

The Most Important Book Most of You will Never Read—or, ‘Doing the Continental’.

Sweet Dreams. The story of the New Romantics. From Club Culture to Style Culture
(London: Faber 2020) by Dylan Jones

Reviewed by Mike Grimshaw

In late modernity Gary Eberle issued...a call to become postmodern ‘Hunters and Collectors’, who must:

Wander through the geography of nowhere picking up bits and pieces of world-views that we may find useful: we must try to patch together a meaningful life for ourselves from these fragments.¹

In a similar fashion, the historian and philosopher Agnes Heller declared: “...this is not a good time to be writing systems. On the other hand, it is quite a good time to be writing fragments.”²

Thirdly, as Foucault observed: “Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read.”³

The book starts with this:

Sometimes, I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all. Julia Flyte, *Brideshead Revisited*

In one of those strange twists, in the first series of *Berlin Babylon*, Bryan Ferry plays [or should that be, channels] a louche nightclub singer performing 1920s Weimar jazz in a decadent nightclub.

Ferry was, well before his transfiguration into elder boomer crooner, an art school musician from the coalfields of Durham who, with Roxy Music provided one of the inspirations for the blitz kids of the 1980s, who in turn sought continental style and influence.

The other main influence was David Bowie, like Ferry and Roxy Music, not just in his sound but in his look—we could say—as in that great track from *Low*: 'Sound and Vision' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRc2_-BCljQ

Dylan Jones, art school kid (Chelsea School of Art, St Martin's School of Art), blitz kid, music and style journalist (*i-D*, *The Face*, *Arena*), broadsheet journalist (*Observer* & *Sunday Times*), (very recently retired) magazine editor in chief (*GQ*), music book author—and dandy—has compiled a new history of what led to and was the new romantics 1975-1985; a history in fragments, a collection of a hunter & collector of interviews, recordings, articles, memories, opinions, backed up with photos and, perhaps most crucially, a discography (subtitled 'they don't make the future like they used to'), arranged, curated, compiled, selected, by year:

I've attempted to list the important records of the time that fit the narrative arc of the story, complemented by various records which help contextualize the period. Consequently, there are many great post-punk records you won't find here, as they don't fit the narrative; nor will you find a collection of clubland's greatest hits. What you will find is a selection of records that give a very strong sense of time—tunes you might have heard in bedrooms, nightclubs and cocktail bars, and songs you could still be singing in your head right now. (p.639)

[Note: the discography runs pp. 639-656- and each track is annotated. It is both a very valuable and very 'dangerous' resource if you have access to spotify. My family got tired, very quickly, of "Warm Leatherette by The Normal [1978], especially when I followed it with Grace Jones' cover version from 1980.] [Note 2: A whole essay could be written on the discography and its archly wry annotations; alternatively, the discography is an essay in itself and its format could easily be applied to a reading list of the history of continental thought, or of a continental thinker. Or even more so,

it gives hope as to what the dreaded literature review or annotated bibliography could become (if only!) with a knowing ironic aside].

There are also 10 pages of *dramatis personae*, each with varying annotations. What is telling is how so much of what became late modern and postmodern culture was (as always) deeply influenced by and often the result of, very small, often barely known coterie of what Simmel identified, many decades before as fashion leaders; the rest of us being, to varying degrees, knowingly and unknowingly, fashion followers. The same of course happens in thought; and the journals of thought operate in much the same way as those magazines of fashion and cultural moments.

The look of the book, of this book, is of course as important as its contents; one of the lessons of the new romantics was you *could*, in fact, judge a book (or a person) but its/their cover. [As an aside, Robert Elms' wonderful *the way we wore; a life in threads* (2005) should be read alongside this book. Clothes are, we know, never 'just' clothes and never exist as 'just' clothes; rather they exist and operate within a rhizomic array of connections, meanings, values and politics].

So here we have, each in a different colour, Boy George, Annie Lennox, David Bowie, Adam Ant and Sade; 5 *dramatis personae* who will, in the book illustrate different times and themes of the new romantics. The front and end papers are black and white photographs of 'blitz kids' each under a clock that tells a different time, each with an insouciance that speaks to and of the time; these are the people who most of us have never heard of, yet in different ways, have contributed to changing the way we dress, think, listen and consume culture. There's a great line in in Graham Ward's *Cities of God* that the question theology "does not handle" is the question concerning "what time is it?"; conversely, the question sitting at the centre of pop culture, the question it is obsessed with is "what time is it?" So, to photograph the fashion leaders under a clock, a clock that in each photo tells a different time is far more telling than we might first think. Time is "of the moment"; this is secular time, a time when meaning is being contrasted, not revealed, a time when meaning is doing, is culture, is art; given that all of these leaders are photographed in the halls of residence that housed all the art school kids who didn't come from London, this is art school time, it is provincial into urban time; it is, via art school, time as art practice, culture as art practice.

