matter. He quite literally *embodies* the wide assortment of angry and abusive characters that can be assumed *behind* his lyrics (including, presumably, at times himself), and in this sense he certainly acts as "a mouthpiece for the British lower classes."<sup>6</sup> Williamson insists, though, that Sleaford Mods are not a political group aligned with any particular party politics, and his own flirtation with and relegation from the Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn illustrates this point nicely (or rather not so nicely).<sup>7</sup>

It is this alienation from 'the establishment' that is captured in the tour documentary *Invisible Britain* (directed by Paul Hannawin and Paul Sng, released October 2016). As its official website puts it, the film *shows the most relevant and uncompromising British band in*

Sleaford Mods, *English Tapas* cover

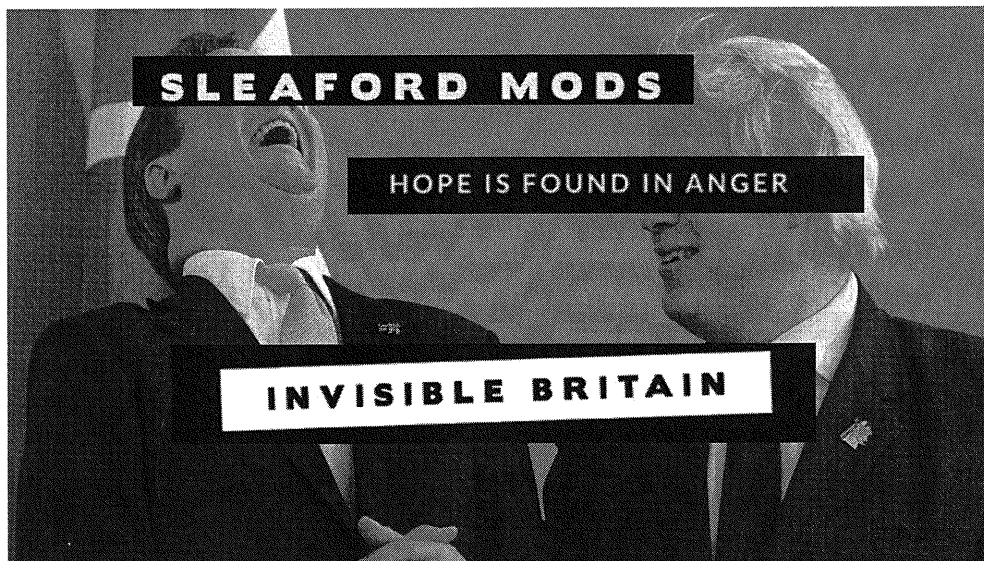
years sticking two fingers up to the zeitgeist and articulating the rage and desperation of those without a voice in austerity Britain. The film follows Sleaford Mods on a tour of the UK in the run up to the 2015 General Election, visiting the neglected, broken down and boarded up parts of the country that many would prefer to ignore. Part band doc, part look at the state of the nation, the documentary features individuals and communities attempting to find hope among the ruins, against a blistering soundtrack by Sleaford Mods.<sup>8</sup> While the reviewer in the *Guardian* took issue with the fact that “its directors can’t decide what film they’re making – one about the group, or one about the people and communities who have suffered the most in the past five years,”<sup>9</sup>

one could argue that it is just this disconnection which speaks loudest from the film. One cannot really see how those who have suffered the most in the past five years (and the examples of cynical elitist politics and policies in the UK presented in the film are, from a ‘con-

tinental’ perspective, eye-opening and devastating) could feel inclined to vote pro-European given that someone like David Cameron, the Prime Minister responsible for everything that has been done to them, suggested they should. And if there is a disconnection between the breadth and variety of those people and communities and the talking heads in the film, which tend to be, “– like the Mods’ audience – white, middle-aged men,”<sup>10</sup> perhaps there should be more outlets like Sleaford Mods for all these people and communities, but this will not bring about a reconciliation with the establishment or a new commitment to those political parties

which are deemed responsible for the disenfranchisement of so many people – and this includes the Conservatives and post-Blair Labour. Anyone wishing to understand how the Brexit vote came about can learn something from watching *Invisible Britain*, but this does by no means imply that the Mods are pro-Brexit.<sup>11</sup>

