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Past! Future! In extreme!: looking for meaning in the "New Romantics," 1978–82

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ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

Past! Future! In Extreme!: Looking for Meaning in the "New Romantics," 1978–82

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Abstract

First used in 1980, "new romantics" was a term applied to describe a British youth culture recognized initially for its sartorial extravagance and penchant for electronic music. Closely associated with the Blitz nightclub in London's Covent Garden (as well as milieus elsewhere in the UK), new romantics appeared to signal a break from the prescribed aesthetics and sensibilities of punk, rejecting angry oppositionism for glamour and aspiration. In response, cultural commentators have often sought to establish connections between new romantism and the advent of Thatcherism and "the 1980s." This article challenges such an interpretation, offering a more complex analysis of new romanticism rooted in nascent readings of postmodernism. It also shifts our understandings of the periodization of postwar British history and the concept of "popular individualism," arguing that youth culture provides invaluable insight both to broader processes of sociocultural change and to the construction of the (post) modern self.

> Nobody lives in the present [...] One cumulative effect of mass communication nowadays is that, though transient in intention, it more and more puts itself on record. So the music, manners and modes of the past are instantly and synchronously to hand in a way they have never been before. Revivals of style can go with ever-gathering speed. The cycle, rubbish-camp-acceptable-antique, has now become almost totally telescoped. Mass communication is like the memories in a mind half-asleep. Or like your mind when drowning?
>
> Paul Barker, *Arts in Society* (London, 1977)

> You take the best things from the past and you got it, you got it [style] sussed.
>
> Martin Kemp, *NME*, 29 November 1980

> I'm just saying that people should do what they want to do, with clothes or whatever you're into.
>
> Steve Strange, *Smash Hits*, 22 January 1981

This article comes with a soundtrack. To hear the songs referenced throughout the article, please open this free Spotify playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0WDl6QST79Ze6hAnISsOzw or this free YouTube playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrVKSRUUvIXQYlzzKZrXEs3JmksIaOeHN

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The video starts with piano chords and a synth-propelled rhythm. The song is "Visage" by Visage, a chart-bound record released in July 1981. Steve Strange (Stephen Harrington) looks at the camera, the frame cutting to-and-from a pencil-drawn sketch of his elaborate makeup coming into being. As the song kicks in, Strange heads to the Blitz nightclub in a chauffeur-driven vintage car. He is accompanied by Perri Lister and Lorraine Whitmarsh, two women dressed chicly and identikit: black hats, grey suits, belts around their waist, red lipstick to offset mascaraed eyes. Poses are pulled as Strange sings the first verse: "New styles. New shapes. New modes: that's the role my fashion takes." As they enter the club, down steps into a new space reimagined from a small wine bar into an alluring simulacrum conjuring Hollywood images of speakeasy America or a pre-war European cabaret, smartly dressed bar-flies turn to stare, watching as Strange and his companions promenade. "Oh my visage," he croons, reveling in the attention. Next, they enter a fashion shoot and turn the pages of a mocked-up *Vogue* with Strange on the cover in drag. "Vis-u-als. Mag-a-zines. Reflect styles: past, future, in extreme." Strange's outfit changes from scene to scene: now he exhibits a bolero look caught in the slow-motion flicker of a celluloid light that complements the pulsating disco beat. He and his associates watch themselves on the screen, moving before it, then tearing it down as they turn to face the glare. They re-enter the club and step onto the dancefloor, their studied poise caught in a smoky haze. New outfits again. They have become their own movie. They have stepped out of a magazine. Fantasy becomes life. Life becomes fantasy. The synthetic combines with the imaginative to invent glamorized visions of the past caught freezeframe in the present. "Oh my visage," Strange croons once more. "Oh my visage."[1]

The affectations of Strange and his group have since become a defining motif of the 1980s. As co-convenor, with Rusty Egan, of a series of ongoing club nights at Billy's in Soho and then Blitz in Covent Garden, Strange helped spearhead a distinct youth cultural style that served also to reinvigorate London's nightlife. After much prevarication, "new romantic" became the media label of choice, a term first associated with Blitz regulars Spandau Ballet in the early months of what became a stellar pop career. Following Betty Page's (Beverly Glick's) "The New Romantics: A Manifesto for the 80s," a feature on the band that appeared in the music paper *Sounds* in September 1980, the moniker entered the cultural lexicon. Writers both astute and bemused tried to explain this mishmash of elaborate fashion and electronic sounds that stoked "controversy in the youth market" for the "first time since the Sex Pistols [and punk]."[2] Visage, Spandau Ballet, a reconfigured Ultravox, and, a little later, Culture Club emerged through Blitz to become household names. Alongside Duran Duran and others, they rode a "new pop" wave that washed over America in another "British invasion" primed to galvanize a music industry adapting to a range of technological changes and challenges.[3] The sartorial and musical influences of David Bowie and Roxy Music were common denominators: Bowie, in return, recruited Strange (along with Blitz regulars Judith Frankland, Darla Jane Gilroy, and Elise Brazier) to appear in the video for his number one single "Ashes to Ashes" (1980). Style-wise, highly individualized looks were continually adopted and adapted across genders, drawing from what was soon read as a "postmodern" plundering of the past. These included historic militaria and iconic cinema; Weimar chic and TV sci-fi; decorated religious garb and Japanese geisha; Little Lord Fauntleroy and Elizabethan court dress; a "psychedelic Regency" look of silk and velvet that *New Society*'s Yvonne Roberts described as "Lucille Ball meets Beau

[1] Visage, "Visage" b/w "Second Steps" (Polydor, 1981).

[2] Ian Birch, *The Book With No Name* (London, 1981), 13; Betty Page, "The New Romantics: A Manifesto for the 80s," *Sounds*, 13 September 1980, 32–33. The coinage of "new romantic" is often assigned to Richard James Burgess, who produced Spandau Ballet's first records and released his own synth-driven music under the name Landscape.

[3] Dave Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and New Pop* (London, 2011 ed.). The term "new pop" had come into regular usage by 1981, with Andy Gill first defining it as "that which channels the sensibility of old pop through new instruments," in Andy Gill, "New Pop," *NME*, 12 January 1980, 23.

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Brummell," replete with makeup and hair set just-so.[4] To this end, Strange remembered scrambling time by "constantly looking through history books, old film magazines and design articles, trying to come up with ideas for new images," while his friends experimented similarly with a range of outré cuts, cloths, and accoutrements (Figure 1).[5] Though always a contested label, new romanticism briefly encompassed everyone from the Burundi-beat piracy of Adam and the Ants to the languidly-somber avant-pop of Japan and the futuristic dance performances of Shock. It became a catch-all term to define what one short-lived magazine recognized as—and thus named itself after—the *New Sounds New Styles* (1981–82) of a new decade.

The media of the time soon registered a fascination with those the *Daily Mail* described in late 1978 as "heavily made-up [...] poseurs" and "peacocks" trying "to bring a little bezazz and brightness to their lives."[6] Scholars, however, have shown scant interest in the new romantics. As the 1980s unfurled, some attention was paid to what Simon Frith recognized as a shift in pop's critical focus from "the forces of production to the moment of consumption." This meant that new romantics were used as an example of a fracture developing between those holding hard to punk-defined modes of sociocultural critique and others succumbing to "packaged narratives of desire."[7] Read as a continuation of 1970s glam, new romantics embraced what the influential music writer Simon Reynolds later described as "fantasy and escapism," informing and responding to the divergent "post-punk" stylings of youth culture indicative of the period.[8] Indeed, Jon Stratton's 2022 *Spectacle, Fashion and the Dancing Experience in Britain* concluded that new romantics "exemplified" the "totalising combination of lifestyle consumer goods within the capitalist order, where mundane life was transformed by way of excess [...] into spectacle."[9]

Historians interested in questions of gender and sexuality have on occasion interrogated the distinctive stylings of the "Blitz Kids" (Figures 2–3). Stan Hawkins and Michael Bracewell both applied the concept of the dandy to position the new romantics' "feigned masculinity" and fearlessness of effeminacy as an extension of pop's wider reimagining of gender performance.[10] Blitz became what Shaun Cole called a space of "creative self-expression," where genders merged and "a whole host of new images [opened up] for men's dress."[11] But as Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton have recognized, this meant signifiers of femininity were often colonized by men who impinged on the "multiplicity of selves" available to women keen to "explore the shifting relationship between being and appearance, [between] seeing and being seen."[12] If the model and singer Ronny could switch

[4] Yvonne Roberts, "The Electronic Eighties," *New Society*, 7 February 1980, 290–92.

[5] Steve Strange, *Blitzed! The Autobiography of Steve Strange* (London, 2002), 55. Strange remembered the theatrical costume shop, Charles Fox, as an invaluable source of clothing and makeup, but see *i-D* 2 (1980), 19, for reference to Bermans and Nathans.

[6] Charles Catchpole and Kathy Phillips, "The Guy and the Girls," *Daily Mail*, 11 December 1978, 20–21. See also Christina Appleyard, "Blitz Kids Let Their Hair Up," *Daily Mirror*, 3 March 1980; Liz Smith, "Dandies in Hand-me Downs," *Evening Standard*, 17 March 1980; Andy John, "Just Dandy," *Daily Star*, 8 April 1980; Michel Jaffe, "I Dress, Therefore I Am, I Think," *Sunday Times*, 27 April 1980; Cathy Couzens, "Weirdies," *Daily Star*, 29 May 1980; Christina Appleyard, "Coming Up Poses," *Daily Mirror*, 2 October 1980. For the lack of scholarly attention, see Andy Bennett, "Fade to Grey: The Forgotten History of the British New Romantic Movement," in *Lost Histories of Youth Culture*, ed. Christine Feldman-Barrett (Bern, 2015), 51–63.

[7] Simon Frith and Harold Horne, *Art in to Pop* (London, 1987), 143–45.

[8] Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (London 2005), 326; Simon Reynolds, *Shock and Awe: Glam and its Legacy from the Seventies to the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2016).