So, what of the contents? Following the preface 'In Plato's cave' that takes us on an auto-ethnographic tour of what a night in the Blitz club in 1979 might have been like, we then get a longer essay on the context of that decade 1975-1985 that, tellingly is subtitled "La Vie en Rose".

Each section is headed by a quote from one of the protagonists of the time and this means use of the central role of the selected quote, the extended aphorism, as another way into—and to make sense of—the time. In this, and in what follows, I am reminded constantly of the Zizekian short circuit, for in Dylan Jones' skillful weaving together of interviews and his italicized annotations, in the various interplays, there are many short circuit moments.

A good place to start is this statement, or rather, proclamation, from, Vivienne Westwood describing the origins of punk in 1975; and her differing attitude to that of Malcolm McLaren:

“Malcolm was against everything for no particular reason. He absolutely hated authority. I cared more about trying to change the world and make it a better place. That's what punk was about – *young people figuring out what they wanted from this world. The first thing they have to realise is that they are all victims of propaganda. the only way to do that is through culture. Culture is the antidote to propaganda.*” [p.45][*Italics added*]

Culture is the antidote to propaganda.

There is 'a manifesto moment' statement if ever there was one; the 'manifesto moment' being what Mary Ann Caws terms its positioning 'between what has been done and what will be done, between the accomplished and the potential, in a radical and energizing division',⁵ a moment of crisis expressing 'what it wants to oppose, to leave, to defend, to change.'⁶

The new romantics were very much the expression and embodiment of the 'manifesto moment': bodies as manifestos; sound and vision as manifestos; clubs, nightlife as manifestos; and even more so than McLaren and Westwood, the real seditionaries were Bryan Ferry (and Roxy Music—so of course, Brian Eno) and David Bowie. Their bodies, their dress, their sound, their attitude. Channelling post-war Europe, Germany in particular (Can, Neu!, Kraftwerk), through very English attitudes, Bryan and David made art school ethos and attitudes (or in Bowie's case, the autodidact short-circuited art school) the culture that was the antidote to propaganda.

There is a whole book, or rather a series of books to be written on the art school impact on culture, high, low, popular and elite' (in whichever country we find ourselves reading this); as Dylan Jones (Chelsea School of Art & St Martins School of Art) observes, art schools in the UK at this time “functioned as a state-subsidized bohemia”(p.192); what they did is what I have earlier observed: they enabled arts and

culture, music and magazines, cultural production and consumption to combine into a forms of 'life as art[school] practice'

Dylan Jones:

Art schools therefore welcomed the 'talented but academically unqualified', who were encouraged to be self-expressive and 'find their way', but also embody the virtues of the idea of art as a practice—and an open-ended, indeterminate and materially-specific process of enquiry. (p.193)

Let's just stop and consider this, especially in light of the expansion of higher education in our universities as the place that welcomes (as customers) the 'untalented but academically qualified'.... what would it mean if we in universities were to try to adopt the idea of 'self-expression, finding their way' and embodying the short-circuited idea of 'thought and theory as a practice—and as an open-ended, indeterminate and materially-specific process of inquiry'? And let's start with ourselves, not just with our students...

What would it mean to recapture that sense of art schools as "chaotic incubators" (p.193); as Jones despondently comments, "it meant a lot more to be an art student in the Seventies than it does now" (p.194) –and we could add, also to be an Arts student.

Gary Kemp (Spandau Ballet):

A cultural identity is a great outlet for people's frustrations. Kids have always spent what little they have on records and haircuts. They've never spent it on books by Karl Marx. (p.218)

[Which is why young Marxists don't get laid by who they want to get laid by... discuss...]

Johnson (journalist):

"...dressing up at the Blitz became an act of affirmation. The Blitz Kids were the first children of the television age, wise in the ways of the popular media and they set out to subvert the realms the young know best—music and fashion. (p218)

We could go all Gramsci-ish here, but really that's beside the point. These were the real seditionaries, the real revolutionaries, the ones who, never having read Marx's *thesis eleven*, put it into practice.

Steve Dagger (among other things, the manager of Spandau Ballet): "we were all in it together to cause a revolution."