So what about Sleaford Mods’ musical reaction after the vote? To begin with, the EP *TCR* only offers oblique and indirect references to Brexit: one track is titled “Britain Thirst”, for example, and “Dad’s Corner” asks “And what do we have to show? / It ain’t a lovely green stretch / And a game of polo”.<sup>12</sup> *English Tapas*, on the other hand, is slightly more succinct, but not programmatically so:



Invisible Britain

it is only on track 3 that an allusion to Boris Johnson creeps in (“He’s got a blonde mop / He’s got a moptop”), and explicit references to Brexit can only be spotted towards the end of the album. Track 9, “Cuddly”, for example, opens with an impersonation of an aspirational middle-class character on whose stupidity Brexit seems to be blamed: “I had an organic chicken it was shit / As the day played out in the evening’s pit / Homeowner man I’m a family guy / Brexity roller, we do and still die”. And track 10, “Dull”, offers a similarly bleak picture of empty materialism paired with nostalgia at the heart of Brexit: “We don’t sell our souls anymore / Give

it away for free / ‘Please Please Me’ / Dead bingo / Brexit loves that fucking Ringo / Safe bet / All the oldies grope for death”. In both instances, Brexit is presented as having usurped the British pop culture of the past (the Bay City Rollers,<sup>13</sup> the Beatles), and perhaps not only because it is of the past and thus lends itself to nostalgia, but also because it was too complicit with commercialisation in the first place, something that Sleaford Mods claim they are not. Given their immense success in recent years and their fond adoption by the left-leaning liberal press, this claim becomes increasingly hard to defend, but Williamson does so by relentlessly attacking know-it-all intellectuals and hipsters and not sparing themselves

either in “Just Like We Do” (track 2: “Given half the chance you’d walk around like a twat just like we do”).

The rest of *English Tapas* continues the mode of inquiry by impersonation characteristic of all Sleaford Mods records to this point, if perhaps on a slightly mel-

lower note: traces of actual singing and a verse/chorus-structure surface more regularly than on earlier albums. While malicious tongues may see the first signs of commercial sell-out here, it seems that this mellowing is accompanied by a more reflective and introspective orientation of the lyrics. The opening track, “Army Nights”, for example, adopts the point of view of a soldier caught between taxing duties at work and letting rip in his spare time (the refrain pits “We get it fixed on the day” against “We do what we like / We have a laugh on the holiday”); this tension is then sublimated into an empty cult of the body (“Idealistic, this is the

man / A frame that looks like it's supposed to, man / All bearing on the self and self-caring"). Track 2's engagement with emerging fame contains the lines "Funny how fucking England hates any success / I know the feeling, dickhead, 'cause I used to be one of them", which indicate a degree of alienation from their earlier speaking position even on the part of the band themselves. Two tracks on, however, Williamson still claims that (as in *Invisible Britain*) "I see the country just like you don't get", a jibe aimed not only at the 'élites' but also at the aspiring middle class ("You're so dead in the head / You got a job facing life"; track 4: "Messy Anywhere"). This slightly disconnected doubling of introspection and satirical venom becomes most obvious on the following two tracks. "Time Sands" (track 5) is more Romantic, metaphysical and metaphorical than Jason Williamson ever seemed likely to become, opening with Wordsworthian overtones: "Let's go back to corridors of mine and also yours / Where the dust lays on the shelf / In this the quiet hell". In its refrain it revolves around the hourglass as an image of futility and fatalism: "Time's sands they fall / They fall into the glass / Turn it upside down / It falls into the glass". In conclusion, however, the image is returned to mundane lower class reality of daily chores and drink with an endlessly repeated "We Hoover [hover?] on the plastic and bad brains" and the concluding line: "We fall into the glass". "Snout" (track 6), on the other hand, lashes out at the emptiness of contemporary culture ("Bollocks, they have to rely on showbiz noddies / Like fake London genius") as the hypocritical camouflage of exploitation and political abuse ("Car crash into the void of Magna Carta") which smothers what used to be the working class: *How dare I slam the uniform of the working class / Condemn me, please, you wanker, to life inside a working glass / Like a spider, suffocated to death for a fucking fiver by scared kids / Like scared kids 'course that's what you are / Rubbing up to the crown and the flag and the notion of who we are / Fuck off!*