[9] Jon Stratton, *Spectacle, Fashion and the Dancing Experience in Britain, 1960–1990* (London, 2022), 162, 180.

[10] Stan Hawkins, *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture* (Farnham, 2009); Michael Bracewell, *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London, 1997), 187–210.

[11] Shaun Cole, "New Styles New Sounds: Clubbing, Music and Fashion in 1980s London," in *80s Fashion: From Club to Catwalk*, ed. Sonnet Stanfill (London, 2013), 36–53; Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2000), ch. 12.

[12] Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women and Fashion* (London, 1989), 35–57; Caroline Evans, "Dreams That Only Money Can Buy, Or the Shy Tribe in Flight from Discourse," *Fashion Theory* 1, no. 2 (1997): 169–88.

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Figure 1. Vivienne Lynn and Steve Strange. Photograph: Derek Ridgers.

from looking immaculately stern to Dietrich-androgenous (providing a template for Annie Lennox in the process), then pictures from the time also reveal women in an array of styles compiled to present a rarefied female glamour. By contrast, a band such as Duran Duran was able to construct and perform a post-Bowie "masculinity not yet seen in the absence of the association with homosexuality, and not pejorative in any way." "Gay/straight" semiotics were blurred; the feminine was absorbed rather than rendered

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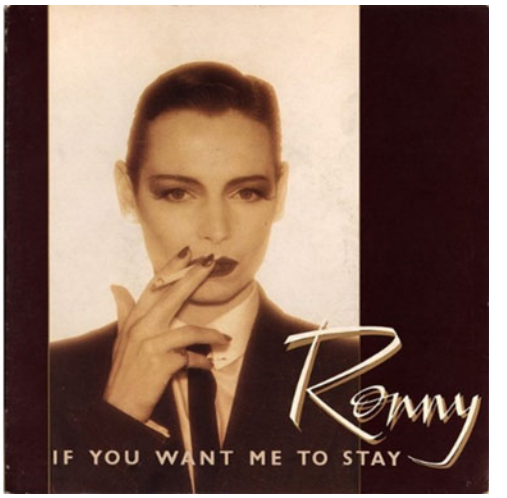

Figures 2–3. Record covers for Visage and Ronny, both 1981.

abject; masculinity was resignified to present an alternative maleness.[13] The boys, it seemed, could have it both ways.

Seeing new romanticism as a spectacular site of desire and/or gender reimagining reveals a youth culture navigating, informing, and absorbing broader processes of sociocultural and socioeconomic change. Yet popular histories of the period remain obsessed with supposed parallels between new romanticism and the "new beginning" promised by Margaret Thatcher in May 1979, imbuing 1980s pop with an aspirational business acumen that strove for success and therefore equated to "Thatcherism."[14] To explain, Kari Kallioniemi argues that the marketing of new romanticism (and 1980s pop music in general) became interdependent on a politics and economics that at once facilitated and castigated the (primarily working-) class, gender, and sexual identities embraced by those within the original Blitz milieu.[15] Simultaneously, "The Story of the New Romantics" remains—in the media-framed popular memory—the preserve of a few close to the scene.[16] In these autobiographical accounts, relations between Blitz and Thatcherism recur, sometimes accepting and sometimes denying the connection. Blitz certainly did host an array of future pop stars, writers, stylists, artists, and designers who helped shape the form and temper of the 1980s. But

[13] Brian M. Peters, "Androgyny, Masculinities and the Re-gender Aesthetics of the New Wave: Duran Duran and the Second British Invasion," *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 1, no. 3 (2016): 297–313. For a somewhat different "way in," see Emily A. Bernhard-Jackson, "'Bliss Was It In That Shirt To Be Alive': Connecting Romanticism and New Romanticism through Dress," in *Rock and Romanticism: Post-Punk, Goth, and Metal as Dark Romanticism*, ed. James Rovira (London, 2018), 45–60.

[14] Michael Hann, "Spandau Ballet: The Sound of Thatcherism," *The Guardian*, 25 March 2009; Andy Beckett, *Promised You a Miracle: UK 80-82* (London, 2015), 185–206; Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: Britain, 1974–79* (London, 2018), 735; Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979–82* (London, 2020), 291–97.

[15] Kari Kallioniemi, "The Sound of Thatcherism on Vinyl: New Pop, Early Neo-Right Aspirations and Spandau Ballet," *Journal of European Popular Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017), 125–38; Kari Kallioniemi, "New Romantic Queering Tactics of English Pop in Early Thatcherite Britain and the Second British Invasion," *Radical Musicology* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–30.

[16] Robert Elms, *The Way We Wore: A Life in Threads* (London, 2005); Dylan Jones, *Sweet Dreams: The Story of the New Romantics* (London, 2020); Dave Rimmer, *New Romantics: The Look* (London, 2003); Graham Smith and Chris Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes: Punks, Poseurs, Peacocks and People of a Particular Persuasion* (London, 2011); David Johnson, "Spandau Ballet, the Blitz Kids and the Birth of New Romantics," *The Observer*, 4 September 2009. For documentaries, see Sharon Walker, dir., *The New Romantics: A Fine Romance* (London, 2001); Bruce Ashley and Michael MacDonald, dirs., *Blitzed: The 80s Blitz Kinds Story* (London, 2020). Better is Kevin Hegge, dir., *Tramps: The Death of Punk, The New Romantics. The Art of Survival* (London, 2022).

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accounts of new romanticism are too often teleological. In other words, they are recounted to chart the success and renown of certain Blitz habitués or to underscore an often-facile correlation between parliamentary politics and concurrent shifts in style, leisure, media, and consumption.

Contemporary interpretations of the formation of new romanticism tell a different story. Exhuming the influences evident through Blitz and performances such as the video for "Visage" allows new romantics to be understood in the process of *becoming*, during which time the possibilities of what Raymond Williams called an "emergent culture" remained mutable and open-ended.[17] In reclaiming texts from the period, the multi-accentuality of (proto-)new romanticism becomes visible, exposing what its cultural configurations were deemed to *mean*—or signify—at the moment of codification and commercialization.

If "new media mediates old media,"[18] then new romanticism epitomizes the experimentation with new forms of media that transformed the cultural terrain over the late 1970s/early 1980s. This was a time when polaroids, videos, cassettes, and Walkmans became commonplace; when changes in printing techniques helped generate a widening array of colorful and glossy magazines with innovative graphic design; when synthesizers and sequencers began transforming pop's sound; when branding and advertising techniques had profound cultural ramifications.[19] Yet proto-new romanticism's initial embrace of technology came with a studied alienation that embodied long-standing fears of automation. It traded in both nostalgia and dystopia, aestheticized for an age yet to come.

These new media and technologies enabled elaborate modes of—sometimes fleeting, sometimes enduring—self-creation and self-reinvention.[20] New romanticism thus exposed how the intricacies of selfhood were encountered and constructed through a nexus of mediated image and spectacle.[21] New romantics forged an array of identities from "looks" they adopted, then adapted from visual culture. They performed the multiplicity and instability of a modern self that could forever be reinvented and reproduced, feeding into early postmodern readings of the late twentieth century. Many Blitz kids—including Boy George (George O'Dowd) and Steve Strange—were themselves willingly commodified to become "agents and objects" of cultural production, their assembled self-identities projected and fragmented across the realms of pop music, fashion, and tabloid media.[22]

Commodification and consumer behavior are central to our understanding of postwar British culture.[23] What became new romanticism was at once a product of trends in

[17] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977).

[18] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, 1999). There are various strands of and approaches to media archaeology. For a good "way in," see Wanda Strauven, "Media Archaeology: Where Film History, Media Art, and New Media (Can) Meet," in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Julia Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam, 2013), 59–78.

[19] Rick Poyner, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (London, 2003).

[20] This has been coming for some time. See Matt Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See the Peepshow': Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921–1922," *Past and Present* 207, no. 1 (2010): 215–49; Matt Houlbrook, "Commodifying the Self Within: Ghosts, Libels, and the Crook Life Story in Interwar Britain," *Journal of Modern History* 85 (June 2013): 321–63.

[21] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991); Roberta Sassatelli, "Self and Body," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford, 2012), 633–53; Penny Tinkler, "Teenagers, Photography and Self-Fashioning, 1956–65," in *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasures in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson, and Mark J. Crowley (London, 2015), 87–101; Joanne Finkelstein, *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture* (London, 2007). The term "adolescent bricolage" comes from Peter Bailey, "Jazz at the Spirella: Coming of Age in Coventry in the 1950s," in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London, 1999), 22–40.

[22] Houlbrook, "Commodifying the Self Within," 361.

[23] Rappaport, Dawson and Crowley, "Introduction," in their *Consuming Behaviours*, 1–18; Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-century Britain* (London, 1996); Frank Mort, "Boy's Own? Masculinity, Style and Popular Culture," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London, 1998), 193–224; Frank Trentmann, "Knowing Consumers—Histories, Identities, Practices: An

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consumption *and* an attempt to escape high-street uniformity. The objective was to stand out; to look *better*; to be distinct, original, and different; to be set against—as much as escape from—the banalities of social and stylistic routine. Hence the emphasis on bespoke design and stylistic bricolage; but also the untethered recycling of stylized images from the past. The tensions between originality and reconstruction, between past and present, between agency and the constraints of social and commercial mores, between marginal and mainstream, between queer and heteronormative are central to parsing new romanticism's engagement with and contribution to Britain's consumer culture.

Consequently, new romanticism helps us to reconsider the post-1945 period in terms not limited to the overly-determined periodization of "consensus"/"social democracy" and "Thatcherism"/"neoliberalism."[24] What was initially described as a "cult with no name," like the 1980s themselves, might just as well be understood as the product of preexisting developments in technological, sociocultural, and socioeconomic change. By recognizing how longer processes of structural and social transformation framed and underpinned late twentieth-century youth culture, we can understand shifts in discourse and sensibility that both explain and repurpose our postmodern conceptions of time and space.