In this case, despite the proclamation of Gil Scott-Herron, the revolution *would be* televised; of course, this was a different type of revolution, a different type of rebellion, a rebellion within capitalism not against it, a revolution of capitalism, not against it—yet a rebellion, a revolution that contuse to shape the way we live. A revolution based in "the blitz's postmodern themes: Bowie's 'just for one day' notion of disposable identities, and of bricolage..." (p.219)

Heroes, recorded in the immediate, physical shadow to the cold war, taking Warhol's 15 minutes and extending it to a day; the cold war sound of Germany made British and American, yet another album, yet another identity; the album itself part of a self-exile from America, with Brian Eno, freed from Roxy Music, now co-authoring songs and sound with Bowie.

What Bowie and Eno were doing with technology was also being done by others.

John Foxx (ex Ultravox):

There was also a whole new language to be devised, you had to rethink every element of a track and replace them all with synth functions. The old sonic hierarchies bit the dust. (p.235).

[We could say: discuss –with reference to Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*...]

Foxx again:

Everything was skeletal now, everything mercilessly naked. The subjects of the songs had changed too: there were no love songs and no jolly stuff. Sure, there was kind of humour, but it was far from light. It was urban, angular and dark, an architecture of longing and mystery, and it was all implicit in the natural sound of machinery. (p.235)

[Again– this is yet another essay question: discuss with reference to Heidegger...]

This is the sound, the world, the context of *Warm Leatherette* (1978), the title alone signifying mass-culture synthetics, downmarket glamour of the affordable every day, the song the dispassionate, transgressive commentary of the eroticism of a car crash arising from JG Ballard's *Crash* (1973); the dispassionate eroticism turned up to full-throttle fetishization by Grace Jones; version (1980). [They might not have read Marx but they all read, or read of, JG Ballard...]

There were the magazines... as an aside, it was one of these, in the mid-1980s, that opened me up to postmodern thought. We weren't going to get it in the history department nor, back then, in the English department—and never, *quelle horreur*, in an antipodean philosophy department; but in the pages of *Blitz* (1980-) we got a crash course; for *Blitz*'s aim was:

...instead of covering music it would reflect the whole range of subjects affecting this market- design, film, politics, theatre, art, video, fashion and much more. (p.283: Simon Tesler [publisher])

The theologian Karl Barth is famously referenced as saying “We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” [or, actually, more correctly] “*Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.*” (*Time Magazine*, May 1, 1966.); but let's stick with the misquote...

For the new romantics, as for those of us coming of age at this time in their wake, it was more a case of holding *Blitz* in one hand and *The Face* in the other [plus the *NME* sitting close at hand]; these were our sources of news, views and opinion, these were our revelatory texts, these were the basis of our daily hermeneutics. These gave us our thought and theory ‘made flesh’. [As an aside this book should also be read alongside Paul Gorman's *The story of The Face: the magazine that changed culture* (2017)]

Nick Logan, founder of *The Face*:

I was really concerned about what the messaging was, and so I analysed every page, every advertisement, as I wanted to make sure that we were sending the right message to the reader. ‘this magazine is about music, fashion, art; this magazine is straight, this magazine is a bit gay. (p.344).

That qualifier ‘a bit’ is somewhat jarring this second decade of the 21st century—and yet, in its own way, it symbolized a version of what, later on, will be described a

'nostalgia for the future'; Bowie in particular, made manifest as magazine ethos—before he went yuppie and sought out stadiums.

Often we would read about music before we heard it—or, before we saw and heard it. Before MTV there were the weekly shows where either a curation of early music videos played or there were live performances (which were actually in the main, mimed performances—and looking back we can see just how mimed they were) of either the top of the pops or up and comers. Radio play was very dependent on where you lived, likewise access to albums or cassette tapes, the latter often also bootlegs or home-made compilations that created their own music underground of aural manifestos, agit-prop and personal soundtracks made communal.

But the reading, the reading of physical magazines was, in a twisted analogy, a textual and pictorial soundtrack to the times; it reminded us that 'subculture' was actually a collective, a collection of sounds, ideas, fashions, attitudes and practices, rather than split, fractured inward-looking sectarian interests; that is, to go back to Simmel, both fashion leaders and fashion followers. It was also indicative of a new 'creative culture' that grew out of punk, as Simon Tesler, publisher of *Blitz* puts it:

But by 1980, punk had been superseded by something altogether more ambitious, a culture that had grown directly out of punk but that was more concerned with extravagance, visual style, creativity. The same people who had spent their time going to punk gigs were now growing up and trying to make some sort of interesting, preferably independent, living—writing, perhaps or making clothes, or acting: anything, in fact, rather than going to work as a bank clerk or a secretary... (pp.282-283)...[and regarding *Blitz*]*instead of covering simply music it would reflect the whole range of subjects affecting this market—design, film, politics, theatre, art, video, fashion and much more.* (p283) [*italics added*]

