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The *Salut les copains* generation

EDGAR MORIN,
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In Paris on 22 June 1963, the French youth magazine *Salut les copains* celebrated its first year in print by organising a free outdoor concert on the Place de la Nation. The artists headlining the gig were young male and female pop singers who had been propelled to the top of the French charts thanks to the regular broadcasting of their music on the show *Salut les copains* (on private radio station Europe 1 since 1959), and extensive coverage in the weekly magazine of the same name (since 1962). The 150,000-strong crowd at the concert exceeded all expectations, but also generated a sense of moral panic in the media as worried commentators speculated on the dangerous mindlessness of such 'rhythmic' music for impressionable French youngsters.

Responding to this scare-mongering with his usual cautiousness and intellectual curiosity, the French sociologist Edgar Morin published, two weeks later and in the centrist newspaper *Le Monde*, a two-part article on youth culture and French pop. His piece not only took the new French fad for pop music seriously, but also became a reference point for all scholars of French popular music from that moment on. His text is presented to an English-speaking readership for the first time here, in a translation specially commissioned by *Popular Music*.

Morin is arguably most famous for his pioneering study *Les Stars* (1957), which influenced many scholars working in Film and Cultural Studies. Equally influential was his article on *Salut les copains*, in which he both noted the mostly 'excellent' quality of the music itself, and gave serious consideration to the enthusiasm of French youth for American-influenced pop music. Importantly, Morin used the phrase *yé-yé* (also spelt *yéyé*) to identify the new genre of French pop, referring to the repetition of 'yeah' found in many lyrics. The fact that this neologism has stuck in common parlance is testament not only to the concise creativity of his terminology, but also to the dynamism of the middle-brow press in France, which was willing to engage with intellectual debates on contemporary culture. As such, there is a sense of excitement in his text which vividly takes us back to the Summer of 1963, when the likes of Petula Clark and Johnny Hallyday shared the French charts with Elvis Presley and Paul Anka, as yet untroubled by The Beatles or Bob Dylan. Indeed, we find ourselves at a historical junction when French youngsters were irrevocably embracing pop music, but also when one French academic was turning his benevolent and critical gaze towards this cultural practice, thus constituting it as a 'field'.

It is therefore a great pleasure to present this seminal article in English below, thanks to an expert translation by Peter Hawkins. Peter himself has previously published on Morin, commending the 'method and madness' of this most prolific, interdisciplinary social scientist (see *French Cultural Studies*, 1997, vol. 8). Peter also paved the way for English-language scholarship on French popular music with his monograph *Chanson* (Ashgate, 2000). Before that moreover, Peter lived in France in

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1962–1963 working as an English language assistant, and actually experienced the *Salut les Copains* phenomenon for himself. While this brought a nostalgic dimension to his work on the translation, we are sure that it enables a renewed appreciation of Morin's vibrant prose and perceptive ideas on pop for all who discover these today. As Morin celebrates his 99th birthday at the time of writing, and over 50 years since his text was first published, it is a real privilege to enable non-Francophone readers to discover it.

B. Lebrun, Manchester, September 2020

The *Salut les copains* generation

by Edgar Morin
Le Monde, 6 and 7 July 1963
Translated by Peter Hawkins

1. A new age-group

The wave of rock 'n' roll that arrived in France with the records of Elvis Presley did not immediately give rise to a French rock music. There was only an attempt at parody, produced by Henri Salvador, in the style of '*Va te faire cuire un oeuf, mec!*' (Go break an egg, mate). The first wave seemed to roll back completely, but deep down it had reached the suburbs and residential areas, taking over the juke boxes and the cafés where young people gathered. Wild little groups of electric guitars were formed. They came to the surface at the Golf Drouot club in Paris, where the competition led to some bands being selected. These, such as the Chats sauvages (Wild Cats) or the Chaussettes noires (Black Socks) were picked up by the record companies. Johnny Hallyday rose to the top and was consecrated as 'the teenage idol'.

This rock audience, as in the United States some years earlier, was made up of boys and girls of between 12 and 20 years old. The music and radio industries realised with the first hit records that an audience of some 7 million young people was available as consumers; the young, driven by rock into economic citizenship, acquired for themselves record players and transistor radios and regularly and massively bought 45 rpm records.