The disconnection between individual

lives and a completely commercialized neoliberal society becomes most obvious in "Drayton Manored" (track 7), which presents the home of a drunkard as a theme park of thoroughly alienated existence ("Have you ever wondered why you wonder why?"), from where the excursions to restock at the Spar supermarket bring the speaker into alien territory. As the refrain has it: "A trip to Spar is like a trip to Mars", set to a sample of the check-out beep. Even the protagonist's garden shed is under surveillance from nosy neighbours in case he dares to have a smoke out in the open ("I don't like it: don't say two words to you / Then peer out their windows with a fuckin' video recorder"). In spite of this basically stupefied mode of existence, the track does offer the occasional insight of self-reflection: *We are the dumb Brits / Lobbin' down one-pint cans of imported shit [...] Few of us grew from guinea pigs into proper dives [...] En route to my bed, a lonely bed / Dressed in sweat, dressed in regret / Dressed in the feelin' that I ain't ready / I ain't got the balls to make my beddy / Oh dear!* The track ends with an acknowledgement that the "Sign of the times" is that "Human beings are now adjacent lines / Like a tube map, or whatever / A mass of lines that occasionally cross each other / But never say anything / Ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever", castigating the isolation that comes from radical individualisation. Even in the public spaces, the next track "Carlton Touts" points out, the reason "Why they got tellies in pubs?" is to "Keep us munched on second-hand grub / Second-hand tales [...] When life isn't anything 'til you start drinkin' here". It is in this track that the shockwaves of the Brexit vote become most discernible, even without any direct reference to it: partly practicing ambivalent defiance ("I'm glad I was born when I was / I get to see the Right once again look like nobs"), partly drenched in resignation (the refrain is "Carlton touts / The angel of the midlands has flown away / Probably south / You can't blame her / When the future is a flag pissed on / And a king-sized bag of quavers"), the speaker is ultimately completely disoriented in politi-

cal terms: *Clouds are low, like the general mood / Tempers cooking up from the inside / We are the microwave food / I'm not in the mood / The Labour Party is a three-quid tube of vending machine smarties / At the airport, where check-in could be check-out / What the fuck is happ'nin? / Bring back the neolib, I'm sorry / Didn't fuckin' mean to pray for anarchy!* All in all, then, the whole of Britain, speaker, audience, everybody, is "going down like BHS / While the able-bodied vultures monitor and pick at us", as Williamson puts it in the last-but-one track and first single from *English Tapas*, "B.H.S." British Home Stores, the British department store chain founded in 1928 and a perennial mainstay of High Streets and shopping centres, was brought down by retail tycoon Sir Philip Green who even fleeced the retirement funds before selling the company for £1 in 2015. BHS collapsed in 2016, driving 11,000 people into unemployment and leaving 22,000 former employees without retirement income. Even as the last stores closed down, Green was allegedly sailing the Mediterranean with a newly acquired super-yacht.<sup>14</sup>

After this bleak affair which sparks a typical Williamson rant, *English Tapas* closes with a very untypical track: "I Feel So Wrong" sets the slightly unfocused experience of a drunk individual returning home late at night against a musically more elaborate setting with a bass/drums/piano-groove and Jason Williamson in lyrical singing mode: *I look to the moon tonight / It looked like a picture / I tried to figure if it was real or just a fixture / Sometimes it winks at me, sometimes it smiles / Sometimes it looks at you 'cause it can see for miles.* In spite of possibly being able to reach the shelter of home before a thunderstorm breaks (a pre-chorus intones "Thunder sky, don't break as I walk home / I want to keep dry under skies that hold their own"), and in spite of, as the second verse points out, growing "richer", the feeling of alienation captured in the repetitive chorus ("I feel so wrong") persists – as the singer puts it at the end of the last verse: "A plugin' death of everything, the death of harmonies". While the moon as perceived by the

speaker seems to promise the possibility of a transcendental viewpoint, the vision of *English Tapas* remains strictly immanent and fractured. Though there is a clearly discernible Us vs. Them antagonism in all the tracks, the 'we' that is frequently implied and sometimes becomes explicit remains oblique, because all the impersonated speakers are, in spite of their longing for collectivity, first and foremost isolated individuals alienated from the society they are forced to live in. All that is left is anger, and it seems as if Sleaford Mods intriguingly illustrate many of the far-reaching observations in Pankaj Mishra's recent *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*<sup>15</sup> in spite of its more limited affiliation with white working class masculinity.