Let's just stop and reconsider this for a moment: music thought of and experienced and expressed as entangled with and arising from: design, film, politics, theatre, art, video, fashion—and much more. To be interested in music was, it is emphasized, to be interested in, or at least open to, and effected and affected by all of these. And this meant you were thinking about all of this: talking, reading, watching, thinking, listening, writing, making, doing, playing, talking, thinking, thinking—and to think by and with there were articles about ideas: postmodernism, Baudrillard, Derrida,

Foucault, Barthes and the like, combined with and as *art school theory for the masses*. As Robert Elms observes:

...I've always said, it's the primacy of style. When you're a kid in particular, your main weapon is what you wear. It was all we had. We had the records that we bought and the clothes that we wore.(p.287)

In other words, aural and physical semiotics; ideas made material; ideas as performative presentation and identity.

As Dylan Jones writes, there were those such as Dick Hebdige who criticized such a cultural turn, seeing it as Thatcherite, too glossy and focused on the image; or as Jones puts it, "an aesthetics that was demonised for rejecting the austerity and anti-fashion stance of punk." (p.288)

But what actually happened? Here the keen eye of Jones is telling:

They embraced a cultural gentrification that at first glance would have been anathema to the ideological guttersnipes of the punk generation. However, a quick second look will tell you that the initial instigators of pun –Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and Clash Svengali Bernie Rhodes–were old school wheeler-dealers. For them shock meant money.... As punk came complete with its own self-destruct button, having an inbuilt obsolescence, success in any regard was going to be a disappointment, or at least at odds with what rebellion had traditionally looked like." (p.289)

Of course we need to remember Hebdige's scene-setting *Subculture; the meaning of Style* (1979) arose out of his time at the Birmingham University's centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and so he was always going to be challenged by a subculture that took a different route to rebellion. As Dylan Jones describes it:

Fundamentally, the new romantics were the result of a groundswell of entrepreneurialism, a DIY ethos that, in the space of about 18 months, produced an entirely new generation of creatives. (p.291)

What drove them was, in Jones' apt phrase a "kind of nostalgia for the future"(p.290). This was expressed by the pick'n'mix , genre and time mixing aesthetics, a postmodern bricolage of the individual is perhaps how I can best describe it; the creative was the collective of the individual and the fault lines were

generational and ideological: between the *NME* and its ilk (the Punk that was the true male protest of authenticity brigade) and those who aligned with *Smash Hits* [which at one stage was selling a million copies every two weeks...], *i-D* and The Face.

Neil Tenant (Pet Shop Boys and one-time *Smash Hits* scribe): “we were strictly apolitical at *Smash Hits*. Although it was apolitical with a left-wing slant” (p.377) Is this this not in itself the succinct description of centre-left technocratic politics that developed from the 1990s...? The Clinton years, the Blair years...?

The central question was perhaps, how to ‘be’ in the post-industrial world. As noted by David Stubbs, the shift in identity was from being defined by your job (or in the case of punk—by not having a job, or not wanting one) to being defined by your stylistic decision. So on one level this was a type of neo-liberal agency, you chose to become, you enacted whatever agency you could perform. Now on one side, this is also what punk set loose: that how you looked was part of how you were perceived, how you performed your identity (that is, your agency) was in many ways not only how you were perceived but, as Jones emphasized, “also how you might be employed.” (p.291)

But this was a DIY ethos: you made clothes, you scoured second-hand clothing shops for what could be mixed and matched, altering, customizing; that assemblage and bricolage of the personal—one that, via magazines, tv, radio also become a DIY of the mind. Non art-school students—and most non Arts students—didn’t get this; most of society, most young people remained deeply conformist; not even followers but rather laggards; except for the influence of the music video where that combination of ‘sound and vision’ or we might say, ‘music made manifest, music made materialist’ suddenly started to shape not only how people dressed but also, how they thought—about themselves and others.

It is what Jones—tracing the aesthetic of the music video via the influence of the Italian design and architecture agency the Memphis group—describes as ‘entry-level postmodernism.’(p.313)

It was just before this that the chameleon-like qualities of Bryan Ferry and David Bowie played out both ends of this nostalgia for the future. On the one hand, as the scene-stars, the taste and style arbiters, the performance artists who kick-started so much of this, they embodied one side of the nostalgia; but their inability to stay static, their presence in the scene, their totemic status made them constant embodiments of the future as well. We could intentionally subvert Heidegger and describe Ferry and Bowie as beings ‘thrown into the world’—echoing of course Bowie’s alien performance in *The Man who fell to Earth*(1975) [Ferry being far too canny to consider himself a cinematic actor; all of life was enough of a stage for him:

the man who went to art school had no need to constantly represent himself as 'art'...].