From the Golf Drouot club to the concert in the Place de la Nation

The market opened up: rock moved on to the twist and the young singing stars varied their repertoire. On the Europe No.1 radio station Daniel Filipacchi launched the show *Salut les Copains!* (Hi there, buddies). The key word was not 'idol', as the record salesmen had thought, but 'buddies'. It was in a spirit of comradeship that 'Daniel' introduced the records and talked about them, often accompanied by Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, Françoise Hardy and Petula Clark. The twist ruled like an enlightened despot, tolerating other styles and feelings. The notion of 'buddy' was not restricted to the under-20s: you could be a 'buddy' even up to 30, as long as you had the indefinable 'buddy' spirit. Even Brigitte Bardot and Petula Clark (a wife and mother) could be 'buddies'. However, a jazz singer like Claude Nougaro was only a part-time 'buddy'.

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The success of *Salut les Copains* was huge amongst teenagers (how does one translate 'teenagers' into French?). The mass media adopted the buddies and their idols. They dominated the TV channels. A wave of 15-year-old stars came up behind the already 'old guys' Richard Anthony, Johnny Hallyday (for whom the age of military service seemed to sound a death-knell), Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy. These were Sheila, whose recent TV exposure gave a roaring send-off to her single 'L'Ecole est finie' ('School's out'), and Sophie, who won out with her pleasant 'Quand un air vous entraîne' ('When a tune sweeps you along'). In 1962, Filipacchi tentatively launched the magazine *Salut les Copains!*, which celebrated its first birthday with a print-run of a million copies, while in its wake the scout movement, the Catholic youth groups and the young Communists all tried to imitate the 'buddy' style. The Catholic *Bonjour les amis* (Hello friends), the Communist *Nous les garçons et les filles* (We boys and girls) jerked and twisted in the wake of *SLC*.

A declining music hall was reborn with the hordes of buddies; tours proliferated in the provinces, swept along by the two leading fanbases, the Johnny/Sylvie group and the Richard/Françoise group. *Paris-Match* confirmed for the generation of 'old guys' the triumph of the buddies, as it gave to the supposed love affair between Johnny and Sylvie the kind of major coverage normally reserved for princesses like Soraya and Margaret. *Ici Paris* fuelled gossip with the publication of the 'Memoirs' of an abandoned girlfriend of Johnny, whereas it usually only maintained its reputation by giving space to the former lovers of Brigitte Bardot. The apotheosis of the 'buddy' generation took place on one of the last Saturdays of June 1963, when the great 'buddy' showman Daniel organised a mass gathering around its stars. Some 150,000 teenagers came to the weekend *rendez-vous* and showed the sort of enthusiasm likely to induce panic in the adult population.

What is involved?

- The promotion of new *chanson* singing stars. In the front rank I would place Françoise Hardy, as a singer, songwriter and performer who transmutes all prose into poetry and all poetry into music. However, overall the whole generation of 'buddies' promoted by Filipacchi and Franck Ténot is first-rate (the two friends were previously well-informed jazz fans).
- The break-out and mediatisation of French rock and twist.
- An important development in the market for transistor radios and 45 rpm records.
- An important extension of the consumer market to a previously unexploited sector, that of teenagers.

This phenomenon, as a part of economic progress, cannot simply be reduced to this progress alone. The economic promotion of teenagers is part of the creation of a new age-group that can be labelled in any way you want (the words used are not interchangeable, but the reality is too fluid to be encapsulated in a precise concept): teenage or adolescence. I prefer the latter term.

The mass media (press, radio, TV, cinema) have played a major part in the emergence of this new age-group, by providing myths, heroes and role models. In the first phase, cinema created new adolescent heroes, who can be grouped around the exemplary image of James Dean. In the second phase, it is rock that provides the driving force. Yet all the forms of mass communication are involved in the process. Elvis Presley became a film star, just as Johnny, Sylvie and Françoise were perhaps going to do, in making their first film – the second Françoise [Hardy] taking her place in the wake of the first one, Françoise Sagan.

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The new adolescent age-group

Adolescence emerges as an age-group in the mid-20th century, no doubt because of the permanent stimulation of capitalism in the entertainment and creative industries, but as stimulation rather than creation. In the Eastern block and economically backward countries one can identify similar formations, as though the phenomenon were responding more to the spirit of the times than to national factors or economic forces. Even so, it was in the Western capitalist sphere that the phenomenon fully took shape, and because of the influence of the 'mass media'.

Adolescence as such appears and establishes itself when the initiation ritual declines or disappears, when progress to full human potential is gradual. Instead of a break, a kind of death of childhood and re-birth as an adult, a transitional stage is created, complex, ambivalent, a kind of biological, psychological and social space, which provides favourable terrain for the creation of an adolescent age-group.

