

Three Theories of the Musical Gem

Weird Aesthetics, Minoritarian Composition, and the
Alchemy of the Evening

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“I shall speak to you of formation. The very desire for the new is merely the hunger of the soul seeking form. And souls shed past forms as snakes slough their skins.”

The Book of Monelle, Marcel Schwob

This article traces three possible definitions for a “musical gem” – one historical, one technical and one magical –, while unfolding this vulgarly-understood term towards a general aesthetics of indie music in order to ground it conceptually. The first part deals with musical gems based on the social assemblages that seem to produce the feeling of *weirdness* usually associated with them, through their peripheral relationality to institutionalised genres and forms of creation. The second part deals with musical gems via a tentative description of a method of composition that could be shared among them, a method hereby characterised as *minoritarian* and illustrated by indie rock’s dialectic of noise and melody. The third part deals with musical gems based on an intuitive analysis connecting them to various sets of values and expressive properties, with special attention to the correspondences between types of sound and types of symbol, or to a sonic *alchemy*. The whole effort is permeated by various speculative discourses from media studies, comparative literature, and phenomenology, but makes special reference to Simondon’s theory of crystallisation and Deleuze & Guattari’s theory of metallurgy.



Historical Critique: For a New Concept of Indie

Let's start with the general accountability of philosophical balances that is usually called a literature review. Delineating a theory of the musical gem would certainly mean passing through some consolidated theories of indie music, at least tangentially. While a "musical gem" and an "indie discovery" are not interchangeable, and shouldn't be equalised as conceptual categories, there is significant overlap between them, up until the point where the thin atmosphere of novelty permeating an "indie discovery" solidifies itself into a genre or a proper collective-perceived *ethos*. Rather, here, I want to catch what both "indie" and "discovery" might mean precisely before this turnaround, before the calcification of the affects that constitute this idea – the gem, a fugitive state of consistency. This should mean, then, understanding indie music neither as a formal grid of thought or method of composition (like a set of instruments and harmonic uses, sonic clichés, etc) nor as a position within and towards the industry (like a conjunction of anti-market attitudes, self-production, and self-distribution, etc). Yes, there are common formal components and external attitudes that often appear in what I'll call "indie" here, but I'd argue those are parallel, incidental, or correlational instead of substantiating.

Thus, a new definition of indie – and first attempt at postulating a theory of the musical gem – should not begin with the classical pormenorisation of Bristol bands that progressively delved into a noise pop sensibility, eventually founding their own independent record labels in the late 1980s. Nor should it begin with NME's legendary C86 mixtape or with those infamous Exploding Plastic Inevitable concerts at the Factory; although these moments, these fleeting events, carry with

them something, some partial and soft arrangement, of the complicated apperceptive pattern I'm trying to describe. Of course, Sarah Records' aesthetics and cosmovision, its blend of zine culture and flexidisc obsession that sought to display a fuzzy intensity of euphoric-melodies-depressive-lyrics, fixes a notional morphology whereas musical gems can systematically fructify – and no one, not even the maddest of purists, could say The Field Mice and Heavenly are not "indie" in every sense of the word. What I'm defending here, however, is the explicitly revisionist stance according to which a well-known track like Beach Boys' "All I Wanna Do" and a tropicalist prog ballad like Lô Borges' "O Caçador", and even some Erik Satie scores, might simultaneously be dubbed "indie". Conversely, I also want to argue that major acts that the average music fan tends to identify as indie, such as Lana del Rey, Foster the People and Tame Impala, might be far from fitting the scope of a musical gem and of this new conception of indie I'm articulating.

It's not a question of authenticity, either. I'm not thinking of a scale of indieness or a determinable factor of "indieability". I'm not trying to qualify or disqualify some bands and their sound using "indie" as a parameter of radiance. Instead, I want to see if I can trace from these bands some general attributes that could serve as models for the analysis of different (including non-musical and non-artistic) circumstances. For there are no indie nucleuses, only indie relations, networks, indie terrains, integration of zones, placements and functions of layered *strata*. To be indie is to establish a transversal cut within a para-social assemblage: to be connected to a main programme, whatever that may be – a top 40 music chart, a best-selling novel, a democratically-elected President, a gesture, a feeling, a norm –, through a

weird tuning of affinities and reverberations. Indie is what lives in the periphery of the Big, annexed to it but dispersing it in a void of disproportions, a crumbling of the Big's outer frontier into very small pieces and the wonderment that can arise from this dialectic miniaturisation [1].