But then Bowie really was 'the god'; 'their god' as often commented; his appearances at clubs were like those visitations of the divine in classical mythology (often with the same tastes and actions, it must be said) and he called upon the Blitz club to gather his acolytes, his disciples, for the Ashes to Ashes video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyMm4rJemtl>

That same year Ferry and Roxy Music released their album 'Flesh and Blood'; yet really it is their album of the previous year, 'Manifesto' and their first ever video single 'Angel Eyes' that perfectly sum up their louche, swaggering nostalgia for future glamour <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9w85VtIG9c>

Yet this was the end of the Bowie that was the inspiration, as Jones wryly observes:

'Ashes to Ashes' is symbolically the end of Bowie's purple patch, the end of his imperial period. It signalled the end of the queer chameleon, the leopard-skin messiah and the glam apocalypticist, the last anti-rock hurrah before the arrival of the custard-coiffured yuppie, the man who wanted to stay in and get things done. (p.300)

And so after Bowie, many took his place as images and sounds of what he was and had unleashed: "a lot of pop is indivisible from the times around it. Whereas a lot of early-eighties futuristic pop was indivisible from the idea of David Bowie". (p.300)

To introduce Baudrillard, Bowie was always his own—and others'—hyperreality; whereas we could say, via Bourdieu, Ferry was always an exercise in cultural and social capital.

And then there was Duran Duran, trying valiantly—but failing to be—in the memorable phrase of their hater, journalist Paul Morley "Peel-listening pop conceptualists mixing the Sex Pistols with Chic (wanton English energy and brazen processed disco...)(p.380); they lacked " the subversive swagger of the Pistols and the transcendent swing of Chic and leaving behind an embellished melodic sludge. They were perhaps more Sweet crossed with ABBA"(p.380); or put it another way, new romanticism for the suburban middle classes happy to live in the suburbs —and safely dream in the weekends.

Yet against this conversion to the mainstream there co-existed the ongoing subversion, as Morley notes:

...there were those displaying convincing signs of resistance to the mediocre, to the restrictive and ordinary– the presence on *Top of the Pops* of daring Boy George blurring the sexes and positively confusing the mainstream mind, Soft Cell's northern sauce, and something deviant dripping from Adam Ant's painted brow was a sign of intact subversive punk spirit filtered through a kink dream, of Bowie. (p.381)

Always, always, that dream of Bowie...

And yet also, the eruption everywhere, on the streets, in the magazines, on the radio, on the tv, of that new postmodern sensibility:

The new pop was not just a collage of every kind of pop that had been before it, but also any number of new splinters, calculated postmodern slices of everything from scratchy post-punk to popular avant-garde, from black electronica to gender-bender pop. (Jones. p.388)

This was the life in fragments, the sounds of hunting and collecting, the end of grand narratives and the start of what Nancy Fraser will later disparage as progressive neoliberalism. (*Dissent* 2017)⁸

Yet before we can get to the progressive neoliberals –if in fact ever get there– (and of course progressive neoliberals are upper-middle class elites, not the voices– or claims–of people of the streets) we need to halt again and consider not 'the sound of music' but, as Jones tellingly implies, *the sound of the economy*. There was the emergence of "twelve-inch epics that openly referenced recession and deprivation... this seemed to be a genuine reflection of the economy" (p.388); or, as is also noted, the musical insurrection mirrored a political insurrection and the sound became that of what *The Face* labelled "hard times" – symbolized by The Specials' 'Ghost town'. As an aside, *The Guardian* put this song as No.2 of the greatest UK No1s" <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/04/the-100-greatest-uk-no-1s-no-2-the-specials-ghost-town>

(*The Guardian's* Alexis Petridis' short essay is a timely reminder of a time when, pre-internet, pop music had a collective impact and audience, before it was fragmented into so many dislocated and disparate soundbites. Writing about popular music now seems in many ways a type of gnostic longing, not only speaking more and more to the initiates of lost knowledge but also seeking a return to a collective, unitary, universal body from which we have been shattered by digital capitalism).

By the way, the No.1 is by another blitz kid, one time new romantic, one half *Smash Hits* music journalist (and his offsider), *West End Girls* by the Pet Shop Boys <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jun/05/the-100-greatest-uk-no-1s-no-1-pet-shop-boys-west-end-girls>

(The essay by Laura Snapes is also well worth a read; both her and Petridis remind us that music is never 'just' music, that pop music is always of and about a time in and of a society, but also can transcend time and place. For example, what am I reading or watching from 1981 or 1984 that has the same immediate impact the same transformative power, the same ability to move me, physically, emotionally, hell, even ontologically, as music from the past, as these two songs?)