### Wake Up and Love More: Kate Tempest

In contrast to the scattered impersonations of isolated individual perspectives in all Sleaford Mods tracks, which only offer the momentary redemption of dancing and shouting while listening to them in a lonely crowd of still isolated individuals, Kate Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, which came out in October 2016, attempts to bring about collectivity on more than this level. Most importantly, this happens in the lyrics themselves. These are not in fact, as the album suggests, separate tracks impersonating different individual perspectives, but one long poem that was also published in book form.<sup>16</sup> Prefaced with the injunction "*This poem was written to be read aloud*" (original italics), this long poem provides the opening for the album and live performances,<sup>17</sup> while on

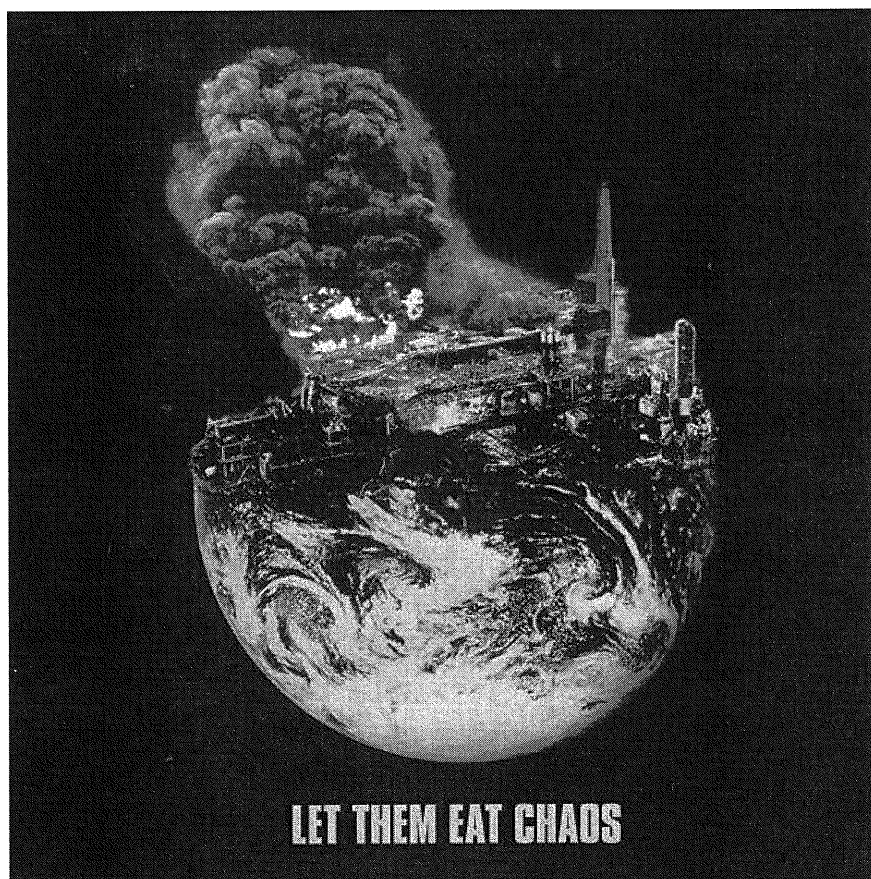
the other hand two epigraphs (from William Blake and the Bible) boost its literary credentials. The poem's most striking feature is its integrated structure of perspectives, which I will trace for clarity's sake both with reference to the different tracks on the album and to the long poem (with page references provided in brackets).