At the same time, there is reason for the musical gem not to be defined solely as a consequence of its rarity. Even though the geodesic exploration of indie can be understood as an hermetic endeavour – an *ars obscura* of sorts, revelation of hidden truths –, there is a hard and unmistakable limit separating a musical gem from, let's say, a bad John Zorn b-side or a garage recording of your uncle's teenage band. A real gem is only valuable if it can be transduced from pure mineral to pure capital, if it can transpose those mediums directly, going from the absolute inert, dormant compression of worth to the absolute dynamic, vitalistic stockage of worth in a propulsion or at least a rapid metastabilisation [2]. The gem's appeal is exactly in this tensional pull, this being-launched, an extreme stressing of energy, when the stone passes between fields. The gem is intrinsically valuable due to its scarcity, albeit it only gains its social value when it *is found* and this value is conferred, and only because it has social liquidity. In the same way, the musical gem needs to have some effect, some impact, in the popular apparatus or structure of taste, it needs transferability or evenness with this apparatus. The amount of experimental music composed every year with a low number of listeners and low aesthetic value is enough proof of the detachment of quality and rarity. The gem asks for a fine tuning of some margin of foreignness and some capacity to actually mobilise popular sensibilities if needed be. For this reason, the gem's obscurity has to be the result not of a bizarre or ultraviolet leitmotif, a

radical base-drive that pulls it off the orbit of the main markets' maelstrom (as in the case of avant-garde works that can face such oversight) but of plain historical negligence and misfortune, a bad luck or bad faith which often drips into the character of the work itself and stains it in perpetuity.

That's why the crate digger is not so much a sorcerer that studies ancient magic texts or an experimenter with revolutionary perspectives as they are a gatherer and mercenary, a collector of archaeological items. They face the rows of a record store (or Bandcamp algorithms) like Humboldt faces the Chimborazo, like Indiana Jones faces the Well of Souls, the dense plurality of labels constituting the boiling ecologies of forests, inside of which may lie Xanadu, Z, Ys, Mount Analogue, inviting environments for audioarchivalistic practices of transvaluation. An *internaut*, having its passion for a compass, sees this macro-organisation of albums, search engines, curatorial techniques, these complex webs of knowledges and opinions [3], as a wilderness it can journey into. I'm thinking of the work of re-found artists such as Robert Lester Folsom and Benjamin Lew as the ruins of a lost city, but I suppose I could also describe them as the teeth or the claws of a creature at the brink of extinction, or as a mystical river, geyser, alluvial reservoir. Because the musical gem is mutable and inconstant, like a living being or a waterstream, and it is dangerous, it drowns us and bites back, it changes shape and becomes exceeding, it carries us with it. The hard form of these musical gems transforms, passing through evolutions, deteriorations, depositions, hypermnesic revivals, mechanistic reactions, multiphasic transitions.

This new concept of indie is temporal too, then, or fits a frame within a temporal disposition. An artist who wasn't indie at all

abruptly becomes the pinnacle of indie while its relation to a programmatic aesthetic ground (the Archive, the floor it stands on) changes. Or the artist suddenly loses its indie boundaries as more and more people discover it and associate their personal experiences with that artwork's aura. In this sense, there's some justice to the hipster's claim of immaculacy from the mainstream, since the sound we hear is effectively magnetised by its context (and by its other listeners, coalesced in an invisible, intersubjective community), as acknowledged by various phenomenologists [4]. This is even more significant in indie, since the essence of musical gems is lighter than most music, it is almost hollow, as if defined by a lateral syncing and haecceity – the way it couples to, through and against what it gets in contact with. The gem is a thin vibe that can easily be parasited, stolen, polluted, by what it phagocytes. "We must change so everything can stay the same", Lampedusa once wrote [5], and to this phrase the gem hunter might add: we must stay the same so everything can change.

