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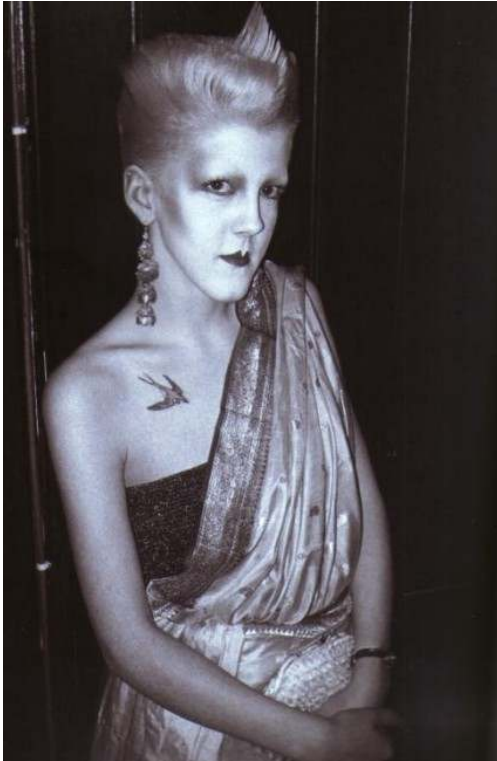


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Scarlett at The Venue Club in Victoria, London (1980)



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- 1 Through clothing, individuals establish their sense of self as well as their place in society. Fashion is a means of communication with complex codes that can be followed, distorted or broken, offering a perfect playground to create or contest identities. The games of fashion cannot be fully understood if they are reduced to the individual intention of the wearer or “the inherent property of the item of clothing itself (like colour or texture)”. They are dependent on culture and on the individual’s “socio-historical location” and are deeply rooted in “connotations” in the Barthesian sense of the term, a set of associations that accrue to a word and which Malcolm Barnard transfers to clothing (Barnard 27). From the most eccentric to the most conventional outfit, meaning becomes a product of the interaction between the beliefs and values of the wearer as an individual and as a member of a particular culture – or counter-culture. Dress is an essential marker of class, gender, sexual orientation or cultural identity with rooted beliefs or unspoken rules creating a sense of community shared by a group of people.
- 2 In the 1980s, after the Rockers, Mods or Skinheads, London saw the explosion of eclectic looks, extroverted sartorial styles, extravagant hair and decadent make-up on a post-Punk littered scene invaded by penniless aesthetes. In 1979, Great Britain was in the midst of a catastrophic economic downturn. Because of rising inflation and unemployment, it was nicknamed “the sick man of Europe”. Into this dire situation “came a new generation intent on glamourising their lives, which some likened to dancing on the deck of the Titanic” (Elan). Escapism was their *mot d’ordre*. It all took place in small intimate clubs like the Blitz in Covent Garden, and other London venues (or later on in Birmingham for example), where British youth started reacting to the right-wing agenda ushered in by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher with bold fashion

steeped in underground culture. In subcultures, elements of style act in concealed ways as responses to a particular political and social environment. The New Romantic movement was more than just a reaction against the hypermasculinity of Skinhead culture or the anti-glamour of Punk. It largely stemmed from Glam Rock which tested "the hegemony of the prevailing metanarrative of heterosexual male freedom" (Gregory 35). Glam Rock facilitated the expression of alternative sexualities out of a repertoire of outfits suggesting interchangeability and the rejection of straight masculinity, and failed to "fit comfortably within those theories which exclusively rely on dichotomies of youth culture, mainstream vs 'alternative' or within theories which privilege resistance to the class system" (Gregory 51). The New Romantics went on defying such dichotomies. In *New Romantics: The Look*, Dave Rimmer explains that the clothes, the glitter, the make-up, the hair, the attitude and music all made up "the Look", and the Look was everything. In Britain, New Romanticism and its "Blitz Kids" were part of the 80s musical movements most characterised by eccentric fashion experiments. These experiments were entirely part of the artistic performance and addressed cross-dressing issues. Female-to-male or male-to-female cross-dressing challenged the constructedness of gender categories and sexuality – with, for some, an additional play on androgyny. Emerging figures of famous cross-dressers also crafted their own musical style: Boy George (Culture Club), Steve Strange (Visage), the band Adam and the Ants, whose frontman Adam Ant favoured an eighteenth century pirate/aristocrat look with lip-gloss and eyeliner, or Bowie, who had already gone from man to icon at the time. The emergence of a subculture can be motivated by class conflict, which was partly the case of the New Romantics, as stated at the beginning of this introduction. But their preoccupations also largely seemed to focus on subverting normative dress codes just for the sake of aestheticism and ritual, just because they were "poseurs" wearing period costumes and frilly fronted shirts, lavish fabrics such as satin, silk and velvet, stilettos, hair braids, heavy eye-liner and lipstick – girls and boys indistinctively.