As its title and first line indicates, the opening track, "Picture a Vacuum" (1-5), establishes a virtual observer position occupied by both the narrator and the addressed listener/reader. It starts from scratch in the "endless and unmoving blackness" of what seems to be either

lips? // Or is it a tremor of dread?" (2) No less than the fate of the world is at stake, it seems, and from here, narrator and addressee plunge "[i]n now. // In // fast." (3) As they "approach the surface / all of that // peace // that you felt is replaced with this / furious / neverknown / passion. /// You're *feeling*." (4) Once down in "a city. / Let's call her // *London*", the former serene detachment has vanished and "these are the only times // you have known", leading to the concluding questions which guide the rest of the poem: "*Is this what it's come too? [...] What am I to make / of all this?*" (5) So far, the soundscape of the album was

mostly ambient, but now the beat sets in. Track 2, "Lionmouth Door Knocker" (5-8), naturalises the narrator position constructed in track 1 into a kind of omniscient authorial "we", specifying the scenario for what follows with these programmatic opening words: "At any given moment in the middle of the city / there's a million epiphanies occurring, / in the blurring of the world beyond the curtain / and the world within the person / There's a quivering." (5-6)

The rest of the track presents a wide range of the narrator's observations and impressions, from momentous to fleeting, and the slightly surreal feeling that is created in this barrage of images is underlined by the incongruous motif of the track's titular lionmouth door knocker "flap[ping] in the breeze" before the highly artificial (or literary) basic situation of the poem is introduced: "It's 4:18 a.m. / At this very moment, on this very street, / seven different people in seven different



Kate Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos* cover

nothingness or outer space – the latter possibility is strikingly visualised in the cover art of both album and book – and after admonishing the reader to keep on picturing ("It's been a long day, I know, but look –"), first the sun ("our Sun!") and then the Earth ("Our / *Earth*." come into view (1):<sup>18</sup> "She looks at herself as she spins. / Arms loaded with the trophies / of her most successful child. [...] Is that a smile / playing across her

flats / are wide awake. // Can't sleep." (7) Establishing the mood for the inquiry into these seven people's mindsets, the hook of the track keeps asking "Is anybody else awake? / Will it ever be day again?" (6/8), and then in a fleeting shift into the next track, the first character is introduced.

The character tracks on *Let There Be Chaos* work not unlike the impersonated perspectives of Sleaford Mods, but there are a number of decisive differences. For one, they do not stand alone but are carefully embedded in the construction of the long poem/album as outlined above. Even within the tracks, the character perspectives are decentred by the intermittent presence of the narrator who introduces them in recitative-like passages. What is more, the social spectrum is much wider and only briefly touches upon a representative of the casualty class (in track 6, "Whoops", the Kate Tempest adept meets Pete again, a character from *Everybody Down* and *The Bricks That Built the Houses* who stumbles home drunkenly, ranting and fumbling for the keys to his father's flat where he is still forced to live with no future whatsoever). The other characters are in fact moderately to pretty successful in life, though they still cannot seem to see the point of it. In order of appearance we have Jemma (track 3, "Ketamine for Breakfast", 9-14), who feels herself unable to fully shed her drug-addled past and to enter into a non-destructive relationship. As the hook succinctly puts it: "Tried to change it but I know / if you're good to me I will let you go // Tried to fight it but I'm sure / if you're bad to me I will like you more." (11/12; 14) She is followed by Esther, "just back from a double shift" as a "carer / doing nights" (14). In the most obviously Brexit-inspired track, "Europe Is Lost" (track 4, 14-24), Esther worries about the state of the world in a quite informed and self-reflexive manner, culminating in an understated hook which introduces the question "What am I gonna do to wake up?" (17/22/24). After this wide perspective, the focus becomes narrowly private again with Alicia in "We Die" (track 5, 24-30). Alicia is grieving