For very similar reasons, a theory of the avant-garde is always a theory of deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations, seeing that what is original and what diverges freely from the principal track of segmentation is soon to be captured again, fossilized and nullified [6]. What's marginal is soon brought on to the main stage and softens its edge. The path of Modern Art, as an operation of unconditional inventiveness and overcoming of entrenched patterns that itself becomes outmoded and congeals patterns, is a clear example of this, as is the ostracising of the Romantic deification of those same patterns. Bergson's effort to rationalise the mnemonic heightening of affections in nostalgia can explain why a surpassed past might seem so alluring to us [7], but why does it sometimes

embarrass us, when we look back? How can the past feel so inferior sometimes? Is it because the forms are really obsolete, past their due date (a due subtly expressed by a social validity or compatibility), or is it because the new predicates maintain the premises of their own inversion? When I look back at my teenage actions and cringe, is it because that isn't me anymore and I regret whatever I represented, or is it because it is still – and eternally – me that's implied in this past, because there's some interlace that never shifts, some tiny prospect of permanence? The cycles of fashion, its trends of appropriation and exclusion, sketch an anatomy of intergenerational relations. Georg Simmel was particularly fond of tracing portrayals of this consolidation of progress, understanding the role of individuation, group assimilation and class pressure in the formulae of urban kinship [8], while other authors saw in these same mimetic chains of motives a tendency towards anxieties, rivalries, mutual disturbances.(9) In any case, what's clear from all of these theories is how aesthetic units "descend" epistemically through a bouncing system of paradigm destruction and coagulation, in which the indie *pathos* should appear as the nuanced spearhead of a line of flight [10].

Because, somehow, there is a detour in the process of transposition [11]. There is a fabled sublimation: *Angelus Novus* shies away from the static pool of catastrophes [12]. A component of randomisation installed in the gaps between generations prompts a couple of elements, artists and scenes, to be forgotten or fall out of the somewhat rigid fabric of officialised tastes. A good curation takes up the part of recovering these deviations and rehabilitating them in their worth, while a good music lover, gem seeking, tries to reconcile what's highbrow and what's lowbrow, or to find, in the ecumenical bowl

of “middlebrow”, footprints of some transcendental grace. The bad curation on the other hand, cements a supposedly objective archetype, a cold dead scheme of criteria for constant comparison, and lists a catalogue of works that serves no other purpose than to legitimise its own elitism. The bad music fan relies solely on the fashion cycles that define the mainstream, but instead capsizing it into a retromania that glorifies some quirky specificities that are exactly on the other end of the spectrum of taste (and those shall, too, become tacky, when the tide turns). Our quarry, our minefield full of gems, is precisely where the tide cannot impact, or where it can contemplate as to take advantage of the coming-and-going of the sea. What we could name an “indie aesthetics” – and what I’d like to name, more broadly, “weird aesthetics” – , very often borders fashion and follows it, for it is not a perennial or a-historical canon, but at the same time it is not determined by these trends, it speaks in its own voice, that needs to *be heard* by musical explorers and yet resists any vulgar type of decoding: for “what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?” [13].

Technical Critique: Extracting Melody from Noise

A second attempt at defining the musical gem would have to take into account those Bristol bands that I intentionally bypassed in my first attempt. Not so much to pontificate on their aesthetics in relation to an “aesthetic of the musical gem” (something that, most likely, can’t even exist) but to understand the technical strategy and *machinic phylum* [14] that leads, sound-wise, to the pregnancy of an indie timbre that can immediately alert its listener to the possible presence of musical gems. Of course, to this alert must coincide

a working radar, i.e., a healthy listening, already settled in what Husserl called an “illustrative intuition” or “donating fantasy” [15], a qualifying imagination that fulfills the musical object with an inexact yet clarifying sense of virtuality, of otherness, of phantasmagoria. We know that the forgery of gems is, *par excellence*, an art of nomads, berbers and barbarians, and that the goldsmith, the jewel cutter, is the subject of a gothic thaumaturgy or manipulation of inorganic spirits [16]. And so it happens, too, with the musical gem: there’s a toil to be actualised by the listener, who must inform and accommodate, refine and polish, with its overarching auscultation. We must become the nomads and barbarians; to find the oasis, we must walk through the desert.

Although, yes, there is some raw material to be found, and it is not hard to create some cartographic adherence to these gleaming oscillators called “gems”. The sound-matter is not a black hole or an amorphous, plastic protoplasm, but already a vessel of symbols, an inhabitable immanence, a world. What is the concrete sonic drive that suggests to the listener’s sensibility an indie incandescence? We see some clues. Let’s analyse a particular type of materiality – in the relationship between noise and melody – and then ask the reader to expand it towards other fields of composition if they so desire. Let’s write the first pages of the gem’s cookbook.