Like some new romantic looking for the TV sound[25]

The basic back story has been told a number of times and goes something like this. New romanticism signaled a distinct moment along a cultural trajectory that ran through David Bowie, Roxy Music, soul clubs, gay clubs, punk, disco, and Europhilia toward inspiring a whole host of stylistic ingenuities over the 1980s. Billy's, the small club in Soho where Steve Strange and Rusty Egan presented "Bowie nights" on Tuesdays in late 1978, marked the conception. Blitz, from February 1979 through October 1980, served as the incubator for much proto-1980s creativity, where fashion and aspiration found synergies to fuel new media, music, and lifestyles (Figures 4–5). Born of Blitz came pop stars such as Spandau Ballet and Boy George, ready to revitalize the charts and fill the pages of a pop-centric *Smash Hits*, soon to become the best-selling music magazine of the 1980s. Their coming of age was ornamented by designers fresh from St Martin's and other London art or fashion schools experimenting with styles en route to prestigious careers, among them Michele Clapton (whose costume designs would win her a BAFTA and three Emmys between 2009 and 2016) and the milliner Stephen Jones (OBE). Holding court and managing the door with discernment was Strange, who—like Boy George and Marilyn (Peter Robinson)—cultivated his own distinctive look, playing with and/or wholly subverting notions of masculinity. Egan's job was to provide the soundtrack, moving from the assuredly erudite glam-rock-turned-electronic-pulsebeat of Bowie and Roxy Music toward European electronica and early synth-based pop to herald an eclectic mix of music—e.g. Kraftwerk, Gina X, Telex, John Foxx's Ultravox!, The Normal, Fad Gadget, The Human League, Japan, Simple Minds—that rejected rock's clichés and envisioned a future world of clubs not gigs; of dancing not spectating; of dressing-up not dressing-down; of pop stars not grizzled rockers; of elongated 12-inch singles and stylized videos.

Close by, eager scenesters and fashionistas found space to propagate what they recognized as a "new movement." This allowed Robert Elms to write features for *The Face* and,

Introduction," in his *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2006), 1–27; John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880–1980* (Harlow, 1994).

[24] Stephen Brooke, "Living in 'New Times': Historicizing 1980s Britain," *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (2014): 20–32; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Aled Davies, and Ben Jackson, "A Neoliberal Age?," in *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s*, ed. F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, A. Davies, and B. Jackson (London, 2021), 1–29; Jim Tomlinson, "De-industrialization Not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-War British History," *Twentieth Century British History* 27, no. 1 (2016): 76–99; Matthew Hilton, Chris Moores, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, "*New Times* Revisited: Britain in the 1980s," *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (2017): 145–65.

[25] Duran Duran, "Planet Earth" b/w "Late Bar" (EMI, 1981).

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Figures 4–5. Melissa Caplan and Stephen Linnard. Photographs: Derek Ridgers.

with Steve Dagger and Chris Sullivan, ensure new romanticism fed back to embrace a mod-inflected soul boy heritage.[26] Blitz provided a "mutual admiration society for budding narcissists," Elms insisted: "[A] creative environment where individualism was stressed and change was vital."[27] Though inspired—like Strange and Egan—by the style and energy of the Sex Pistols, and the ways their manager Malcolm McLaren manipulated the media and the music industry to construct a recognizable scene and subculture, they recoiled from the affected yobbishness and earnest social realism that ostensibly defined "punk" by 1978–79. "Punk was a fashion," Sullivan insisted. "It wasn't anything to do with politics and really angry kids."[28] Instead, he and others began to imagine, and then start, their own clubs and pop groups, reviving the zoot suit and delving into sounds from the non-rock past (jazz, swing, funk, soul, salsa, Dietrich, Piaf, Sinatra). A glossy "style press"—*The Face*, *i-D*, *Blitz*—emerged in 1980 to disseminate the aesthetic awareness associated with Blitz, meshing music with fashion, design, and art to further eclipse the once preeminent music press (*NME*, etc.) and evolve toward catalogues of cultural consumption that pertained to construct confident and continually updating selves. By 1983–84, both the pop charts and London's clubland were seemingly transformed. Elms and Dagger had respectively propagated and managed Spandau Ballet to stardom; Sullivan had opened the uber-hip WAG club in Wardour Street; Dylan Jones—later to collate the most extensive oral history of new romanticism—had found his way to *i-D,* from where the briefly ubiquitous Perry Haines served time as a "consultant" to globetrotting Duran Duran; Boy George's Culture Club had broken America on the back of MTV; stylistic motifs associated with new romanticism had infused Paris catwalks and fed into the visual palette of film and design. The once

[26] Page, "The New Romantics," 32–33; Robert Elms, "Spandau Ballet: An Immaculate Conception," *The Face*, October 1980, 8–10; Robert Elms, "The Cult With No Name," *The Face*, November 1980, 22–27; Ian Birch, "'You Look Fantastic'...," *Time Out*, 30 January–5 February 1981, 12–13; "How to Make it Big," *i-D* 2 (1980), 17–18.

[27] Elms, "The Cult With No Name," 23.

[28] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 76.

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would-be trendsetters of London's suburbs, squats, and housing estates now defined the times from *inside* the media, fashion, and music industries.

Of course, a messier history exists beneath the sheen of eighties success. Most obviously, the prevailing narrative has become overwhelmingly male and, given the "gender-bending" heralded as a defining feature of the Blitz crowd, oddly heteronormative. The "blokes" never "mention [...] the women in the scene," the designer Fiona Dealey later complained. "The Blitz was our youth club and I feel they hijacked it."[29] If Steve Strange and Boy George always get their dues, the narrative tends to follow Elms, Jones, and Sullivan through their club, music, and media careers into the 1990s. "I was fed up of people wandering around with make-up," Sullivan later remembered of his post-Blitz clubs and the formation of Blue Rondo á la Turk in 1981, "fed up of electro music. I wanted to do something with men [...] in suits, without a synthesizer in sight. I wanted to do something that represented the heterosexual side of the scene."[30] Although Strange opened Club for Heroes in 1981, this soon gave way to a 1982 residency at Camden Palace that *The Face*'s founder Nick Logan felt was "anathema to what had gone before" (that is, commercialized and seemingly behind the times).[31] The *queerness* of Blitz, first signaled by the multi-sexual mix of those frequenting the club, was therefore rerouted back through the gay underground into clubs such as Cha Cha (opened in the back of Heaven in 1981) and on through Philip Sallon's Mud Club (1983) and Leigh Bowery's Taboo (1985).[32] It was there—alongside Skin Two, the fetish club opened in 1983, and, perhaps, among the Neo-Naturists who took nakedness into clubs and galleries throughout the 1980s—that we find further continuation of the *otherness* associated initially with new romanticism.[33] Simultaneously, clubs such as the proto-goth Batcave allowed for residual punk-glam influences to find new and elaborate expression from 1982.

The dominant narrative is also decidedly London-centric. Birmingham's Rum Runner usually gets credit for spawning Duran Duran and providing a stage for the flamboyant Martin Degville (an inspiration for Boy George) and the designers Jane Kahn and Patti Bell. But the recurring club nights hosted at venues such as Croc's in Rayleigh, Cagneys in Liverpool, Sherry's in Brighton, Le Phono and The Warehouse in Leeds, Valentino's in Edinburgh, and Cardiff's portable Tanzschau are unfairly presented as merely duplicates trying to recreate London's swish in the provinces (Figure 6).[34] For example, Keenan Duffty remembered the New Outlook in Doncaster hosting "a male nun, a Cossack, a Che Guevara lookalike, a bloke in a wedding dress and the Chip Shop King of South Yorkshire," an array of "style misfits" who no doubt encouraged his move to St Martin's and career as a fashion designer.[35] Yet, we could instead turn to Manchester's Pips as a precursor to Billy's and Blitz, a nightclub with its own mid-1970s room for Bowie and Roxy Music acolytes to gather in "homemade outfits [...] glamourous and beguiling."[36] In Leeds, the Adelphi did Bowie nights on a Friday in the late 1970s, while Sheffield's Crazy Daizy put aside Wednesday for Bowie and Roxy fans even earlier in the decade.[37] Back in the northwest, Holly Johnson (later of

[29] Quoted in Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 72.

[30] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 345.

[31] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 416.

[32] Stephen Willats, *Cha Cha Cha* (London, 1982); Sofia Vranou, "Performing the Subcultural Freak: Leigh Bowery's Peculiar Narcissism and the Disruption of Normativity," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 30, no. 3 (2020): 326–39.

[33] Tim Westwood, *Skin Two* (London, 1991); Jane England, *The Neo Naturists* (London, 2007). Skin Two was opened by erstwhile Blitz DJ David Claridge, who later found fame as the voice of Breakfast TV puppet Roland Rat.

[34] Birch, *The Book With No Name*, 28–29; "Nightclubbing," *New Sounds New Styles*, Spring 1981, 23 and July 1981, 26–27.

[35] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 304.

[36] Gareth Ashton, *Manchester: It Never Rains ...* (Manchester, 2019), 24–25; Philip Kiszely, "From Place to Space to Scene: The Roxy Room and the Emergence of Manchester's Alternative Pop Culture Identity," *Punk & Post-Punk* 2, no. 1 (2013): 27–42.

[37] Dave Haslam, *Life After Dark: A History of British Nightclubs and Music Venues* (London, 2015), 263.

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Figure 6. Ticket for Cagneys (1980). Reproduced with permission of Steve Proctor.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood) remembered how "young people in their droves had been turning up for Roxy and Bowie nights at discos [in the mid-70s] and it was all becoming a bit commonplace."[38] Certainly, Johnson's crowd in Liverpool—not to mention the resplendent Pete Burns (later of Dead or Alive)[39]—comprised one of several comparable milieus to those congregating in Soho and Covent Garden between 1978 and 1980. If Billy's and Blitz overtly conceptualized and aestheticized club nights, there were precedents in embryo, not all of which took place in London.