for her lover/partner/husband who appeared to her that night in the moment of his death, "holding his belly, / blood on his shirt" (25). As she puts it repeatedly in a tentative hook "I heard your voice so loud it woke me up. // I don't believe in ghosts." (27/28) Shaken, Alicia only gets a grip on herself at the end of her imagined dialogue with him, when a chorus emerges: "We die so others can be born / We age so others can be young / The point of life is live, / Love if you can / Then pass it on." (30). After this, the first batch of character tracks is rounded off by Pete (track 6, "Whoops", 30-37), the one closest to customary Sleaford Mods personnel. Pete's mindset, "fourteen doors from home", is aptly summed up by the narrator as "a pack of starving dogs, / Fighting / over / the / last / bone." (32), followed by a highly credible impersonation of a raving drunk climaxing in the last refrain: "Woops. [sic] / I swear this person isn't me. / We did have fun though, / didn't we? // Didn't we?" (37) At this point the sequence of character tracks is interrupted by the appearance of a new narrator position. In track 7, "Brews" (38-39), the narrator, in a striking parallel to the not-yet-breaking storm in Sleaford Mods' "I Feel So Wrong", describes how a "roaring storm" is gathering over the characters' heads (38). They are, however, "too concerned with their own thoughts to think about the weather." (39) And in track 8, "Don't Fall In" (39-44), the four winds of the brewing storm are speaking up in an interlude that harks back to the world perceiving itself in the opening track and being on the verge of articulating its feelings. Though they evoke millennial motifs in their refrain ("Hard rain falling [...]", 40/41), the four winds nevertheless insist on their benevolence: "We are not the dread storm that will end things / We're just your playful / gale-force friend / in the end times / Come to remind you / that you're not an island" (43; the storm's benevolence is also mirrored in the cautionary title of the track). And facilitating a breaking of the isolation of the poem's protagonists is just the function that the storm will perform at the end

of the poem.

Before, however, the remaining three characters need to be introduced. The first, Bradley in track 9, is a man as far removed from Sleaford Mods' precarious working class masculinity as can be. A Mancunian who made it big in PR and "moved south a few months back" (44), Bradley nevertheless wonders whether "*this* [is] really what it means to be alive" (45) and opens his rant with "The days go past like pictures on a screen. / Sometimes I feel like my life / is someone else's dream." (46) The whole track, titled "Pictures on a Screen" on the album (44-50), is a study in alienation that briefly touches upon the established leitmotif of "What am I gonna do to wake up?" (47) and finds its keynote in the refrain "I know it's happening, // but who's it happening to? // Has it happened to you?" (48/50), a sentiment that finds its echo in Sleaford Mods' "Have you ever wondered why you wonder why?" in "Drayton Manored". The second, Zoe, in track 10, "Perfect Coffee" (50-56), finds herself packing up her existence at the last possible moment in the middle of the night after she has been squeezed out of her flat by gentrification. Her part oscillates between nostalgic resignation and angry defiance, and strikingly she arrives at an inkling of the larger picture of people moving on ("The kids are alright. / But the kids'll get older." 55) and sees herself as part of a process of squeezing out other people elsewhere: *And so I'm moving on. [...] / I'll be the invader / in some other neighbourhood. / I'll be sipping Perfect Coffee / thinking, this is pretty good, // while the locals grit their teeth and hum / Another Fucking One Has Come.* (55-56) And finally, there is lovelorn Pious in track 11, "Grubby" (56-62), who finds herself, in a situation that mirrors that of Jemma's in track 3, in bed with a girl who she knows is not the right one after her great love Thorn left her earlier that summer. This existential though clichéd situation is evoked in the obsessive refrain ("I'm thinking of you / And the things you do to me" 58/59/ 60/62) which references the Sister Sledge 1979 hit "Thinking of You".