Intellectual notions of “noise” come first and foremost from information theory, which used this randomised type of sound as metaphor for a measure concerning the entropy of messages (their degree of uncertainty and spontaneous variation) [17]. More recently, authors like Cecile Malaspina [18] have navigated these notions to come up with a more robust concept of noise as the unrecognisable

forces that outline phenomena, and that therefore escape cognitive regulations and disciplinary interventions, drifting into interderminacy, dissolution, impossibility. It soon followed that the realm of musicology, where “noise” had always been understood more simplistically as a sound that is uncontrolled (loud, unpleasant, unexpected), started to absorb those alternative notions born out of cybernetics and build upon them. However, here, I don’t want to devote myself to a historiography of noise and melody that revises the hegemonic interpretations of it in the whole of sound studies. This would confuse more than clarify my second attempt of defining the musical gem. Rather, I want to start out axiomatically (that is, non-philosophically [19].), stating that while I consider the implications of these previous developments (such as “black metal theory”) to my typology of musical gems qua indie sensibility, I’m interested in drawing up new blueprints. I’d like to propose from the outset that there are only three ways to introduce noise in the tonal edifice of a song: as a form *out of* melody, as a form *of* melody and as a form *through* melody. Noise as the absence, the transfiguration and the traversing of melodic particles, respectively.

The first kind can be exemplified by the compositions that radicalised chromaticism in the 19th century, such as, and above all, Wagner’s operas. In its anticipation of Jimi Hendrix’s feedback loop [20], some pieces of *Gesamtkunstwerk* reduced noise to the level of alien species, invader of the musical state, nevertheless applying it as a celebratable anarchic turbulence, a negative thesis resulting in fecund counterfactuals of noise-engulfing contraptions. Wagner is not afraid to push the limits of musicality, helping to lead it to the era of post-tonality, with the emergence of stochastic, concrete, serial,

conceptual musics [21], which consider noise an useful but exogenous component (see, for reference, Stockhausen’s *Helikopter-Streichquartett*). This mode of relation between noise and melody encompasses most uses of noise as a central conceptual tenet, such as in works for which dissonance is a medullary engine of forces.

The second kind of introduction of noise employs it melodically, as a provision of melody itself, thinking cacophony in its own right, as its own instrument in the flux of a track. Rock, for example, integrates noise through an exercise of stylistic catabasis supported by the technological development of schizophonic devices for recording, combining, splitting, and superposing tracks in the 1940s and 1950s [22]. It finds, in clamours and turmoils of sounds, new tools, channels and concretudes, new colour pigments to paint with. It’s worth noting that when this use is taken to its utmost capacities, such as with some of the post-punk experimentalists (Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music*, Throbbing Gristle, Einstürzende Neubaten, Glenn Branca, some of Sonic Youth’s No Wave material), the second kind of noise-melody relation turns into the first kind again, as noise ceases to blend in among the melodies and saturates the music.

The third kind of noise imposition, though, which is the one that interests me as a sidecut of the musical gem’s body, is the use of noise within a melodic consummation, its customisation into a character of the melodic narratives of songs. This could be translated as an “extracting” of melody from noise or a provoked metamorphosis of noise into melody. It is usually a consequence of the creative torsion of noise, itself a celestial carpentry, a supremely delicate craft of an unstable ingredient. In this case, the *organons* are reversed: melody becomes

the outsider, the invader, and noise, the controller, the founder or modulator of postural gestures. This doesn't necessarily mean that the majority of songs of this third kind are made up mostly of noise in opposition to melodies, but only that in them noise works in ways that are commonly seen as melodic, and vice-versa. Melody and noise fuse, interpenetrate, mediated through a liminal cunning of balances, potency and fragility, the sacred and the profane.

These three categories shouldn't be regarded in terms of stages on a scale of progress, like my examples might have insinuated. Most contemporary works of extreme music – such as harsh noise, drone, and dark ambient – fit the first category, because even though they assume an edgier worldview, more congenial to the current times, they originate on ways of putting noise on the forefront of the sonic expression and result from similar political emergences [23] (and in this sense Merzbow and Boris stay exactly where vanguardists from 70 years ago, like Boulez, Xenakis or Varèse, left them standing). Meanwhile, composers from before the turn to post-tonality, like Debussy and Ravel, might fit the third category (like the musical gems they are!). In hip-hop, for instance, Death Grips may fit the first category, but Kanye West fits the second one very noticeably, and Madlib fits the third, despite the three of them creating in the same time and within roughly the same situational references. The three noise-melody relations I am proposing are then completely diagonal to any historical account of music.