Age-groups, whose organisation provides structure for archaic societies, disappeared from historical Western societies up until the 20th century. Somewhat strangely, new age-groups are tending to be recreated at this latest stage of evolution of contemporary societies. The adult age finds itself accompanied on one side by the teen-age and on the other by a nascent 'third age', by which the group of post-50-year-olds are to be preserved from redundancy.

The creation of an adolescent age-group is not simply the realisation of economic citizenship. In any case, this realisation signals the promotion of youthfulness. This promotion is a complex phenomenon that implies a greater and greater precociousness (in this, no doubt, mass culture plays a major role by introducing childhood, massively and extensively, into the already fairly infantilised world of modern adulthood). Amorous and sexual precociousness is associated with sociological and psychological precociousness (accentuated by the intensification of 'erotic' stimuli provided by mass culture and the constant erosion of taboos). So the teen-age is not childishness recreated as an age-group, but childishness turning into precocious adolescence. And this adolescence is able to consume not only pure rhythm, but also love, the number one commercial stimulus and the supreme value of modern individualism, just as it is also able to consummate sexual relations.

The creation of this new age-group occurs in an atmosphere of the promotion of youth values in society as a whole. The ultimate tribute: Maurice Chevalier promoting '*yé-yé*' at the same time as his 'A soixante-quinze berges' ('At 75 springtimes'), the song of hope of the 70-year-olds; to remain young is the ambition of the 'old fogey'. Effectively, in mind and in body, one can henceforth maintain one's youth. Even more than the promotion of youthful values, it involves a prodigious emphasis on the juvenilisation of adults in a world where 'permanent adolescence' is, if not yet the constant slogan, at least the secret desire that permeates in waves the lives of adults and old people.

This new age-group incorporates teenagers from different social classes: this is moving towards the creation of the huge salaried category of modern societies, in which the complex hierarchies and differences of authority, wealth, prestige and status do nothing to prevent the standardisation of consumer tastes and values, and first of all through mass culture. It is this that leads this standardisation, and it is in this sense that one can say that the creation of a new age-group is an aspect of the development of mass culture.

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Having said that, this new age-group is not completely homogeneous. Even in its heroes, it presents a complex face, or rather several different faces, from the leather jacket and bike chain (a pre-delinquent image in the view of parents and adults) to the beatnik, the rebellious bearded intellectual, heir to what the newspapers of 10 years ago called the existentialist; from the 14-year-old schoolgirl Claudine Copain launching her sweet insults at her maths teacher, to the very virile Johnny Hallyday. Yet one can recognise common features.

The age-group centres around:

- A common uniform, that changes in any case according to whether the 'oldies' hungry for youthfulness adopt it: so blue jeans, polos, leather jackets and blazers have featured and currently the fashion is for printed tee-shirts and embroidered shirts. The canons of teenage elegance have thus been created and are rapidly changing according to the norms of democratisation.
- The aristocratic look appropriate for adult fashion (onto which is grafted an extra dialectic created by adult pilfering and the permanent desire for differentiation from the pilfering class).
- A certain kind of feminine make-up (Cleopatra-style eye-shadow, face cream, no lipstick), some types of haircut, from the Ophelia-like cascade of hair to sulky braids, in other words, separate canons of beauty and seduction.
- The initiation into teenage consumer goods: record-player, guitar – preferably an electric one – transistor radio, a collection of 45 rpm singles and photos.
- A common dialect punctuated by superlatives such as 'awesome', 'fantastic', a 'buddy' language in which the term 'buddy' (*copain*) is the key-word, the password (is it wrong to see in this the newly 'twisted' form of the aspiration that once led us to talk of 'comrades' and 'brothers'?)
- Its communion ceremonies, from the party to the stage show, and perhaps, in the future, massive gatherings in the style of the one at Place de la Nation.
- Its heroes. A familiar cult of buddy-idols has been born. It is not particularly interested in 'voyeurism', so the exact nature of relations between Johnny Hallyday and Sylvie Vartan is not an obsessive preoccupation of teenagers. They would certainly rather the idol of the opposite sex were not settled or married, but they are not obsessed with their private life. This cult is thus more reasonable and less mythologising than that of the 'star system'. Yet where it is more intense is in the act of communion, the live performance, when the relationship becomes more frenetic, more ecstatic. (*To be continued)*

2. 'Yé-Yé'

In the film *Lonely Boy*, starring the Canadian teenage idol Paul Anka, all through the performance of the young singer can be seen admirers out of their minds, screaming, swooning, collapsing. This enthusiasm, which harks back to archaic ceremonies and reaches an ecstatic paroxysm, is frightening to adults. They are scared by the frenzy provoked by a 'twist' rhythm, forgetting that a drumbeat, a shout of 'kill the bastard' can unleash a frenzy of their own. What disturbs them is the exaltation without any content.