- 3 Such use of clothing as "semiotic guerrilla warfare" (Hebdige quoting Umberto Eco 105), signalled a "category crisis" and exposed "cultural or aesthetic dissonances [...] to undermine the very notion of an 'original' or a 'stable' identity" and destabilize "comfortable binarity" (Garber 16). The London youth displayed resistant tactics with dress as a visual sign used to signify disorder. The New Romantics "championed decadent fantasy" and organized resistance through their rituals, as a gesture of "symbolic defiance by disempowered youths who developed dramatic subcultures as a challenge to social power structures" (Osgerby 136). The aim of such DIY panache was to look as creative and inventive as possible, which drew the attention of young designers like Vivienne Westwood, Stephen Linard, or Stevie Stewart and David Holah from BodyMap. Tinkling synthesizers and keyboards in Spandau Ballet's or Duran Duran's tunes were the soundtracks of this creative scene.
- 4 First looking at the types of cross-dressing games at work in the 1980s' subcultural communities, and the ensuing interferences between the music, fashion, and art world, this essay will then examine the very notion of cross-dressing as fundamental in the construction of the identity of London "tribes" vs. "subcultures", before finally analysing some of the links between cross-dressing practices and the notion of Britishness.

1. Defining the New Romantic ethos and aesthetics

- 5 Subcultural theory operates within both cultural and fashion critical background. Fashion historian and theorist Caroline Evans is concerned with the changing nature and fluidity of subcultures which establish and communicate both personal expression and group identity on particular occasions and in particular places. Evans advocates that subcultural identities are far from being set points in a dichotomous opposition between subculture/mass culture. They are "mobile, fluid, as a 'becoming' rather than a 'being'" (Evans 179), and are part of the "creative trinity of music, fashion and design" as Stanfill, curator of twentieth-century and contemporary fashion at the V&A, argued during the "Club to Catwalk: London Fashion in the 1980s" exhibition held at the V&A in 2013-14 (Stanfill 9). This exhibition showcased more than 85 outfits and the brash new looks experimented by young designers of the decade (Katharine Hamnett, Wendy Dagworthy or John Galiano). The influence of the club scene on the fashion world is a stimulating example of cross-pollination between the arts in the 1980s, as commented upon by journalist Brenda Emmanus in a recent BBC interview. The 1980s celebrated New Romantic iconic styles, with a touch of Goth, Glam fetish¹ or High Camp captured by photographers Derek Ridgers or David Gwinnutt².
- 6 Ridgers had a democratic approach, photographing everyone, not only the emerging celebrities. As he started filming music bands, he realized that the people in the crowd looked even more interesting than the bands. He documented UK style, culture and the spirit of youth, acclaiming the individuality of his subjects, as they wore their own sartorial creations. The disruptive artistry of High Camp³ was impersonated by designer and performance artist Leigh Bowery who developed his extreme personal style by manipulating and adorning his own body "like a form of cosmetic surgery" (Healy). He used his club, the Taboo, as a theatre for his performances, or invaded other art spaces like The Met for a Lucian Freud exhibition. "Like the leader of a militant fashion army" (Healy), Bowery walked into the museum wearing a floral dress (a model called "Metropolitan" created in the mid-80s and accessorized to suit the occasion) with a Kaiser helmet, to pause in front of a back view of himself by Freud for whom he had modeled. The Taboo was so-called because "there [was] nothing you [couldn't] do there", the night scene thus pushing and provoking clubbers, artists and designers to creative extremes. The Taboo's dress code was "dress as though your life depends on it, or don't bother" (Healy). Leigh Bowery's place in fashion, art and popular culture is insubordinate. The fashions he created, with hand-sewn sequins in a mock-Dior or Balenciaga style, were rarely seen in daylight or meant for mass consumption. His dress style hailed from club culture, and the concepts of dressing up and masquerade.
- 7 These gender-bending cross-dressing practices were documented by Derek Ridgers, Graham Smith, or Anita Corbin. In her introduction to the "Visible Girls" series, Corbin says how she began
- to study the informal 'uniforms' of young women in August '80. I had already looked, in a previous project, at the formal uniforms, the 'ready-made' stereotypes found in schools, at work and in other institutions. So in this project, I turned my attention to more personal visual details and I became increasingly interested in the effect appearances have on everybody's lives. The way we often use dress as a means of communication/identification and how it can both inform and misinform us. I have chosen to focus on girls, not because the boys (where present) were any

less stylish, but because girls in 'subcultures' have been largely ignored or when referred to, only as male appendages. (Corbin)