Where things came together, was 'the street' (and note how in both 'Ghost Town' and *West End Girls*) the videos are about the experience of urban streets, streets emptied by recession, streets full of intermingling); as Vivienne Westwood comments: "the enemy of individual expression is the high street" (p.395) (yet again, we could say: "discuss" and set it as an essay question...); or as she proclaims "the only subversion is in ideas, and ideas come from the past. It's about culture, as you can't throw away the past." (p.396) So you dressed up to reference the past, but the past subverted into the present; you went out, you danced, as the past into the present, knowingly or (in the dreaded high street simulacra of 'fashion'), unknowingly but referential all the same.

Clubs were where the subversion of ideas occurred as individual expression, listening to and dancing to (not necessarily the same thing as any vinyl train spotter would tell you) music of past and present—and that trying to sound like the future; music of and from here and there, that postmodern bricolage that was a type of common currency and identity. It was where, as listed by Alix Sharkey, at Chris Sullivan's Wag Club you would find "a hip young crowd of art students, musicians, designers and shop assistants. On the dance floor, regulars included Boy George, John Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier, Neneh Cherry, Michael Clark and Leigh Bowery, as well as any number of 'fabulous nobodies'". (p.403) If you don't know the names listed then you should if you want to be able to claim any sort of pop-cultural literacy, but even better is that wonderful catchall term 'fabulous nobodies'. Isn't that what going out offers, the chance to be a 'fabulous nobody'; not by being 'somebody' but rather by being some where? Another version of knowledge is power: you have to know where to go.

Hip hop was introduced, to a select few, before boldly gate crashing into wider society, as well as being invited home by bored, white suburban teenagers. The start of the eighties was defined, Dylan Jones observes by 3 American records: 'The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel' by Grandmaster Flash

(1981); 'The Message' by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982); and 'Last night a DJ saved my life' by In Deep (1982); and even for me, in cultural exile (or so it seemed, deep down in the cold southern Pacific), as one too young and too provincially isolated to club, 'The Message' still got through, peaking at No.2 on the NZ charts in 1982 (higher here it seems than anywhere else). We all started to wonder how we stopped from going under....

For many, elsewhere, it was dancing to gay disco, the sounds of 'euphoria and transgression' (p.404), and a sound where European electronica (notably Kraftwerk) went transatlantic into black street and club culture and then exploded out into the world, driven by the collectivist ethos of artists like Afrika Bambaataa, a collectivist ethos wherein all sorts of sounds and influences inter and counter mingled. Each track was a musicology and sociology lesson—if you cared to listen and think your way through it. We could say, to involve Žižek, that every track was both a short circuit and a parallax view, 12 inch puppets with many dwarves hidden inside....

What made it possible was technology, recording technology, sampling technology, the rise and, some would say (in reference to scratching), the misuse of technology, the rise of the sample, not as plagiarism but as cultural appropriation; or in Westwood's frame, the musical, aural, subversion of ideas from the past.

This was also the age of the rise and then the ubiquity of the synth-duo, that "oddly fetishistic" (Jones, p.420) performance of emoting and glowering; two points of focus, for the introvert and for the extrovert; most making (in the words of George Chesterton—in this case of The Human League—but here expanded more generally) sounds that "seemed new at the time to the people who mattered, namely the people who didn't know any better. They are who pop is for (p.425).

Let's just pause and consider this definition of pop: *for those who matter but don't know any better*. Is this the secret of pop? What you connect with is the gnostic call of 'you matter'; that's what draws you in; suddenly, hearing this (and often via the video) seeing this, you connect because it says to you, 'you matter' – and you connect because you don't know any better. Your frame of reference is limited, your expectations are ready to be broken—either collapsed or expanded because you don't exist in the cultural equivalent of Donald Rumsfeld's political context of

...as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. (2002)⁹

Pop makes known what we know and what we did not know, but we do not know what we do not know until we hear and see it—and then it just becomes a known. But by knowing it, we confirm ‘we matter’. The problem being, we matter because we did not know any better and when we do know better, we stop mattering. So pop is the momentary moment of mattering—but not knowing....

We could say that punk was the ethos of ‘knowing but not mattering’, the sound of the outsider who knew something was wrong because of who and what they saw as not mattering.