There is indeed an empty frenzy, unleashed by the rhythmic singing, the '*yé-yé*' of the twist. However, let us look a little closer. In fact, through the rhythm, this shouted, syncopated music, these '*yé-yé*' chants, there is participation in something elemental, biological. Is it not the expression, just a little stronger in the adolescents, of the return of a whole civilisation to a more primitive, more basic relation to life, so as to compensate for the endless growth of areas of anonymity and artificiality?

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In addition to the twisting sessions, these twisted gatherings are ceremonies of communion in which the twist appears as the medium of inter-communication, the ritual that allows young people to celebrate and adore their own youth. One of the meanings of '*yé-yé*' is '*we are young*'.

In any case, if you look at the lyrics of the songs, you find the basic themes of mass culture. So '*yé-yé*' comes together with love: '*With you I'm fine, oh yeah, yeah*' sing Petula Clark and Dany Logan: '*Oh! yes, darlings we love you even so, oh! yeah, yeah! Oh! Oh! yeah, yeah*' (in 'Vous les filles', or 'You girls'). To these themes are added other teenage ones such as teasing comments on girls by boys, on boys by girls, as well as school allusions ('Le Twist du bac' or 'Graduation twist', 'L'école est finie' or 'School's out').

The ultimately dominant meaning of the desired ecstasy, evoked by the '*yé-yé*', is sexual pleasure. The '*yé-yé*' mingles with the content of mass culture for adults, it is true, but we should not lose sight of its specific character. It involves us in a pure game, in a life structure that is basically justified by the sense of play and the pleasure of spectacle. This structure could be called nihilist, in the sense that its ultimate motivation is in game-playing. However, this game remains an ambivalent one.

On the one hand it opens out into that peaceful and consumerist kind of nihilism that forms part of individualistic personal gratification, and as a result, it harks back to adult mass culture and more generally to contemporary middle-class civilisation. On the other hand there can be found in '*yé-yé*' the seeds of a non-adherence to that adult world, from which emanate bureaucratic boredom, repetition, lies and death; a profoundly depressing world in the eyes of a young person with deeper aspirations; a world in which the lucidity of youth (not shared by all young people) sees only the failure of adult life: '*Je sais bien que la vie est brève. Et j'en ai fait le tour*' ('I know life is short. And I've seen it for myself'; Françoise Hardy:' Comme tant d'autres').

The exaltation of '*yé-yé*' can sow the seeds of the anger of the delinquent, the solitary revolt of the beatnik, but it can also be the purifying initiation into the state of being salaried, married, settled, gratified. It's because in this '*yé-yé*' are merged together indistinguishably all-consuming nihilism and consumer nihilism. In '*yé-yé*' there is an overlay, even a mixing together of content from mass culture and an absence of content.

'*Yé-yé*' is a phrase that sounds like the Dada of Tristan Tzara, and something even like 'gaga'. This contradiction or, if you prefer, this difference corresponds closely to adolescence, the age of preparation for adult life and of refusal of adult life, a particularly ambiguous age which carries within it a possible youthful revolt and a probable conformity.

So we must take on board the multiple meanings of '*yé-yé*', while remembering that the ultimately dominant meaning itself will not reduce the ambivalence. Indeed, I think the finally dominant meaning of desired ecstasy, called for by the '*yé-yé*', is gratification; this gratification in all its forms includes (and feeds into) middle-class individual gratification: enjoyment of a place in the sun, of goods and property – in a word, consumer gratification. Yet the deeper and more intense form of consumption is consummation.

'*Buddification*'

The new adolescent class appears as a microcosm of the whole society. It already carries in it the values of a developing civilisation – consumption, gratification – and it

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brings to this civilisation its own value: youth. Even so, although reflecting the image of the whole society, the new class tends to separate itself into a self-contained social group. Not aggressively (and doesn't this lack of aggression betray an even deeper trace of mass culture?). With a self-conscious indifference, which is perhaps its self-delusion, the 'buddy' universe hives itself off by declaring that 'we, the young, we are not old fogeys', as if it held in youth an unchanging and undeniable quality, as if its main problem was not precisely that of growing old.