The stylistic interplay of past, present, and future held evident tensions that similarly problematizes new romanticism's origin story. New romanticism's "coming out" party was a Valentine's Day Ball at London's Rainbow Theatre in 1981, a "People's Palace" full of "photographers, professional and amateur," snapping "urgently away at a passing peacock throng that was only too willing to oblige with a pose and a pout."[40] In an instant, new romantics were ensnared by the media spectacle, their image reified and style codified as a fashionable mélange of billowing shirts with frilly cuffs, ruffs, sashes, and makeup applied with a futuristic glaze. Adverts—such as for the Leeds-based shop Fab-Gear—appeared almost immediately in the *NME*, providing identikit outfits for Steve Strange replicas.[41] Bands such as Classix Nouveaux were aligned to "the scene" on account of their flamboyant dress and songs of "Night People" and robots dancing. Comedy programs caricatured the artifice and aesthetics of new romanticism. The "Nice Video, Shame About the Song" sketch on BBC's *Not the Nine O'clock News* from February 1982 was a veritable mix of Weimar chic, synths, makeup, historic costumes, and dramatic color-shifting effects. No longer able to continually transform out of sight, the photos and polaroids snapped in Warholian fashion to simulate stardom in a self-made world after midnight became artefacts of a very particular look, time, and place.[42] As Bowie crooned in 1975, "Fame: what you get is no tomorrow."[43]

[38] Holly Johnson, *A Bone in my Flute* (London, 1994), 75.
[39] Pete Burns, *Freak Unique* (London, 2007).
[40] Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened*, 52; Mike Nicholls, "Posing at the Palace," *Record Mirror*, 21 February 1981, 9.
[41] *NME*, 28 March 1981, 44.
[42] Key photographers of Billy's and Blitz included Anita Corbin, Derek Ridgers, Graham Smith, and Nicola Tyson.
[43] David Bowie, "Fame" b/w "Right" (RCA, 1975).

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Equally, however, the aesthetics and moods cultivated at Blitz were dissolving and diverging by the time new romanticism was named. Speaking in 1980, Perry Haines had already waved "goodbye/riddance" to the "Flash Gordon clones" of 1979.[44] In the guise of Spandau Ballet, he and Elms heralded a "new movement, as yet unlabelled, arising to tear down the high-tech backdrops that threatened fashion [...] A new movement that respects romance and adores the classics." It was "no longer on to look 'strange'," Haines concluded, the aim of his jibe obvious.[45] For Sullivan, at least, it was about "turning the clocks back."[46] "I wanted to take things back to before punk, to the first clubs I attended [...] venues such as Crackers and Lacy Lady that played great Black music, where the dress code entailed '40s, '50s and '60s with a soupçon of now."[47] By contrast, Strange saw Visage as "a passport into the new age of the eighties," while Egan always insisted "I was a futurist, I liked new records not retro."[48] In other words, he saw the DJ sets that heralded the advent of new romanticism as closer to the broader upsurge of synth-generated music evident in 1978–81 than the lounge music, soul, funk, and salsa sounds enjoyed by Sullivan at the St Moritz club or Le Kilt. Labelled "futurist" in the music press and associated with labels such as Daniel Miller's Mute and Stevo Pearce's Some Bizzare [sic], the moniker loosely incorporated an array of synth-pop and post-punk acts—from Depeche Mode and Soft Cell to even Joy Division and Cabaret Voltaire—whose records were played by Egan but also at "Sci Fi Discos" and "Electro Diskows" across the country (Figures 7–10).[49]

Although a commitment to nightclub life ensured a semblance of correlation that was retained across the diversifying sounds and styles unfolding post-Blitz, a breaking point was formally declared by Elms in his "Hard Times" article for *The Face* in September 1982. While the shift toward "men in suits" had first been noted in the winter of 1979, a definite change of sensibility was now intimated, transforming from the bold and the bright to "an entrenched die-hard mentality where 'Good Times' is replaced by 'Money's Too Tight (To Mention)'." The dancing did not stop, Elms reported, but the attitude hardened: "gay abandon has evolved into a clenched teeth determination where [...] sweat has replaced cool as the mark of a face." All semblance of dandyism and camp was jettisoned for function: denim was back and the Europhilia associated with Blitz was displaced by Black American influences.[50] In the meantime, most post-Blitz pop stars began diluting or rejecting any lingering new romantic styling to concentrate on conquering the charts and infusing the pop plurality of 1981–84.[51]

These faultlines raise questions as to how (sub)cultural identities, performances, and spaces complicate our approaches to periodization and social change. They reveal disparities between those keen to reconstruct imagined pasts and those preoccupied with continual innovation; between those looking for validation via cultural capital and those prompted by a need for recognition/attention; between those guided by markers of material success and those keen to adopt artifice (and pleasure) as a means to self-reinvention. They further suggest that as much as new romanticism marked the start of something—"the 1980s"—it was also a manifestation of the end of a period that had opened spaces and the means to experiment both creatively and in terms of gender and sexuality. How then was new romanticism understood at its moment of becoming?

[44] Perry Haines, "Crop," *VIZ* 9 (1980), 16.

[45] Haines, "Crop," 16.

[46] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 345

[47] Quoted in Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 126. See also *Ritz* 45 (1980).

[48] *Ritz* 48 (1980), 23; Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 102.

[49] See *Record Mirror*, 29 November 1980, for an issue on futurist bands with Strange on the cover and features that blurred the lines with new romanticism.

[50] Robert Elms, "Hard Times," *The Face*, September 1982, 14–17.

[51] Jon Savage, "1983: Pop in a Plural Phase," in his *Time Travel: From the Sex Pistols to Nirvan: Pop, Media and Sexuality, 1977–96* (London, 1996), 162–67; originally published in *New Society*, 22–29 December 1983.

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Figures 7–10. Futurist charts, *Sounds*, 30 August, 29 November, 13 December 1980, and 28 March 1981.

Oh look at the strange boy, he finds it hard existing …[52]

For Raymond Williams, "emergent" cultures encompass "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [...] continually being created." These always relate, in some way or other, both to the "dominant culture" of a particular period and to "residual" elements of the past. "It is exceptionally difficult," he points out, "to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture [...] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional." Nevertheless, emergent cultures are dependent on "finding new forms or adaptations of form," creating or occupying spaces as they come into being.[53]

New romanticism's formative influences and responses to the dominant culture complicate any binary reading of its relationship to the past and present. In tracing new romanticism's becoming, we need to locate the array of emergent looks, sounds, and sensibilities in relation to ongoing socioeconomic transformations (such as deindustrialization, globalization, and financialization) beyond simply the advent of "Thatcherism." We must consider the cultural intervention of punk that critiqued the music industry and stimulated youthful agency; the residual influence of pop and youth culture's past that punk scrambled but never wholly denied; the wider cultural influences that circulated and coalesced through film, fashion, art, and literature; the pertinent sexual and gender politics permeating the 1970s–80s; the technological innovations that brokered affordable new media, fashions, and sounds.[54] Only then do the "styles," "shapes," and "modes" Steve Strange sang about begin to coalesce.

Where to look? Not the weekly music press, which proved slow to recognize (or at least cover) what was happening at Billy's and Blitz. The club- and style-based nature of the scene rubbed against the gig- and record-oriented coverage prevalent in the *NME*, *Sounds*, and *Melody Maker*.[55] Nor does the more chart-focused *Smash Hits* reveal much before 1981. Galvanized by Gary Numan and Adam Ant heralding the post-punk return of the pop star, attention turned to Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran over 1981–82, with the latter, especially, becoming regular cover stars. Prior to that, Steve Strange was dismissed as "possibly

[52] Spandau Ballet, "To Cut A Long Story Short" b/w "Version" (Chrysalis, 1980).

[53] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121–26.

[54] David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* (London, 2019); Amy Edwards, *Are We Rich Yet? The Rise of Mass Investment Culture in Contemporary Britain* (California, 2022); Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, "Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s," *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 268–304; Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture* (Cambridge, 2017).

[55] See Paula Yates's "Natural Blonde" and "Paula's Pages" column in the *Record Mirror* between 1979 and 1980. Also, Steve Taylor, "Blitz: We Love the Night Life," *Melody Maker*, 8 December 1979, 10.

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the worst dresser of his generation" but otherwise ignored until a front-page appearance in January 1981.[56] As this suggests, new romantics were reported as pop music rather than stylists, as stars rather than creatives.

The Face, *i-D*, and *Blitz* offer richer pickings, though all three magazines started almost at the moment when Strange and Egan vacated Blitz in late 1980. True, the earliest issues of *i-D* celebrated the multiple street styles so evocative of the immediate post-punk period, pioneering "straight up" photographs that often featured Blitz habitués.[57] It was in *The Face*, moreover, that Elms pitched Spandau Ballet and presented "the cult with no name" as the harbinger of a new generation.[58] But all three "style bibles" provide better trace of Blitz's immediate legacy than new romanticism's formation. Indeed, it was David Johnson's "On the Line" column for London's *Evening Standard* and LWT's *Twentieth Century Box* that proved quicker off the mark. Johnson eagerly propagated the "Now Crowd" living for the moment throughout 1980, while LWT's feature on Spandau Ballet helped generate a buzz around the group as they played invite-only gigs and fostered expectations of becoming the "next big thing."[59]

Better, then, to explore the more marginal fashion, society, and arthouse publications circulating in the late 1970s, magazines that fledgling new romantics read and aspired to appear in (Figures 11–14). It was in the likes of *Harpers & Queen*, *Tatler*, and *Ritz* that reports on London's clubland ventured into Billy's and Blitz, aligning glamorous aspiration with high-life glitterati in ways resonant of Roxy Music's stylized visions of penthouse perfection. Featured next to images of film stars and society stalwarts, and alongside clubs such as The Embassy on Old Bond Street, Blitz's youthful coterie appeared like a new generation of decadent dandies and would-be neue-frau bohemians usurping the capital's pleasure domes. Writing in *Tatler*, the cultural anthropologist Ted Polhemus described Blitz's "low-tech décor of war-time austerity" as a "post-punk kingdom of heaven and hell." Thus, to the "Electro-Diskow" sounds of "German electronic pop with J. G. Ballard lyrics about love in a crashed car," "a girl dressed like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast in Tiffany's* is dancing with a boy in a jet-black plastic space suit [...] His hair slicked back Valentino-style."[60] Polhemus wrote of the Blitz milieu "tapping our image resources" to reenvisage themselves in the context of post-punk Britain.[61] Allusions to Weimar Germany were common, the travails and decadence of pre-war Berlin transferred to the turbulent 1970s, with "cabaret" becoming a buzzword amid the outfits, poses, and demeanors of a crowd schooled by such films as Bob Fosse's 1972 adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novels and the aesthetics of German Expressionism.