If they are significant to me and to this essay, it is only because these relations can be articulated to represent a sort of minoritarian arrangement that defines the musical gem in its actual sonority, in the

way it tends to sound. It's not that noise is more common than melody in the musical gem or that noise grows in usage as the history of music unravels to let out more gems. It's also not about noise being in itself more indie or more advanced in terms of composition, but about how an specific management of the noise-melody relation opens up the artwork to other repercussions of linkages, minor or marginalised ways of assembling vibrational pulses. The musical gem can work with minoritarian behaviours in various of its structures (in its melody, as I've explored here, but also in its harmony, rhythm, duration, color, lyrics, attack, tessellation, externality, etc). A resonance of sections, an imaginative dismemberment, aerifies the connections between the elements of the sonic architecture, producing a strange mix of pop and experimental atmospheres, and suddenly the song is tied to what a gemologist would call a *metamorphic crystallization*, the formation of a precious stone [24].

In the case of this noise-melody relation specifically, the third kind of imposition I described usually acts as a minoritarian, becoming in musical gems because it is then that the quaint specificities of the song can surface as a nuanced inversion of features. The melodic matter seems made-up of noise, the noise sounds wet and sweet, and the texture of the song amplifies a sense of minor configuration – of being small not in number and not by accident but in essence and by plan [25]. This miniaturisation, though, is always non-full, non-terminated, but self-restrained, leaving deliberate intermissions. Think of Beat Happening and its calculated use of the power guitar and of hoarse-gut vocals, occasionally crosscut by a dainty femininity. Think of My Bloody Valentine and the shoegaze tradition it spurred, which embraced a

shiny and pollinated type of noise, noise as a life-world expression of the white *logos* of youth. More than markers of a generic distinction from mainstream pitches and ratios, there's an elevated sonic motility in these bands, or an embodiment of sonic intentionality [26] that discovers, in the concoction of the musical object, a porous projection and a subdirectional (or heterogeneous) filling of the soundscape. Noise doesn't feel like noise anymore.

As different as they might be, the styles of production of both Beat Happening's Calvin Johnson and MBV's Kevin Shields (the latter being decisively more meticulous) favour a contingent or spectral ornamentation of the main melodies they present, spurring new procedures of mixing, some of which are so wilfully amateurish (in a dreamy way) that fans can mimic their idols' creations with ease. Alas, this is what brings shoegaze, dream pop, twee, jangle, and other parental genres closer to lo-fi approaches of recording and mastering, eventually propelling a movement of "bedroom pop", in the last ten years or so, rooted precisely on the use of common hardware, on composing these genres without having to handle expensive high-tech. The ideology of DIY did not start with these shoegaze bands, of course, and isn't even central to them, but to that anterior punk dogma of autonomy of means – something better explained not by the lavish scandal of The Sex Pistols but by the energetic cynicism and refusal to properly learn of The Pop Group [27] (or even by the frugal timidity of Glenn Gould, perhaps one of the fathers of the indie sensibility). Nevertheless, production-wise, it's relevant how much the sound of shoegaze anticipates a *blasé* resignation or ingeniousness, a performance of *naïveté*, in relation to what can be done with just a couple of tools, without abandoning aesthetic preoccupations. The musical gem can

many times derive from this lack of ambition, from turning failure, hyperbole, disconnection, collapse, into artistic features.

In what I would call "feral pop", the musical dimension explored by maniac, passionate, lonely, and often extremely prolific singer-songwriters (those "diamonds in the dirt" [28] such as Daniel Johnston or R Stevie Moore), this underground and off-the-mark production is not only relevant but pivotal. Scratchy singing, low-pass filtering, phonographic imperfections (such as clicks from the cassette turning), overheard distortions, coughs, sneezes, nocturnal crickets [29]. These musicians navigate the potencies of errors and mild improvisation with a blank face. They know that mistakes must be aggregated instead of beaten. The song is not a math problem to be solved. This kind of musical gem is a sort of a spontaneous advent, then, seeing that it results from a decrease in control over the composition, an inhuman urge that disjoins the mosaic of the song. The noise-melody relation in Arthur Russell's most inspired albums can't be diagrammatised, only ever supplemented: it is a purple ray, a flock of birds, frozen vertigo, the Milky Way, the womb-of-all, a string of cheese, a final chime, a blissful cry...