Yet let us not be taken in by superficial appearances. The euphoria of 'we are young' hides a denial more than a stupid naivety. It reveals perhaps a particularly intense denial of a particularly intensified anxiety, that of ageing. For the advances of juvenilisation are also those of the fear of growing old.

In the same way, does the general 'buddification', I mean the elimination of the unpleasant aspects of existence, reflect a silly frivolity or the desire to gain an advance on an inevitable seriousness, on the real conflicts and tragedies of mankind and society? Adults are always surprised to see a primitive, striking, or simply alien force emerge in what they persist in seeing as harmless innocence. Do they realise that a broad judgement is difficult – difficult because the problem, which seems superficial, of a great twisting gathering refers back to the creation of an age-group, whose roots spread throughout the social fabric? In order to understand it, one needs a systematic understanding of the developing civilisation, which calls for a great effort of revision of received ideas in research and thought.

This is all the more difficult because the view of adults, parents and teachers is false, distorted, coloured from the start. Adults will need to practice self-criticism, I would even say hyper-criticism, of their attitudes, which in any case are too laden with self-justification. They will need to beware of their negative bitterness, their condescending sadness just as they may of the opposite tendency of indulgence, that would have them marvelling at 'this splendid youthfulness'.

There is a difficulty, in the end, that arises from the nature of the contemporary juvenile phenomenon and of the global phenomenon of civilisation. Just like adolescence, the adolescent age-group is complex, ambivalent. Within it, contradictory elements conflict and combine in multiple patterns. As a result, within the phenomenon itself, there is uncertainty.

Buddy-buddy

Can one say, for example, whether young people are satisfied or discontented? Doesn't the schematic formulation of the question falsify it? Can't one say that they are satisfied in some areas and discontented in others? Or perhaps just as much unable to be sure whether they are satisfied or discontented? Let us look further: is this uncertainty not based in reality? Does it not betray the deep feeling of that section of humanity that participates in the civilisation of well-being, of comfort, of consumerism, of rationalisation, that is pleased and delighted with it, but who at the same time senses a discontent in its well-being, a dissatisfaction of the soul in its comfort, a poverty of feeling in its affluence, a fundamental irrationality in its rationalisation? Does one know whether to be satisfied or dissatisfied with this society? Or rather, are we not at the same time both very satisfied and very dissatisfied?

In this world that harks back to youthfulness, and in which youthfulness relates back to the world, it is necessary to avoid over-simplifying ideas and crude

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judgements. Let us take as an example the frenetic delirium provoked by a live performance. It is what seems entirely regrettable to most adults. I myself, until I saw *Lonely Boy*, had always regarded these trances with a clinical and amused eye, drawing pleasure from diagnosing in our proud society some wilder forms of mysticism, some elementary forms of possession. With *Lonely Boy*, as if a veil was torn away, I thought I saw something more: a truth. I found the ecstasy created by a song, the trance provoked by a musical voice, moving, this violently emotional relationship with the rhythm and the music, even when accompanied by futile adoration, when this adoration is nothing but gratitude for the ecstatic experience.

A message of ecstasy without religion

There is a message of ecstasy without religion, without ideology, which has come to us through a prodigious infusion of black spirit, of uprooted *négritude*, from American civilisation, and which has become incorporated into 20th-century humanity. '*Yé-yé*' virulently illustrates the point. I am certainly one of those who would rather that ecstasies had a meaning, that they participated in a movement of human fraternity, of progress of the species. Yet I am also one of those who prefers to the corrupt and misguided fervours of the decades from 1930 to 1950, a kind of empty fervour, an inoffensive one.

In this way I henceforth welcome what torments and distresses many adults. On the contrary, many adults will be reassured by what will appear to some as signs of adaptation, not to life itself, but to the mediocrity of living in a mediocre society and in mediocre times. In this again, lucky is the one who can make a clear assessment. The adolescent age-group may well have the role of preserving adolescence. However, it also has the role of preparing for adult life. It is an enclosed channel that guides young people, through the necessary upheavals, towards adaptation to life in society. In the end these young people, the objects of so much anxiety and concern – who themselves repress all too deeply their anxieties and concerns, just as they repress their need for aimless fervour – head off towards adult life, in 'buddy-buddy' style.

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