Likewise, relatively short-lived titles such as *Boulevard*, *Deluxe*, *Mode Avantgarde*, *VIZ*, and *ZG* give sight to the cultural references and influences that informed the styles and sensibilities expressed after dark in Soho and Covent Garden. These were magazines of art and fashion, bold on imagery and keen to recognize "hybrid styles" across "diverse areas of cultural activity."[62] Therein we find early reports on Helen Robinson and Stephane Raynor's shop PX, whose "clothes for the modern world" were initially caged in lockers retrieved from the old MI5 headquarters on Curzon Street and sold behind a white steel shutter with a TV monitoring the street.[63] Articles on Jon Baker's Axiom and Willie Brown's Modern Classics (which were both clothing outlets and fashion labels) broadened the stylistic array, making

[56] *Smash Hits*, 14 November 1979, 30. This was David Hepworth reviewing Visage's debut single, "Tar."

[57] *i-D* nos. 1–6 (1980–81). Among those featured were (Boy) George, Rusty Egan, and Scarlett Cannon.

[58] Elms, "Spandau Ballet," 8–10; Elms, "The Cult With No Name," 22–27.

[59] David Johnson, "Strange Days," *Evening Standard*, 24 January 1980, 23; David Johnson, "Private Worlds of the New Young," *Evening Standard*, 16 October 1980, 16; LWT, *Twentieth Century Box*, broadcast 13 July 1980.

[60] Ted Polhemus, "What Makes Steve Strange?," *The Tatler*, November 1979, 41. The "German electronic pop" was in fact "Warm Leatherette" by The Normal, the first release on Mute Records (so British rather than German).

[61] See also Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See the Peepshow'," 215–49.

[62] The quotes are from *ZG* 1 (1980), 2.

[63] *VIZ* 1 (1978), 29–33.

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Figures 11–14. Covers of *Ritz* (1978); *Deluxe* (1978); *Mode Avantgarde* (1979); VIZ (1980).

connections between DIY designers and those beginning to garner a reputation. Attention often focused on the self-created looks of Kim Bowen, Melissa Caplan, Judith Frankland, and others, women whose originality retained an otherness that both startled and unsettled. The rouge-smeared eyes of Scarlett Cannon and the dark glamour of Princess Julia (Foder) preserved a trace of punk's provocation and *difference*. Similarly, the coverage given to Stephen Linard's stunning "Neon Gothic" designs presented at St Martin's in 1980 revealed a fascination with religious imagery that generated an otherworldly effect intensified by the makeup and shaved heads of Michele Clapton and Myra Falconer. As well as pre-"Boy" George's regularly transforming and startlingly imaginative looks, the "space age pope" style of Lee Sheldrick appeared more Klaus Kinski's Nosferatu than 1980s nouveau riche. With an emphasis on "looking radically different" (Cannon) and "being distinct"

Figures 15–16. Myra Falconer and Michele Clapton. Photographs: Graham Smith; Scarlett Cannon. Photograph: Derek Ridgers.

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(Clapton), the innovations of those in and around Blitz stunned as much as seduced (Figures 15–16).[64]

Such images were set next to features on the sexually exploratory artwork of Allen Jones and photography of Helmut Newton (who in 1982 shot the cover for the second Visage album). Exhibitions, including ICA and Haywood Gallery shows dedicated to interwar German art and society, were covered. Fashion shoots from 1978–79 reveal military uniform looks akin to those modeled at Billy's and early Blitz, with lines from Ventilo and Hechter offering clues to how PX and Oxfam-sourced variations might be repurposed for nights out.[65] Consummate stylistas—Jordan, Grace Jones, Amanda Lear, Antony Price—featured repeatedly, as did the filmmaker Derek Jarman and references to Andy Warhol, Duggie Fields, Quentin Crisp, Vivienne Westwood, and Malcolm McLaren. With their airbrushed illustrations of faces painted with futuristic cosmetics, 1979 covers of *Mode Avantgarde* signposted the color palette of the 1980s. *VIZ*'s profile of Richard Sharah revealed the source of Steve Strange's elaborate makeup. Adverts flit from the glamorous to the futuristic, with shops such as Bastet (South Kensington) and Metropolis (Covent Garden) evoking Fritz Lang and presenting in ways that complemented the aesthetics performed in Blitz. In *ZG*, produced out of St Martin's by Rosetta Brooks, issues were dedicated to themes that "challenge our most deep-rooted orientations to the world whether in terms of art/culture, elite/popular, or male/female": sadomasochism, image-culture, future dread, desire, heroes.[66] A first issue article on "Blitz Culture" wrote of street-level performance art, recognizing "the look" as less to do with achieving a perfect reproduction of a particular style or "cinematic stereotype," and more a play of juxtaposition designed to distort and skew. "Posers," Brooks suggested (citing the photographer Diane Arbus), revealed the flaws or "the gap" between "intention and effect." By so doing, the styles presented at clubs such as Blitz might disturb and unsettle, thereby revealing more leftfield impulses behind the "constantly shifting and symbolic maze."[67] Deviancy and hard drugs have often been written out of the prevailing new romantic narrative. But such darker fascinations, which circulated through these magazines, informed the spirit of Blitz and help contextualize, for example, the OD deaths in Warren Street squats and drug-induced problems that later befell Strange, Boy George, Marilyn, and others once the glitz turned shit.[68] The magazines that began to identify the *culture* of proto-new romanticism reveal how shared references, interests, aesthetics, and stimuli circulated and contributed to the bricolage that eventually cohered into a nameable subcultural style.[69]

Two writers, in particular, offered pertinent insights into the becoming of new romanticism, grappling with cultural formations that bore trace influences and promised new possibilities. In late 1977, Stephen Lavers and Peter York combined to write "The German Connection" for *Harpers & Queen*. Here they argued that synthesizers and electronics—as pioneered by Kraftwerk (among other 1970s German groups), then adapted by David Bowie with Eno in Berlin, and applied by Giorgio Moroder to Donna Summer's pulsating "I Feel Love" (1977)—proffered a futuristic collision between punk and disco. "In a technological age, a formalized primitivism is an avant garde stance," their article asserted. "The only logical counterpart to modern Ludditism is the cult of the machine. The only counterpart of intellectual primitivism is intellectual futurism. They are, of course, intimately linked." In a time of no future, signaled both by socioeconomic strains and political dissensus, the "arts mafia" were looking to Futurism as an answer to punk's angry despair, York and Lavers argued: that is,

[64] *i-D* 2 (1980), 27; Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 260.
[65] *Mode Avantgarde* nos. 1–5 (1978–79).
[66] *ZG* 1 (1980), 2.
[67] *ZG* 1 (1980), 4–5.
[68] Strange, *Blitzed*, 95–100; Boy George, *Take it Like a Man* (London, 1995), 490–91; Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 99–100.
[69] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979), 103–06.

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seeking an escape from the "horrors of the present" but "accepting the modern world and trying to shape it."[70] "We are the robots," to quote Kraftwerk.[71]

Lavers also wrote for *Ritz*, a paper started in 1976 by David Bailey and David Litchfield as a British equivalent to Andy Warhol's *Interview*. Attuned as he was to the political and aesthetic innovations of early punk, Lavers recognized Strange's and Egan's vision for Billy's and Blitz as being in line with his own preferred "direction for [...] post-punk."[72] "The elements of a successful youth culture," he insisted in August 1979, were "an identifiable genre of music, a distinctive look and, if possible, a radical ideology or mode of behaviour."[73] The music was there, via Egan's electronic soundtrack and Visage's first single release in late 1979.[74] The style was "in embryonic form," developing from a straight Bowie or Bryan Ferry "clone approach" into "a synthesis of the PX "extraterrestrial uniform," the [Kraftwerk] "extremist normality" look [shirt, tie], and a plain monochrome minimalism." Cross-dressing, which Lavers suggested stemmed from Bowie's dragged-up performance for his recent "Boys Keep Swinging" video, was also now apparent. "All that is missing," Lavers concluded, was the "attractive ideology," though he predicted one would soon emerge.[75]

York, meanwhile, continued to offer a more detached but equally intrigued analysis from the pages of *Harpers & Queen*. For York, the Blitz crowd was an extension of the "junior grade Them" he recognized in punk *ca.* 1976. "Them," York explained, were people who constructed a look and a way of living that was neither socially acceptable nor sexually appealing. They dressed "to look interesting," conflating art school tutelage with camp to forge a "strange sensibility" that allowed "ideas" to be put into everyday life. They were the "cognoscenti of trash" and the "aficionados of sleaze," committing to novelty and being ahead of either fashions or trends. "Them" tended to present as apolitical, instinctively elitist, and concerned primarily with aesthetics. They appeared detached from material reality, living instead in self-made worlds that constructed or reassembled "versions of" a style, film, or photographic image. Circulating in the world of "Them" were Ferry, Bowie, Fields, Jarman, Zandra Rhodes, and Andrew Logan (whose "Alternative Miss World" was a touchstone). Their forebears and influences included Warhol, Crisp, Marcel Duchamp/Rrose Sélavy, and *Vogue*'s Grace Coddington. The first punks—followed by the Blitz crowd—were to York both part of and a reaction to "Them." They comprised a new bohemia "literate in the language of style" but generationally distinct from their forebears,[76] "Post-Modern," even.[77]

"Post-Modern," at least for York, suggested an attitude resonant of the 1970s. It pertained to a performance or creation that was "stylish, ambivalent, ironic, eclectic, a touch retro, a bit classy (but that classiness [is] distinctly ironic; *post-classless*, you understand)." Fragmented, rejected, and revolutionary ideas were assimilated, transitioning from pastiche toward parody and then what York feared would become a meaningless "mush." In other words, the past was looted and reworked until it lost all significance. An "uncomfortable transition" was in play, York fathomed, whereby "period references will be used without any self-consciousness." Having absorbed images from TV and magazines, young people were "cross[ing] borders they no longer see." Thus, Billy's and Blitz were "hopelessly Post-Modern," combining "period idea[s] of the future" with repositioned signifiers of the past.[78]

[70] Peter York and Stephen Lavers, "The German Connection," *Harpers & Queen*, December 1977, 172–78.
[71] Kraftwerk, "The Robots" b/w "Spacelab" (Capital, 1978).
[72] *Ritz* 31 (1979), 50.
[73] *Ritz* 32 (1979), 54–55.
[74] "Tar" b/w "Frequency 7" (Radar, 1979) was advertised in *Ritz*; Visage comprised Strange, Egan, Midge Ure, and members of both Magazine and Ultravox (which Ure also joined).
[75] *Ritz* 32 (1979), 54–55.
[76] Peter York, "Them," *Harpers & Queen*, October 1976, 204–09.
[77] Peter York, "Post-Modernism," *Harpers & Queen*, January 1980, 72–75.
[78] York, "Post-Modernism," 72–75.