Magical Critique: Sonic Ontology of the Evening

A third and final attempt of defining the musical gem, an attempt of defining it through a somewhat intuitive leap of faith or a magic-symbolic apprehension, might start exactly on this acknowledgment of the importance of integrating mistakes and improvisations into the artworks. When we learn to aesthetically centralise the historical sublimations addressed in the

first part of this text through the technical procedures of minoritarian composition addressed in the second part, the result is a sort of “indie essence”, captured in the form of diffuse ambiances [30]. To describe this essence might be a risky endeavor inasmuch as the chemical conditions supporting the musical gem are fugitive both in origin and in reception, as I’ve argued. Not to mention that the gem can crystallise due to several disparate reasons. But, I could list a few content-tenets (signs, emblems, myths, allegories, expressive properties) to draw a preliminary metaphysics of the musical gem. In this sense, the deliberate synthesis of miscalculations into a wider framework is characteristic of a mood that listeners easily perceive as deriving in gem-ness.

One of the axiologies pertaining to the musical gem could be based, then, on the value of failure, of being wrong or being second. For example, someone who enjoys indie music might not care if a band or album is regarded as the second or third best in a genre or discography. In fact, being second can give it even more charm. The gold medal is only more valuable than the silver or the bronze medals in the official positionality of honor, in the authoritative grammar of sports competitions and economic markets, but the indie *ethos* implies precisely the contestation of official categorical distinctions, as we know. Meaning the aesthetic value of the gold metal may be lower for the indie fan than that of the silver medal – an attribute of the materiality, the coloring, the brightness, of the silver medal might compensate for the lower ranking of accommodation in the prevailing consensus of worth. That’s why The Beatles are never the indie’s choice for the greatest band of all time, and why the gem hunter is always looking out for a “second Beatles”, a band that might be equivalent to The Beatles in stature, quality

or influence, but be generally overlooked by the public – hence the old “better than the Beatles” dispute, often associated with The Beach Boys, The Zombies, Todd Rundgren, Frank Zappa, ELO, etc.

While these artists are, indeed, examples of some of the finest jewelers of 20th century music, none seem more apt to receive the title of “second Beatles” to me than The Velvet Underground. Not only because the band founded and reinforced an indie sensibility just as much as The Beatles did a pop sensibility (1967’s *Velvet Underground & Nico* being the closest thing to a conjugating genesis for the musical gem, with its meticulous blends of tenderness and subversion, complexity and amateurism, high art and punk creed), but also because no other musical project in the history of popular culture embodied so many of these expressive properties that can be lumped in within the musical gem’s radius of plangency, its bandwidth of tight condensation (or, simply, its *Gestalt*) [31]. To mention one value apart from the value of being second itself, to follow up with another axiology for this indie essence so hardly articulated but so plainly manifested in a sound like VU’s: the value of forgetting and being forgotten. Which means being victim of a circuit of mediatic neglect – that some outlets, like MTV and Pitchfork, will capitalize on decades later –, while at the same time not caring enough to voice against this neglect. Lou Reed and John Cale, but especially Nico herself (her solo work is a testament to this), are the nonchalant misfits of the 1960s, occupying the dead spaces of hippie culture, spaces that may be equivalent to the dead spaces of hipster culture today, occupied as they are by unaligned crackpots like Jim O’Rourke (whose album title *Insignificance* it not a mere coincidence) or Zach Philips (who has dedicated his whole life to a *quasi*-anonymous and superbly curated independent label such as OSR Tapes).

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Another axiology pertaining to the musical gem's essence, relatable to these first two and also very evident in The Velvet Underground's sound, is the endorsement of silence as a rite of passage or as a manipulable (artisanal) paste. Nothingness, minimal intervention, conceptual layers of whispers, but most of all pure silence, live amongst the composition, even when it is noisy and strident (see Women's *Public Strain* for a reference regarding the noisy appearances of silence in gems). Strindberg used to say that within silence there's nowhere to hide [32], and silence is an open field, preceding any mold, any compass, any orientation. The side of indie that points to the chiselling of silence favours composition as a game between the spoken and the unspoken: it wants what's in the interplaces, the changes of phase, that separate a formulation from its outer limits, the background *stasis* of groundedness from the plastic contours of fruitfulness. The gem's silence is a way of fitting the unspoken in the spoken and *vice versa* and for this reason it approaches a sort of hauntedness, the occluded zone of a zero-degree presence [33]. Once again, we face the question of official and unofficial distinctions and how they are modulated as substances, how collective agreements "individuate" [34], in the case of the gem's formation. Fisher used to employ the term "weird" as a mode of "imaginal truth" [35], a sub-truth that somehow overcomes truth itself, and that's exactly what the value of being second, the value of being forgotten and the value of silence might simultaneously presuppose as their logical landscape. That is a fair description of the indie paradigm I'm trying to define.