So there was the ironic perversity of Paul Weller ending The Jam at the height of their post-punk popularity (in part because of the violence of their fans at gigs...neo-mods with their Fred Perry’ed propensity for violence to exert laddish masculinity...resurrected with Oasis...) and combining “new romantic pop and jazz-funk” (p.426) into The Style Council, where irony and politics combined in jazz-funk agitpop. Here perhaps were the real heirs of Roxy Music and pre-Let’s Dance Bowie; a band, a sound, a look that was deeply, curatedly ironic, proclaiming “we know and you matter”.

The other form of ‘we know and you matter’ was goth; if The Style Council made outsiders insiders, goth deliberately kept outsiders as outsiders. This was the other side of dressing up, romanticism not modernism goths not mods, politics of the personal for those excluded by modernity—but wanting psychedelic poetry of anomie.

Perhaps the ultimate expression of ‘I know and you matter—and you know now, which means you matter’ was Boy George. As Jon Savage comments:

...Boy George was completely fascinating. In a way, George, to me, is the key figure in the whole thing. He had the biggest hits and he is the link with punk and he is the link with the subculture and he was the global superstar. There’s something really fascinating about George. He was a soul boy, and then he went through punk and he went through the squatting scene and he did all that. (p.436).

It is too easy to forget just how subversive Boy George was – at a time where, pre-internet, subversion could play out not just on the communally heard radio but even more so, in the suburban living room through music videos playing on top hits shows and MTV. This was the legacy and influence of Quentin Crisp, of those who had fallen for Bowie, of blitz kids, of gender-genre bending, hitting suburban and middle America [as Roy Hay of Culture Club says, “if you grew up with a Culture Club poster on the wall in eighties America, I doubt you’re voting for Trump

now'(p.469)]; punk attitude meeting music hall camp mixed up in a neo-soul boy pop. Blitz kids went global; "an image of benign asexuality, while at the same time looking like the most transgressive pop star of all time"(Jones, p.438). As Boy George says of first his family, and then his fans: "I forced them to accept who I was." (p.440); as Neil Tennant observed of 'mass-market pop music', Boy George "changed everything, because before that it was just straight boys dressing up."(p.441). Of course straight boys continued to dress up, often in forms of American hair metal, and a little bit of knowing camp was taken to signal self-confident hetero-masculinity; but the new romantics made mainstream music androgyny to dance to and with. It was personally and collectively, in ethos and acceptance, what Neil Tennant terms " 'aspirational' pop, i.e it doesn't just celebrate what's there, it celebrates what *could* be there."(p.442); and, we should add, for the fans, *who could be there*—and in what fashions. The self could now be a series of performances of things, ideas and possibilities; it was Foucault's biopolitics of agency for those who never had and never would read Foucault. It was, as Midge Ure remembers, the time whereby, whether Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet or Culture Club, they had "the ability to experiment in an environment that enabled them to be creative" (p. 449); and it was video that enabled sound and vision to come together and transcend time and place.

The other central influence was *The Face*. Established by Nick Logan (who also invented *Arena and Smash Hits*), *The Face* ensured there was a magazine "which on a monthly basis brought information on the developments across youth and wider culture in terms of art, architecture, design, fashion and music."¹⁰ Neville Brody, *The Face's* art director, describes it as "a living laboratory where I could experiment and have it published. Our golden rule was to question everything" (p.462).

In many ways *The Face* was a monthly manifesto of an ethos Chris Sullivan describes as "unafraid to go out on a rather shaky limb and try and do the unexpected."(p.463) That is, the unexpected that then got copied, personalised, systemised as ideas, images, performances and sounds by all who read it; *The Face* being a tangible, visible signal that you knew what mattered; even if by the time you knew, what mattered had changed. But you mattered because you knew:

they were the first generation of men to see images of themselves reflected back at them in magazine pages, and these reflections helped turn them into consumers. They stopped being defined solely by their jobs and started being defined by where and how they spent their money...in a postmodern age of arbitrary gesture and kitsch'n'sink subculture... (Jones,p.498)

There is of course so much to critique—and for many, to dismiss—from such an observation: capitalism creating its own opiates for the urban tribes masses; and pop music is the perfect opiate; but remember the other point of the opiate, it soothes the pain. Perhaps it is, to deliberately misuse Marx: “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”¹¹ That is, we listen, we dance, we dress, we dance, we consume, we customize, we dress up, we listen, we dance, because no other opiate works in quite the same way—especially when you are young. Urban tribes as collective opiates against the pain of modern suburban existence; a way to push back against ‘you are what you work as’; the subculture and the club as the performance and transcendence and fleeting utopia of possibility.