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According to York, the question "what is postmodernism?" was doing the rounds among "Them" in 1979, the year in which Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* was published. Fredric Jameson and David Harvey had yet to formulate their critiques. The term itself was still in the process of entering the public discourse via books such as David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture* (1977), a title later borrowed and reversed by Blitz playlist regulars Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark for their third album (1981). York used the term vaguely, evoking a structure of feeling rather than a definite concept. Yet we can see here some grasping toward what Jameson would later recognize as a weakening historicity, a fascination with surface dimension, and the collapsing of reality into mediated images driven by new technologies.[79]

Initially, then, postmodernism was the lens through which Blitz culture was interpreted, informing the thoughts of influential *NME* writers such as Paul Morley and Ian Penman as they began to consider "today's usage of yesterday's future visions."[80] Style as self-creation was the principal motif, a theme Jon Savage also explored in his review of David Bowie's *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* for *The Face* in 1980. Bowie was an "agent of transformation," Savage argued. Not only did he liberate "a whole range of fantasies" hitherto repressed, fusing futurism and gender confusion with choice cultural references to fantastical lives and mediated moments (Isherwood's Berlin, Warhol's New York, William Burroughs, Jacques Brel), he also embodied the enticing possibilities of combining pop and style. Now in 1980, Savage continued, Strange was the "most recent, the most absurd, yet [also] the most magnificent exponent of the suburban pose which never dies."[81]

At the moment of its becoming, therefore, new romanticism was a mélange of recognizable reference points coalescing as an emergent culture ready to be codified in the context of a new decade with newly positioned politics and economics. That is, the crucibles of new romanticism—Soho and Covent Garden (between the closure of the market in 1974 and the later 1980s retail renovation)—were presented as seedy and desolate settings against which extravagant fashions brought startling effect. "Declinism" and social disrepair were reflected in references to Weimar Germany, a presiding motif of the 1970s present in Bowie's work, early punk, and across cultural and sociopolitical commentary more generally.[82] In response, Blitz enabled an escape into self-created "fantasy worlds," finding space amid deindustrialized or dilapidated shops and clubs to forge alternative cultural forms.[83] Though punk was acknowledged as a stimulus, it also marked a moment to move beyond, locating proto-new romanticism in an amorphous "post-punk" diaspora of overlapping sounds and styles. As well as various youth cultural forebears—punk, mod, soul boys/girls, glam—wider influences were applied through "looks" codified in films, books, photography, and artworks that began to push further back in time. These, in turn, were swapped and discussed around shared houses, squats, and, notably, the Ralph West Hall of Residence that served London's art schools and provided a meeting place for many of Blitz's core clientele.[84] Multi-sexuality and blurred gender boundaries were integral to Blitz's aesthetic, which adopted camp and gay cultural signifiers to inform modes and sensibilities that infused pop culture through the 1970s. This was a testament to the impact of gay liberation evident also in Bowie's casual

[79] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings of the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London, 1998); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1990).

[80] Paul Morley, "Post-Modernist Fringe," *NME*, 12 January 1980, 6–7; Ian Penman, "Review of Japan's 'Quiet Life'," *NME*, 2 February 1981, 3; Paul Rambali, "Modern? It's So Passé," *NME*, 21 March 1981, 5. See also Roberts, "The Electronic Eighties," 290–92: "If this is Futuristic, it seems very 1960s."

[81] Jon Savage, "The Gender Bender," *The Face*, November 1980, 17–20.

[82] Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2010); the introduction is entitled "Our Weimar?". Matthew Worley, "Whip in My Valise: British Punk and the Marquis de Sade, c. 1975–85," *Contemporary British History* 36, no. 2 (2022): 277–321.

[83] Elms, "The Cult With No Name," 22–27.

[84] Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 145–46.

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arm around Mick Ronson's shoulder on *Top of the Pops* in 1972.[85] The embrace of new technologies gave a sense of (post)modernity, ensuring references to the past came with a sheen and a color palette soon to be resonant of the early 1980s. "They are hinting at pre-and post-industrial attitudes," Savage wrote in relation to Spandau Ballet's Culloden chic and Vivienne Westwood's recent designs that evoked eighteenth-century France. "What they are saying is, our society is obsolete, and unconsciously they hint at a new world."[86]

No future they say, but must it be that way?[87]

Did the "attractive ideology" Lavers hoped for develop? To an extent, perhaps. Strange held fast to the line of self-transformation through style, a way of escaping from the tedium of everyday life.[88] Though drugs and ego soon took their toll, Strange and Visage continued to reimagine their image and construct "modern dance music" that later fed into the innovations of Detroit techno.[89] On one side of new romanticism, Green Gartside of Scritti Politti ditched Karl Marx for Jacques Derrida to concoct the means to explore pop's language and surfaces in ways that both revealed and expressed modes of desire. Aiming for the charts, singles such as "The 'Sweetest Girl'?" (1981) and "Wood Beez (Pray Like Aretha Franklin)" (1984) offered the most sophisticated take on the "knowing" aspiration that writers such as Paul Morley ascribed to the "new pop," which he discerned across such diverse acts as Scritti, ABC, Adam and the Ants, Haircut 100, and Heaven 17.[90] Malcolm McLaren, having briefly advised Adam Ant on his pop-centric reconfiguration of historical sounds and styles, conceived Bow Wow Wow in 1980, a group built on a situationist-inspired agenda that celebrated unemployment as an antidote to work and extolled the virtues of home-taping and teenage sexuality under the slogan "sun, sea and piracy." Akin to the new romantics' looting of history, Bow Wow Wow came dressed in Westwood ensembles that drew inspiration from pirates and eighteenth-century French Incroyables. Boy George was briefly a member, revealing connections between the Blitz crowd and Vivienne Westwood's shop at 430 King's Road that extended back to Strange's working there as a shop assistant.[91] A spate of short-lived "moral panics" ensued, primarily as a result of the group's singer—Annabella Lwin—being recruited aged 13, before McLaren lost interest and the band broke up.[92]

Spandau Ballet, meanwhile, came closest to producing what *Sounds* described as a "New Romantic manifesto."[93] Alongside Robert Elms, the band's manager Steve Dagger and guitarist Gary Kemp cultivated a sense of expectation around the group, presenting them as "the most contemporary statement that London can offer in terms of fashion and ideas."[94] This meant much purple prose from Elms, evoking images of "oblique romance, an age when machines have lost their mystique and beauty has returned." Spandau Ballet's sound was described as "a soaring, gothic dance music that conjures up everything except rock 'n' roll," a form of "White European Dance Music" that was modern, positive, and passionate.[95]

[85] Patrick Glen, "'Oh You Pretty Thing!': How David Bowie 'Unlocked Everybody's Inner Queen' In Spite of the Music Press," *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 3 (2017): 407–29.

[86] Jon Savage, "'You Look Fantastic'...," *Time Out*, 30 January–5 February 1981, 13–15.

[87] The Human League, "Blind Youth," on *Reproduction* (Virgin, 1979).

[88] Mark Cooper, "The Young Pretender," *Record Mirror*, 29 November 1980, 10; Steve Taylor, "Strange Tales," *Smash Hits*, 22 January 1981, 4–6; Anon., "Further Through the Looking Glass," *Blitz* 2 (1981), 25.

[89] BBC, *Friday Night Saturday Morning*, broadcast 28 November 1980. See the comments of Carl Craig in the Much Music documentary: Denise Donlon, dir., *Detroit: The Blueprint of Techno* (Toronto, 1998).

[90] Reynolds, *Rip it Up*, 361–82 and 417–19. ABC and The Human League could also talk a good talk in interviews from the time.

[91] Strange, *Blitzed*, 36.

[92] Paul Gorman, *The Life & Times of Malcom McLaren* (London, 2020), 452–92.

[93] Page, "The New Romantics," 32–33.

[94] Elms, "Spandau Ballet," 8–10.

[95] Robert Elms, "The Spandau Ballet," *NME*, 29 March 1980, 51.