- 8 Corbin was impressed by the girls' "commitment to the group" and by the fact that there were a huge range of alternative role models amongst the "subversive" subcultures, either looking boyish or girly based on the chosen outfit. Her subjects always appear in pairs, often dressing alike, supporting each other in their looks, celebrating sexual ambiguity as a committed response to the political and social pressure of the time, and performing a role. The notion of gender is performative according to Judith Butler – a "doing", rather than a "being", "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 25)⁴. However, it cannot be reduced to binary opposites, as it is constructed through a set of acts (in the theatrical sense of the term) – and clothes, one might add – which produce a series of often unpredictable effects on the viewer. New Romantics resorted to an unlimited array of costumes from which they built an unconstrained choice of gender styles. Their artistic energy questioning the appropriateness of dress has infused the music and fashion world for years, and still does, as shown later on in this paper.
- 9 In the 1980s, fashion critic Shaun Cole claims, many looked for something new, as they were "[a]lienated by the masculinisation and commercialization of Punk":
- Plundering fashion history [...] these New Romantics [...] created a whole host of styles and played with notions of gender and (homo- and bi-) sexuality in a nightly theatre of self expression. Within the ethos of escapism and individuality a cross dressing aesthetics was identifiable, as the men as well as the women incorporated silk, satin, [wigs], lace and frills and make-up into their costumes. (Cole)
- 10 Many of these costumes were rooted in historical styles with ruffles, piecrust collars and knickerbockers. Women sometimes looked like Marie Antoinettes (like Stevie Stewart photographed by Graham Smith) and John Galliano's first collection in 1984, "*Les Incroyables*", was inspired by costumes of the French Revolution. New Romantics' costumes also echoed popular folklore. David Bowie took part in their glamorous experiments. In his 1980 video clip for "*Ashes to Ashes*", he created a new persona, a Pierrot surrounded by three of the New Romantic clubbers: "Bowie was [...] a product of the gender-bending subculture that he had spawned" (Cole). At The Blitz, Steve Strange "did not want passive consumers but people who created unique identities" (Elan). In that sense, they took Bowie's 1977 song literally, and chose to be "heroes just for one day". Blitz DJ and Visage member Rusty Egan claimed that "Just for one day" you could "dress up and be more than what Britain had to offer you" (quoted in Elan). Getting ready for a night out was part of the whole ritual among the London tribes.

2. The New Romantics' cross-dressing practices: ritual and tribalism

- 11 Sociologist Sarah Thornton has explored the complex hierarchies that appear within the domain of popular club culture, and the way subcultures brought together by similar sartorial and music tastes may measure their cultural value compared to the "mainstream" (Thornton 5). Subcultures are traditionally defined as a form of resistance, an antidote to the mainstream, which is sterile, unimaginative and conformist in dress. But subcultures are not necessarily countercultures, they can be

considered as an "alternative" to the mainstream, the youth also seeking to find a place within social culture. In that sense, the New Romantic subculture has often been considered as having been co-opted by the market place, resistance then becoming "a dream that only money can buy" as Caroline Evans argued in the title of her article about the subcultural tactics of ravers in the 80s. If clothing may liberate through masquerade, it can also "cage" or control the body, a question discussed by Calefato in her book *The Clothed Body*.