What I've called "indie" since the start of this text is the formulation of an incidental labyrinth, perhaps. Labyrinths, broadly understood as figures of speech, are sub-

categories of synecdoche which produce obstacles in the seam of an object and itself. Just like a metaphor is a portable equalisation of two differences (which, through analogical juxtaposition, become a little bit more like each other), a labyrinth can be understood as a portable differentiation of a single sameness (splitting the one into a multiple). It creates folds that cut a straight line into a twisted path, that magnify the streak until it loses its ratio in a spectacle of self-binding, self-constraint and (later, inevitably) self-derangement. Albeit most times they are preconfigured puzzles, calculated riddles that require solutions, labyrinths are also the most common aftermath of the adventures of the *clinamen*. And when I try to explain the feelings I get from listening to avant-pop bands like Stereolab, The High Llamas or Field Music, I can only think of the *clinamen*. Because, in their baroque orchestrations of a solar matter through the bending of toy keyboards, motorik beats and Bacharach-infused vocals, they verge to a sort of unpredictable externalisation that inverts the conventional processes of chamber composition away from their optimal state and fully into the realm of the ludic. Solving the labyrinth is a creative demand; even more when this labyrinth is autopoietic, when it is based on a paragon of rapid actualisation.

In any case, there is indeed an essence to the musical gem which this wider indie *ethos* incorporates quite well, an essence that can be accessed through the compounding consideration of different axiologies (the value of being second, the value of forgetting and being forgotten, the value of silence, the value of the in-between, and many others I will probably fail to account for in this text). Labyrinths may be a good image or symbol to summarise such essence as pointed out by these expressive properties or values,

since it offers sufficient analogies for the morphology, physiognomy and anatomy of musical gems – Borges describes the labyrinth exactly like I'd describe an indie composition: it has no door, no centre and no outside but continually bifurcates, in concentric circles, around a beast [36]. Nevertheless, as a locked, fixed image, the labyrinth will still and always lack the diverse range of qualifiers that could impede it from becoming non-indie in the perception of the uninitiated (becoming the Classical Greek icon of a labyrinth, for example). No single symbol can operate this indexical transmission of the indie sensibility or any other complex *Stimmung* [37] – we're left to erect our own hermeneutics.

Just as it is true that there are majorly indie scents or tastes – tangerine, vanilla, coconut, honey – which cannot be interpreted as the essence of this indie *ethos per se* (even if considered as a group of features), some colours are more indie than others – let's say, a pastel or punch shade of pink is more common in indie album covers than a bubblegum or rosewood shade. That doesn't mean indie is determinable by resorting to this established table of associations. The metallurgy of the gem is not directly proportional to the application of the parameters it is culturally bound to. Even if it's true that the indie temperament, light, and ambiances are very discerning in the evening, for example, way more linked with the evening than with night or day, we cannot limit the configurations of the musical gem to the configurations of the evening through a synthetic judgement. Phenomenologically, such judgement might even be correct, insofar as the categories it entails seem to positively relate, and these relations appear to us in intuitive rushes, mediated by a critically-informed, collectively-built metonymic imagination (that is, by the waves of

remembrance between obfuscated parts and wholes [38]). At the same time, they might not be enough to truly relate categories from different fields like "musicality" and "evening" in terms of an emphatic ontology (a defined substance, passivity, causality, and scalability), like it happens in a translation between languages.