After this frustrating and very private moment, the storm breaks. Picking up from track 7, "Brews", track 12, "Breaks" (63-66), provides the narrator-mediated key scene of the poem/album, which is, as the subjectless titles indicate, brought about by the world itself. The narrator switches back to his/her listener/reader-inclusive mode as established in track 1 and recapitulates what has gone before: "So: here is our moment. / Frozen. / We've seen our seven / unmoving / in lonely homes. / It's been 4.18 / and dawn's still / hours off yet." (63) And then the decisive moment comes: *But watch now / as the breaking storm outside / animates the frozen moment. [...] Seven broken hearts / Seven empty faces / heading out of doors: / Here's our seven perfect strangers. / And they see each other. [...] Amazing! They shout. / You seen it?! they shout // As they walk towards each other [...]* (63, 64-65).<sup>19</sup> This climax segues into the final track 13, "Tunnel Vision" (66-72), whose title may remind the knowledgeable of Virginia Woolf's "tunnelling process" of how to "dig out [...] caves behind [...] characters [...] that [...] shall connect."<sup>20</sup> As Alicia vaguely felt towards the end of her dialogue with her deceased partner (track 5, "We Die"), "Everything's connected. Right?" (30). The title "Tunnel Vision" makes this ambiguous, of course, as the idiom stands for a narrowing of perspective rather than a broadening of it or even a transcending of its limitations. And indeed, the track provides a succinct summary of many of the grievances articulated by the poem's protagonists, but it links it up to the collective fate of the world with the lines "Thinking we're engaged / when we're pacified / Staring at the screen so / we don't have to see the planet die." (67), which in turn leads to the leitmotif question "What we gonna do to wake up?" again (68/69). Both poem and album culminate in a plea for acknowledging the guilt of the past and its consequences for the present: *It was our bombs that started this war. [...] It was our boats that sailed, / killed, stole and made frail [...] It was us who*

*turned bleakly away, / looked down at our nails and our wedding plans / in the face of a force 10 gale* (71). And the speaker, who paradoxically but tellingly reverts to an "I" after the "we" prevalent in the preceding narrator discourse, cries out in desperation "The myth of the individual // Has left us disconnected lost / and pitiful", ends with a return to the carefully constructed speaking position of tracks 1, 2, 7, 12 and of the recitative passages, which is now revealed in all its artificiality and ordinariness: "I'm out in the rain / it's a cold night in London // Screaming at my loved ones / to wake up and love more. // Pleading with my loved ones to // wake up / and love more." (72)

### Europe is Lost: Studies in Alienation

The track on *Let Them Eat Chaos* which most clearly pinpoints the feeling of individual powerlessness and alienation that pervades the present and brought about the Brexit vote and Trump is, as its title suggests, "Europe Is Lost". Esther, the worn-out carer, is "worried 'bout the world tonight" (15), a world in which everything seems lost. Her rant opens with the lines "Europe is lost / America lost / London is lost / And still we are clamouring victory." (16) This indictment of the Western world at large is then relentlessly played through in a panorama of current grievances close to home and on a global scale.<sup>21</sup> And it is the link not made between the two dimensions that is part of the problem: *Your kids are dosed up / on prescriptions and sedatives. / But don't worry 'bout that, man. / Worry 'bout // terrorists. // The water level's rising! [...] The animals - / the polar bears / the elephants are dying. / STOP CRYING START BUYING!! // But what about the oil spill? // Shh. / No one likes a party-pooing spoilsort.* (18-19) Starting out with a collective "we" more inclusive than the one constructed by the narrator, Esther slips into a second-person "you"-mode for long passages. And time and again she also retreats into her personal "I" ("I see it tonight / in the stains / on my / hands." 16; "I feel the cost of it pushing my body" 17). The latter finds occasional

respite in the one escape route still open to alienated individuals: "Working and working / so we can be all that we want, / then dancing the drudgery off / But even the drugs have got boring / Well, / sex is still good / when you get it." (17) It also pushes out towards collectivity again, but to no avail: "I am quiet // Feeling the onset of riot. // But riots are tiny / though systems are huge." In her frustration, the "I" then even briefly seems to approach the attitude of a pro-Brexit voter in a prose-passage: "And about these immigrants? I can't stand them. Now, mostly, I mind my own business. But they're only coming over for the benefits." This is followed by the cry "England! // England! // The blood of my kinsmen", but this momentum is immediately deflated by a laconic "And you wonder why kids want to die for religion?" (20)

Occasionally the relentless rhythm of the track is interrupted, and words spoken into sudden silence gain particular weight (marked by the absence of italics in the following quote). Most strikingly, Esther lets the hypocritical scapegoating tendencies of neoliberal society wriggle in silence after a harangue worthy of Jason Williamson: *politico cash in an envelope / caught sniffing lines / off a prostitute's prosthetic tits, / and it's back to the House of Lords / with slapped wrists. / They abduct kids / and fuck the heads of dead pigs, / but him in the hoodie with a couple of spliffs - / Jail him - he's the criminal! / Jail him - he's the criminal!* (20-21)<sup>22</sup> This is indeed the point where the visions of Kate Tempest and Sleaford Mods intersect. Taken together, they provide studies in alienation that cut to the heart of the current political tumult. So here's a starter package for future attempts at understanding what is happening now: listen to Sleaford Mods' *English Tapas* for what it was like on the ground. Listen to Kate Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos* for an early attempt at making sense of it and drawing conclusions. And then read Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger* to put it all in historical perspective.