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For the sleevenotes to their debut album, *Journeys To Glory* (1981), cased in the classicist design of Blitz-friend Graham Smith, Elms imagined "angular glimpses of sharp youth cutting strident shapes through the curling grey of 3 a.m. [...] immaculate rhythms [...] music for heroes [...] the rousing sound on the path towards journeys to glory."[96]

Contemporaneity was stated in a variety of ways (Figure 17). First, rock culture was rejected as boring spectacle: succor rather than subversion. Spandau Ballet, like Visage, made music for clubs, embracing new technologies (synths, video, luscious production) and elongated 12-inch dance mixes of their songs. In contrast to gigs, where people stood and watched a band, clubs allowed "kids" to become "stars in their own environment."[97] To this end, Spandau Ballet initially played invite-only performances in unusual venues (Blitz, HMS Belfast, Scala cinema, Birmingham Botanical Gardens), their presence an "applause to the audience."[98]

Second, the "cult with no name" was committed to fashion: style came first, with the music following as a "soundtrack to the look" (to quote *Smash Hits*' Mark Ellen).[99] This, in turn, highlighted style and design as modes of communication beyond language and politics; it allowed for perpetual change and evolution. Paradoxically, it also tied new romantic styles and sensibilities to a youth cultural vanguard of working-class mods and "soul boy freaks."[100] Unlike Strange, whose Visage stood for visual/image (vis), travel (visa), and modernity (age),[101] Elms and Spandau Ballet regularly placed themselves in a subcultural lineage of grassroots youth cults, constructing aristocracies of style that eschewed class hierarchies.

Third, pride and ambition were extolled as an antidote to the negativity of punk's no future. People were encouraged to "make the most of themselves rather than the least of themselves."[102] Elms and Dagger went to the London School of Economics. Nevertheless, they and Kemp were keen to underline the working-class and non-art school credentials of Spandau Ballet. "[There] is a different working-class stereotype to your dustman, punk type," Dagger said, "we threaten that."[103] Thus, Kemp presented himself as the "anti" Jimmy Pursey, referencing the lead singer of Sham 69 as the epitome of lumpen punk rock.[104] Herein, too, came an apparent break from the 1970s, with correlations to Thatcherism being later registered in a shift of discourse. Youthful ingenuity and agency now found articulation as entrepreneurship; creativity became a business venture; autonomy signaled aspiration or self-centered individualism; internecine squabbles powered "healthy competition."[105]

Such schtick led to criticism. Most troublingly, references to classicism and "White European Dance Music" raised the specter of fascist flirtation, paving the way for positive reviews in National Front publications and censure from the left and the music press.[106] Alternatively, as youth unemployment rose and riots raged across Britain's inner cities over the summer of 1981, new romantics were seen as frivolous and detached: "let them eat smoked salmon," Paul Morley quipped as he watched Duran Duran perform on the

[96] Robert Elms, sleevenotes to Spandau Ballet, *Journeys To Glory* (Chrysalis, 1981).
[97] Quoted in Birch, "'You Look Fantastic'," 12.
[98] Elms, "Spandau Ballet," 8–10.
[99] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 371.
[100] Quoted in Birch, "'You Look Fantastic'," 13.
[101] Anon., "Further Through the Looking Glass," 25.
[102] Page, "The New Romantics," 32–33.
[103] Quoted in Birch, "'You Look Fantastic'," 13.
[104] Paul Rambali, "Talking Threads," *NME*, 29 November 1980, 32–33.
[105] Caroline Spicer, "The Land of Trend Revisited," *Blitz* 4 (1981), 19; BBC, *Newsnight*, broadcast 23 January 1981; Marek Kohn, "Hip Little Englanders," *Marxism Today*, November 1983, 37–38.
[106] Eddy Morrison, "Don't Condemn Pop," *Spearhead*, April (1981), 20; Joe Pearce, "White European Dance Music," *Bulldog* 25 (1981), 3; Lynden Barker, "The Aryan Freeze Out," *Melody Maker*, 28 February 1981, 22.

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Figure 17. Spandau Ballet in *The Face*, January 1981.

same night as Birmingham burned.[107] Homophobic asides were not uncommon, typically as a launchpad to belittling or mocking new romantic fashion. Musically, attention centered on the relative ordinariness of the records released, as if the product rarely met the promise (or stayed too close to their Bowie, Roxy, John Foxx, Kraftwerk precursors).[108] Come late 1981,

[107] Paul Morley, "Ice Cream," *NME*, 25 July 1981, 16–18.

[108] See, for example, Cooper, "The Young Pretender," 10; Richard Williams, "Spandau Ballet," *The Times*, 31 December 1980, 5.

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therefore, Spandau Ballet and others associated with new romantism were being dismissed for their narcissism and elitism, presaging the aforementioned associations with Tory-esque aspiration. So, for Ian Penman writing in the *NME*'s end-of-year round-up, "what had started as a jolting reassessment of the value of looking good" had since turned "formal and inflexible." In attempting to mythologize their "Nightclub life" and conceptualize their borrowed styles, the new romantics were left looking as if they "lack[ed] the assurance of *anything* to call their own."[109]

The most astute analysis came from Jon Savage, who was quick to recognize how far new romanticism and new pop more generally were both a response to and a continuation of punk's cultural intervention. Each reacted to what punk had seemingly become, be it the "boy's club socialism" of earnest politicos, the cardboard cutout of yobbo caricature, or the post-punk experimentation that pertained to offer an alternative to mainstream pop.[110] In reply, the new romantics and new pop acts inverted punk's supposed motifs: "Glamour replaces grubbiness, naked elitism [replaces] inverse elitism," escape replaces commitment, "dance [replaces] thought, gold [replaces] grey."[111] Punk's techniques were thereby used not to "change the world, but to change *their* world."[112] As such, both new romanticism and new pop learned from punk's critique of the music industry to ostensibly work through it toward creative expression, wealth, or recognition. This often shed the controversy and subversive intent associated with punk, but nevertheless took from the "lessons" outlined in McLaren's Sex Pistols' film, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980).[113] The initial presentation of Spandau Ballet, for example, undoubtedly drew inspiration from the McLaren handbook. Finally, new romanticism—like Bow Wow Wow and Adam Ant—continued the cut-up and assimilated stylings that defined punk's beginnings, now leaving the twentieth century to escape time and place altogether. Extending his analysis from the 1970s "Me Decade" described by the American cultural commentor Tom Wolfe, Savage felt "self is now turned into an Art Object, while relations with the outside world are carried out from within a self-constructed cocoon. Self finally retreats into a fantasy vacuum, with its micro-cassette, video tapes, and replacement of 'nine-to-five' by the micro-chip and, of course, the dole queue."[114]

Here, then, Savage further developed a "postmodern" reading of new romantic form and style. Akin to Peter York's prediction of "mush," and following Penman's observation that new romantic "desires and designs" were rarely "harnessed to an innovative edge, but left to float heavily on the surface of things, like oil on water," Savage traced new romanticism through an "age of plunder."[115] Plunder, that is, "not merely [of] post-war fashion but the whole of history," reassembled and recycled endlessly until style replaced meaning and all substance was lost to the empty gestures of "misapplied semiotics."[116] As examples, he pointed to the John Flaxman lithographs used by Graham Smith to suggest Spandau Ballet's classicism and Chris Sullivan's Pablo Picasso pastiches for Blue Rondo á la Turk: record covers where historical artworks were used to "tart up product that has increasingly less meaning" once produced solely for aesthetic purposes and "cut loose" from the "subcultural beginning" that gave pertinence to Bowie, Roxy Music, and the Sex Pistols.[117]

[109] Ian Penman, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall ...," *NME*, 19 December 1981, 12.

[110] Jon Savage, "The New Hippies," in Birch, *The Book With No Name*, 40.

[111] Savage, "'You Look Fantastic'," 13–14.

[112] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 333.

[113] Savage, "'You Look Fantastic'," 14; Savage, "The New Hippies," 32–48; Paul Tickell, "A Consumer's Guide," in Birch, *The Book With No Name*, 68.

[114] Savage, "'You Look Fantastic'," 15. Tom Wolfe, "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening," in his *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine* (New York, 1976), 126–67.

[115] Penman, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall ...," 12.

[116] Savage, "The New Hippies," 32–48; Jon Savage, "The Toytown Nihilists," in his *Time Travel*, 181–82; originally published in *The Face*, December 1985.

[117] Jon Savage, "The Age of Plunder," *The Face*, January 1983, 44–49, quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 436.

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In effect, Savage adopted the situationist theories of Guy Debord to reveal culture as a commodity to be endlessly recycled. Crucially, however, he did so by locating pop's postmodern turn next to broader technological changes and shifts in media. He reasserted pop's perennial relationship with money and marketing.[118] He celebrated pop's implicit politics: its ability to resonate with the times; to sometimes transcend "mere entertainment"; to express aspects of youthful "consciousness"; to encourage agency and comment on "the relationship between the dominant (what we are told) and the subconscious (how we feel)."[119] But he recognized too the limits of "overt rebellion" within the context of the media spectacle and a music industry reasserting dominancy in the wake of punk.[120]

Savage also considered pop music and style in relation to the range of new groups and "street styles" circulating by 1981. A *confusion* of pop modes reigned, he suggested, pointing to the surfeit of subcultural identities revived or reimagined in the form of ted, mod, skinhead, punk, rockabilly, and "Bowie" looks compiled in *i-D* but also sold "off-the-peg" via clothing ads at the back of the music press. New romanticism, with its constantly changing and reassembled looks, represented a tipping point—the opening of what Polhemus later described as a "supermarket of style."[121] Pop culture was entering a period of "dissolution," Savage predicted. What had once felt liberating in 1978–80, as style constructed new identities and challenged prescribed meanings, now felt meaningless as pop fragmented "into myriad markets."[122]

The facilitators of such change were found in the technological innovations transforming a media that expanded and diversified into the 1980s: cheaper production and advanced equipment, deregulation and globalization, video and MTV, color and gloss. "Just walk through Soho and figure out where the money is coming from," Savage wrote later in 1985 as he pondered the increased coverage (and recycling) of pop music on television and in daily newspapers.[123] Across the interlocking interests of new media industries owned by a gaggle of multinationals, pop culture was key to servicing the multiple vistas of an ever-more vibrant leisure economy.[124]

Finally, Savage considered new romanticism with regard to a period framed politically by the social conservatism and free market economics of Margaret Thatcher's government, wondering if youth cultural style served merely as a means to act out the power politics of a particular government or epoch: punk's proletarian chic under Labour, new romantic's aristocratic ostentation under the Tories.[125] This was less convincing. Indeed, Savage himself recognized such analogy to be more structural than actual. An extended analysis might therefore consider a Foucauldian reading of new romanticism, suggesting that the Blitz kids' adopted styles and sensibilities displayed evolving cultural logics and discourses already in the process of reshaping identities and subjectivities into the late twentieth century. Certainly, Savage's assessments appear most astute when considered through a range of metanarratives mediating broader cultural change and crisscrossing though processes of deindustrialization, globalization, and ever-expanding media spectacle. If seen as an emergent culture, the semiotics, discourse, and performance of new romanticism suggest structures of feeling both resonating with and challenging prevailing sociocultural and political mores. A cultural variant of "popular individualism" perhaps, revealing how a growing postwar desire for autonomy and agency was performed and creatively imagined in ways that

[118] Savage, "The New Hippies," 32–48.