Perhaps it all came together in stylist Ray Petri’s Buffalo, a collective of creatives that drew on the new romantics and the street, of London, New York and elsewhere, to create “an American vision seen through strictly European eyes.”(Jones, p.509) In Petri’s definition:

Buffalo can be anything – a movie, a car, a sound, whatever. But, basically, Buffalo is a functional and stylish look; non-fashion with a hard attitude. (p.510)

Buffalo brought black and white models and styles and attitudes together; in the words of Neneh Cherry:

Buffalo was an attitude, a way of living. It stands for rebellious self-expression, friendship and a fearless creative spirit... Buffalo clashed cultural and gender stereotypes...Breaking down boundaries, creating iconic images... ‘Buffalo Stance’ was a tribute to the Buffalo crew. What they did in fashion, we did in music. (p.510)[see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWsRz3TJDEY>]

Buffalo changed the way we dressed, the way things were styled, what we were and are now able to accept and celebrate. It made mainstream life far more fluid and diverse; it was Bauman’s liquid modernity in action.

So where can we end? Does this end? Perhaps, more telling, after all of this, where did it begin? Jones, at the end then of this book makes a strong case for Roxy Music’s ‘Mother of Pearl’ from 1973’s *Stranded*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHexTTOdpXE>

The music arrived at two speeds; the first a rush into the night, a saraband, a snapshot of Swinging London, seventies style; and then a slow, protracted, piano-driven coda, a melancholy end to the evening. The lyrics mirrored the noise: cocaine and cocktails followed immediately by a deluxe ennui, a wistful meditation on life lived too fast, being up all night, and relentlessly party time wasting. For the listener, the spectator, the fan, this was the ambition template: the contemplative destruction of a world only imagined. Were we really that desperate to feel jaded? Apparently so. (Jones, p.578)

Is this not also where we find ourselves, almost 50 years later experiencing the contemplative destruction of a world only imagined; is this not what makes 'knowing and not mattering' come together...?

And where did it go? DJ Norman Jay sees the fashion, art, music, lifestyle coming together at the end of the eighties into the 'day dot' of Acid house, the outcome as 'a great creative revolution'(p.584).

Yet perhaps 1985 was where it ended—and down here in New Zealand it ended in the way it seemed to end everywhere: neoliberalism. Everyone embraced creativity and agency—unless neoliberalism was done to you, whereby, in a perverse post-pop inverse you neither knew nor mattered. You either had a lifestyle or a bare life. If a neoliberal, you became a progressive neoliberal or a suburban values neoliberal; those with bare life had society done to them, not for or by them. And these fractures remain today— and to his credit Jones does not shy away from such a discussion. The final chapter, '1985, like punk never happened' is a powerful critique and review of what came before and more so, of what has come after. By 1985 extravagance was back; and even architecture of the 1980s blew out into not postmodernism, but what Jones describes as "maximalism, a cultural and design concept manifested by excess, redundancy and lots of 'more is more'"(p.607); whereas to be ironic is to know: less is more—and more is less....

And what really happened is not necessarily what is now remembered; for as Andy McCluskey from OMD argues:

What we were actually trying to do was adopt art-school and Bauhaus principles to make beautiful designs for the masses.... It was pop Bauhaus. It was shiny, modern beauty for the masses. It wasn't elitist. Why can't working class kids have something colourful and beautiful, instead of this shit we are living in? And it shouldn't be mixed up with the self-indulgent, bright decadence of the second half of the decade. After 1985, it all soured. (p.612)

Pop Bauhaus for the masses

If we are going to have an opiate, perhaps that is not a bad one to have ... a Pop Bauhaus that also draws on:

...the very idea of continental Europe is one that evokes melancholy, a wistful longing for a solitary existence, wandering the city streets while pulling on an unfiltered cigarette. (Jones, p.614).

All to a soundtrack from 1970s European electronic music that, via Bowie and Ferry “celebrated Europe for its promise of escape as well as its place in history.” It was, via Kraftwerk, a “blueprint for romantic modernism.” (Jones, p.614);

who cared if you couldn’t afford it, as long as you could feel it. Who cared if you weren’t living the good life, as long as you could dance to it, as long as you could lose yourself in it. (Jones, p. 616)

It is “the perfect illusory power of pop”. (Jones p.616),

¹ G. Eberle, *The Geography of Nowhere. Finding Oneself in the Postmodern World*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1994; p.vii.

² Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of History in fragments*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1993, p.viii.

³ Michel Foucault. “Self Writing.” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press, 1997. pg. 214.

⁴ Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, p.2.

⁵ Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: a century of isms*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2000, p. xxi.

⁶ Ibid., p.xxiii.

⁷ Jones does note Firth & Horne’s *Art into Pop* (1987).

⁸ see: https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser

⁹ see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/>

¹⁰ <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/13-19-november-2017/story-face-cult-magazine-changed-british-culture/>

¹¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>