Notwithstanding, it is clear to the trained eye when a particular disposition of colour, scent, taste, temperament, light, and so on, evokes the pious fog of indiness, even if this fog is never grabbable, never close to being enunciated, never properly at-hand. Look at XTC's *Skylarking*. There's something off here about the combination of yellow and turquoise, about the use of extremely thin lines, the diagram of superposed rectangles, the stained texture of the backdrop and the infantile imagery depicted, something that automatically brings forth both the actual sonority of the album and, on the other side, its untold identities. This galaxy of indie traits approximates XTC's work exponentially to the category of a musical gem without changing a single note of the sound itself; it all curdles in this single unit of awareness. After almost half a decade of perceptual automatisms to those indie traits, some independent media outlets and blogs of heroic gem-hunters (like Gorilla vs. Bear, Aquarium Drunkard, New Commute, Monolith Cocktail), are even able to systematise their curation to the attunement of these aesthetic combinations and in this sense they become serial musical archaeologists, of the most earnest kind. But, it is amazing to go back to albums from decades ago, to debuts by Brian Eno, Prefab Sprout or Television, and uncover again the seeds of this now common indie parallels between sounds and unsounds, and understand how these albums shaped the aspect of the gems to come.

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The connections I just mentioned between the indie sphere and the feelings associated with the evening can also be examined further if we really seek to formulate a magical identity to the musical gem. Because there are precedents to this sort of transcendental correspondence between strains of sound and times of day. Gilbert Durand even says nocturnality is to shadows like melody is to noise [39]. That is, night and melody are both the dissolution of chaos into a new, refined substance, which is still chaotic, but is now built as a communion instead of a surmount. Durand's typology of the night rehabilitates the symbolism of melody to explain the imagination of dawn and darkness, but it leaves way to the opposite just as well: to think of the symbolism of the night in order to better explain a type of musicality. This is what seems to happen in the works of some Romantic artists, like Novalis and Tieck, who take up pretty clearly on this connection [40]. Musical composition is described by them as an alchemy of the night, or the embossing of night over non-night and vice-versa. Creating melody would be like extracting the night as a musical load, or using the night as a meta-image for sounds. To them, the night has a smoothness just like the melody is a softening of temporalities, let's say, and the melody and the night produce a similar ecstatic feeling of the suspending of duration.

It's not hard to speculate on the expansion of this logic to a symbolism of the evening, particularly when the night-melody duplicity is considered under the light of this text's second attempt to define the musical gem. An ontology of the evening shows us how it trails through the refinement of the contours between night and day. Feeling the evening is finding this border, as rarified as it is. Similarly, in the contemporary indie music I'm describing, melody and noise blur their limits to the

point of alchemical rebalancing [41]. A variance in this point of precipitation, in this edge between the day and the night of a sound, may mean the difference between a gem and a fossil. Both a gem and a fossil result from the geological accumulation of crude oil, this vicious, devilish, anonymous *hyle* [42], it's true, yet only the permanence of the evening can lead the musical petrol to its phylogenetic champion: a stone of volcanic glass. Small adjustments in this border between melody and noise, between night and day, might mean a shockingly different resulting frontier. This might explain why artists who are seemingly close in terms of genre, plot, elasticity, portability, and niche, might diverge profoundly in their capacity to produce gems; Elliott Smith is a master pearl waxer, Carissa's Wierd is a gasoline refinery.

This also goes back or partially explains again why the category of "weird" seems to fit the musical gem so well. It's as if the gem was non-linear, non-direct, in its aesthetic affirmation, in the migration between an artist's intention and the public's reception. We enter the indefinable (and ur-definition) of the evening. Not for nothing, there are no bigger musical minefields than freakish and relegated music scenes, or scenes from rarely noticed cultures and epochs, like krautrock, MPB, hypnagogic pop, psych-bizarre. Not for nothing, one of the holy grails of musical gems can only be a record that never existed in the first place, that went unfinished and unspoiled, and that spurred from and to a slow schizo descent: Beach Boys' *Smile*. This mythological merging of experimental rock, symphonic opera, *musique concrète*, tape manipulation, poetry, comedy, cartoons, mysticism!, presents the world with a devoted dizziness that would be responsible for the education of this generation's greatest gemoids (such as Panda Bear, Jens Lekman, Sandro Perri).

Just like 1967's *The Velvet Underground & Nico* is a virtual, immemorial genesis for the musical gem, 1967's *Smile* is its final destination beyond infinity. For – I finally realise – there's no better definition to the musical gem than these albums themselves, which, much more than words and concepts, behave as sets of preternatural fables for the gem's objecthood. The only thing I can offer is the advice that you go listen to them now, hoping that this magical aspect is suddenly sensed.

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Notes

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