[119] Savage, "The New Hippies," 32–48; Jon Savage, "Androgyny: Confused Chromosomes and Camp Followers," *The Face*, June 1983, 20–23.

[120] Savage, "The New Hippies," 32–48.

[121] Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (London, 1994), 130.

[122] Savage, "'You Look Fantastic," 14; Savage, "1983," 162–67; Savage, "The Toytown Nihilists," 181–82.

[123] Jon Savage, "Is There Life After *Smash Hits*" [June 1985], in his *Time Travel*, 171–72.

[124] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 436.

[125] Savage, "The New Hippies," 48; Fred Vermorel, "McLaren Exposed," *Sounds*, 11 April 1981, 12–14.

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realized shared modes of understanding, experience, and sensibility?[126] In 1973, David Bowie declared: "Once upon a time, your father, my father, everybody's father I presume, wanted a good job, with a good income, or reasonable income [and] some chance of promotion to secure their family life [...] and that's where it ended. But now people want a role in society, they want to feel they have a position, they want to be an individual. And I think there is a lot of searching to find the individual within ourselves."[127] In a post-Bowie sanctioned context of spectacular self-reinvention, the urge toward greater autonomy and self-determination was thereby directed at expressing the *extraordinary* as well as the "ordinary."[128]

Savage himself now considers the new romantic period "fantastically important," particularly with regard to gender fluidity and the evidently gay elements coming to the fore.[129] As a response to both the perceived grimness of the late-1970s/early-1980s and the negation of punk, extravagant style and the lure of the dance floor offered what the BBC's *Newsnight* recognized in early 1981 as a "positive reaction to a difficult world."[130] As it was, new romantic attempts to avoid definition allowed commentators of the time to apply their own logic and interpretation. Once named, moreover, new romanticism proved set to diffuse into the 1980s, its pose too bold to ever quite fade to grey (Figure 18).

Boys, now the times are changing, the going could get rough[131]

Accounts of new romanticism and early 1980s pop tend always to look for the end or start of something: the break from punk; the advent of Thatcherism; the onset of club- or style-culture; the arrival of a new decade. Writing retrospectively in the mid-1990s, Peter York could only see the sounds, styles, and sensibilities of the Blitz kids as Thatcherite in all but name, a culture "driven by entrepreneurial zeal." Blitz was, he maintained, akin to the Centre for Policy Studies founded in 1974 to break the supposed postwar "consensus" and develop ideas to reshape Conservative priorities through and beyond the 1980s: "two [elitist] clubs with a door policy."[132] History was thereby edited, the lens refocused, and the script revised to fit the predominant cultural and political narrative of the period. "Were we Thatcher's children?," Stephen Jones similarly asked much later: "In a way we were [...] that entrepreneurial spirit was encouraged by her because it was somehow a fresh start."[133] It's like the 1970s never happened (to paraphrase Dave Rimmer).

Yet, we could equally understand the new romantics as heralding the twilight of a particular political moment. Informed by various postwar youth cultures (mod, soul, glam, punk) and certain artistic and gay milieus, proto-new romantics occupied and repurposed spaces made available through longer processes of deindustrialization and socioeconomic change. They took over backroom clubs, bars, and disused warehouses; they found cheap accommodation in depopulating cities; they forged looks and styles out of cultural images circulating within an expanding but relatively concentrated media spectacle; they signified key aspects of the "popular individualism" redolent of the 1970s, asserting self-defined identities and perspectives that rejected social shibboleths and hierarchies. In constructing and reimagining their image and selves, new romantics embodied key aspects of the sociocultural liberalization apparent from at least the 1960s, most obviously with regard to gender and sexual fluidity. Before AIDS and the conservative push-back of the 1980s, the new

[126] Robinson et al, "Telling Stories about Post-War Britain," 268–304.

[127] David Bowie on LWT, *Russell Harty*, broadcast 17 February 1973.

[128] George and Strange made this point often, but see also the quotes from Blitz "punters" in Roberts, "The Electronic Eighties," 290–92

[129] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 430.

[130] BBC, *Newsnight*, broadcast 23 January 1981.

[131] Japan, "Quiet Life" on *Quiet Life* (Hansa, 1979).

[132] Peter York and Charles Jennings, *Peter York's Eighties* (London, 1995), 31–33.

[133] Quoted in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 624.

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Figure 18. Blitz Kids. Photograph: Derek Ridgers.

romantics signaled a moment of sexual possibility, wherein genders and sexualities blurred or emerged bravely and defiantly to seek new modes of expression.[134] That all this was captured and accelerated by technological innovation was less the result of 1980s economic policy and more the product of new media processes developing over the preceding period, particularly with regard to digital electronics, video, synthesized sounds, printing techniques, and design practice.[135] What was captured, moreover, tended to relate far more to imagery and sensibilities evocative of the years preceding the 1980s. Initially, at least, new romantics suggested louche glamour not hard-nosed business; decadence not healthy efficiency; pop culture as an escape route rather than a career; street or haute couture

[134] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, 2011).

[135] Nick Von Tunzelmann, "Technology in Post-War Britain," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, ed. Roderick Floud and Paul Jonson (Cambridge, 2004), 299–31.

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not "designer" style; stylized or dystopian futurism not capitalist realism; modernist bricolage poised to collapse into a postmodern sea of signs. More to the point, much of what enabled new romanticism as an emergent culture would soon be challenged over the course of the 1980s.[136] Changes to education policy and funding saw university and art school provision realign; the drive toward urban regeneration cut off grassroots affordability and access to creative and habitable spaces; the media and music industries adapted to reassert the control tested by punk (reaffirming their London-centricity as a result); hip hop then house, techno, and rave delivered a very different "1980s" to that seemingly apparent at the start of the decade (albeit with synth-pop claiming some influence on the latter and various erstwhile futurists and new romantics continuing to DJ an array of dance music). New romantic ingenuity was funded and facilitated in large part by a welfare state that saw benefits and student grants slowly eroded or made more circumscribed from 1980. Many came from working-class backgrounds, finding space through creativity, and sometimes also education, to inform wider aspects of British culture from the "bottom-up" or margins.[137] If this particular "groundswell of entrepreneurism" started in the 1970s, as Dylan Jones admits, then it might therefore be said to have rescinded over the 1980s as Thatcherism took hold.[138]

It is wrong, then, to suggest the Blitz club and new romanticism led seamlessly to a world of Groucho clubs and Soho brasseries.[139] Even in 1983, the blue-eyed soul of Spandau Ballet's "True" seemed some way from the disco-throb of their first single, "To Cut A Long Story Short" (1980), let alone the futuristic polysexual playgrounds of Billy's and Blitz. Better, perhaps, to recognize new romanticism neither as a "start" nor an "end" but as a moment of coalescence en route to dissipation. If, as Williams suggests, emergent cultures contain both "new" and "residual" elements, then the poses, sounds, and sensibilities of the Blitz kids and their equivalents across the UK necessarily bore traces of the past and portents of the future. Be it consciously or unconsciously, new romantics—and the wider new pop and style-based cultures of which they formed part—sought to establish new practices and relationships, reordering and repositioning elements from the past and present to reflect and embody structures of feeling both dissolving and emerging. These, in turn, would be shaped and channeled by ongoing processes of socioeconomic change, ensuring the recognizable signifiers of new romanticism were reframed and reinterpreted as priorities, language, and polity shifted.

Once determined, new romanticism disaggregated and dispersed through various cultural strands, permeating into clubs, fashion, pop music, dance music, film, photography, and design. In many ways, therefore, what became known as new romanticism ceased to exist as soon as it was named, the post-Blitz parade of clubs, sounds, and styles denying the culture a focal point. For a moment, however, spectacular selves were created and consciously (re)invented through an amalgam of visual culture and inspired consumption. Across the UK, worlds of possibility were envisaged and constructed by young people in liminal spaces soundtracked by a fusion of glam, punk, disco, and electronics. In living their dreamlife through their nightlife, (proto)new romantics sought to transcend the mundane and embrace the past, future, in extreme.

[136] Stephen Farrall and Colin Hay, eds., *The Legacy of Thatcherism: Assessing and Exploring Thatcherite Social and Economic Policies* (London, 2014); Bernhard Rieger, "Making Britain Work Again: Unemployment and the Remaking of British Social Policy in the Eighties," *English Historical Review* CXXXIII, no. 562 (2018): 634–66; Kevin Albertson and Paul Stepney, "1979 and All That: A 40-year Reassessment of Margaret Thatcher's Legacy On Her Own Terms," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 44, no. 2 (2020): 319–42; Selina Todd, *Snakes and Ladders: The Great British Social Mobility Myth* (London, 2021).

[137] For the class backgrounds and sexual persuasion of those associated with new romantics, see Roberts, "The Electronic Eighties," 290–92; Strange, *Blitzed!*, 1–29; Boy George, *Take it Like a Man*, 10–31; Gary Kemp, *I Know This Much: From Soho to Spandau* (London, 2009); Martin Kemp, *True* (London, 2000); Elms, *The Way We Wore*, 9–21; Smith and Sullivan, *We Can Be Heroes*, 215–39 .

[138] Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 291.

[139] Elms, in Jones, *Sweet Dreams*, 595.

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