1 Cf. <http://consequenceofsound.net/tag/30-days-30-songs/> and [ourfirst100days.us](https://ourfirst100days.us) or <https://ourfirst100days.bandcamp.com/> (accessed 16 March 2017, day 56).

2 Cf. <http://www.brexitthemusical.eu/> (accessed 16 March 2017).

3 Michael Hann, "Sleaford Mods: Invisible Britain review – an awkward ode to austerity Britain." *The Guardian* (26 Nov 2015). <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/26/sleaford-mods-invisible-britain-review-austerity-britain-documentary> (accessed 16 March 2017).

4 Alice Vincent, "Kate Tempest proves poetry has a place in pop." *The Telegraph* (11 Sep 2014). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/11089340/Kate-Tempest-proves-poetry-has-a-place-in-pop.html> (accessed 16 March 2017).

5 Alasdair Gray, "The Man Who Knew about Electricity" [1990]. *Every Short Story 1951-2012*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012: 398-413, 408.

6 I would like to acknowledge that my appreciation and understanding of Sleaford Mods profited immensely from Florian Meissner's inspiring M.A. thesis "Sleaford Mods: A Mouthpiece for the British Lower Classes?" (University of Tübingen, submitted December 2016).

7 See <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/sep/14/sleaford-mods-singer-jason-williams-suspended-from-labour-over-derogatory-tweet> (accessed 16 March 2017).

8 <http://www.invisiblebritain.com/about/> (accessed 16 March 2017).

9 Hann 2015 (see note 3).

10 Hann 2015 (see note 3).

11 For Williamson's comments on the Brexit vote cf. <http://www.nme.com/news/music/sleaford-mods-brexit-just-cant-ignore-things-anymore-1900981> (accessed 16 March 2017).

12 All lyrics are quoted as I hear them to the best of my capacity of decoding Williamson's East Midlands accent – with a little help from Internet lyrics archives if available.

13 The obvious allusion to the Bay City Rollers, a hysterically successful 1970s pop band/boygroup, is a bit tricky to decode. Yes, they were the epitome of commercial schlock at the time – but they were Scottish after all.

14 Cf. <http://www.spin.com/2017/01/new-music-sleaford-mods-b-h-s/> (accessed 17 March 2017).

15 Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. London: Allen Lane, 2017.

16 Kate Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos*. London: Picador, 2016. All lyrics are quoted from this source.

17 A BBC-produced video recording of an impressive performances of the piece in its entirety, accompanied by a live drummer and two laptop/keyboard-musicians, is currently available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xu5HL1Xl64> (accessed 21 March 2017).

18 As the poem is carefully arranged

on the page, / indicates line breaks, // double line breaks, and /// triple line breaks in quotation. Indentation, which is also very deliberately used, is not transcribed.

19 In one of the rare discrepancies between poem and album (another one can be found in the differently segued ending in "Perfect Coffee") the album omits a distinctly literary passage of the poem (65-66) which adds religious overtones ("this baptism") and direct references back to track 1 and 9.

20 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: The Hogarth Press, 1959: 61/60. The ostentatious literariness of the track's title may not be as unlikely as it seems, given that it opens with "The winter of our discontent's / upon us." (66) in direct allusion to Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

21 For the official video to this track, a collage of footage from these troubled times released 1 February 2017, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSVyyykaEOo> (accessed 21 March 2017).

22 In the repetition of the final lines and partly in their wording the album differs from the poem which only has a much weaker "jail him / or deport him" (21). Another striking though more predictable instance of words spoken into sudden silence is the repetition of "We are lost" (22).