- 12 Subcultural fashion relies upon what is done with items of dress and how these are worn. The term "bricolage" (Hebdige 102) refers to the assembly and manipulation of a collection of apparently incongruous objects and clothes into a whole outfit, thus subverting and transforming the original meanings and uses to give birth to crosscultural inspirational pieces, liberating the body instead of controlling it. In their 1983-84 "Buffalo Girls" collection, Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren combined unconformity (geometrical Aztec or Mexican shapes) with a parodic sense of tradition (ties and bowler hats). From this point of view, the term "subculture" is not tied to issues of social class and a "fixed" notion of identity. Popular music and culture theorist Andy Bennett prefers to consider the "fluidity" of youth lifestyles (Bennett 614) constructed around the associations built on musical and stylistic preferences and a longing to belong. Bennett uses Maffesoli's concept of *tribus*⁵ (tribes) which seems quite relevant to an empirical analysis the musical and stylistic sensibilities exhibited by New Romantic people, a new form of "sociality" rather than a fixed subcultural group.
- 13 This sense of belonging to a tribe was largely created by a new style of magazines such as *i-D*, *The Face* and *Blitz* focusing on street style. These magazines explored how the creative relationship between music, catwalk and club wear helped reinvent fashion in an "alternative" way. When Scarlett Cannon with her androgynous and Greek-like style competed for an Alternative Miss World contest or posed for the cover of *i-D*, she opened endless possibilities and crossovers often found in music, fashion, and fashion photography. The magazines focused on the rejection of a simplistic reduction of gender to male and female opposites, giving a new sense of empowerment to New Romantic iconoclasts who explored ideas of transformation, beauty, glamour and androgynous sexuality. In July 1986, *Blitz* magazine published an issue featuring images of 22 Levi's denim jackets that had been customized by some of the world's most famous designers. The jackets were worn during a special evening of performances, and were displayed at the V&A, also showing how fashion entered the institutional space of museums and art galleries at the time. Complete strangers could end up wearing designers' outfits and models would wear second-hand clothes "sampling" or "mixing" styles and fabrics, borrowing those words from the music world and crisscrossing the codes of the fashion world. Stephen Jones, now an established milliner, created a denim hat out of the jacket that was given to him by *Blitz*. He was by day a student at St Martins, and modeled at night with his own whimsical hats, and still does.
- 14 Magazines such as *i-D* questioned the hybrid style of documentary and fashion photography which shaped the British identity and is still at work in contemporary fashion photography. In *The Study of Dress History*, Taylor observes how photographic images are "percolated" (Taylor 163) through the lens of the photographer depending on his cultural standpoint and social status: when garments in photographs are analysed, the context of the photograph (when, where, why it was taken, by whom and

for whom) must be considered. It is the paradoxical nature of photography to both capture the present and produce a record. The photographs seize the ongoing dynamics of collective identity formation but they subjectively result from various processes of selection. One has to acknowledge the fact that fashion photographs of the 80s are not necessarily documentary *in style*: most of the pictures offer no distant-observer perspective, but a preference for close-up portraits. The immediacy of the shots has allowed many fashion photographers to chronicle the 80s' trends, to tell or retell a narrative that deconstructs the stereotypes of the 80s according to which everybody wore large shoulder padded jackets.

- 15 With hindsight, one cannot help wondering which England is put together by those photographs of London tribes born out of the imagination of young designers on their nights out. How does the repetitive representation of cross-dressing practices – whether they are gender-bending, class-bending, cross-historical, cross-institutional or cross-cultural ones – serve as a narrative informing English identity?

3. Playing on dress to shape and question British identity

- 16 Past examples of cross-dressing in the British arts are numerous: men wore dresses in the theatre of Elizabethan England, *Twelfth Night* being perhaps Shakespeare's most stunning play from this point of view, bringing in a pair of twins, a boy and a girl, with the woman ending up pretending to be a man while still being played by a man dressed as a woman. The era of the pantomime was then a mixture of songs, dancing and clowning featuring the harlequinade. In the music halls of the early 1900s, Hetty King and Vesta Tilley were female performers who played male soldiers or sailors, Tilley wearing Savile Row suits in a way that influenced male fashion. An example that comes to mind in Britain, in the 1920s, is that of the aristocratic, flamboyant and outrageous Bright Young Things who organized theatrical fancy dress parties and acted frivolously and irresponsibly perhaps as pure reaction against the "order" of the old world in pre-war Britain, or to avoid facing post-war political, social and economic problems. The *Monty Python* troupe donned frocks from time to time. Drag acts were impersonated by Lily Savage in the 80s, while in parallel the music and fashion crowd developed a more liberal attitude towards gender identity, with no intention to make their audience laugh. Boy George had a visually arresting look and shaped his own identity by posing for images that turned into *motifs* of the 80s and made him a national icon.
- 17 In a way, the cross-dressing practices of the New Romantics make them part of an "imagined community", a phrase coined by Benedict Anderson and discussed by Hobsbawm who announces that tradition, far from being immemorially frozen in the past, is undergoing a constant process of creative "invention" (Hobsbawm). Past and present designers and fashion photographers all contribute to this ongoing imagining process.
- 18 Indeed, the New Romantic aesthetics still seems to pervade Alexander McQueen's or Gareth Pugh's creations – to take but those two examples. Interactions between the fashion and music worlds have kept on operating, with Jean-Paul Gaultier finding inspiration for his famous cone bra for Madonna in the London underground scene, or Lady Gaga wearing McQueen's clothes and shoes from his Plato's Atlantis Spring/

Summer 2010 collection in her “Bad Romance” video clip (while McQueen closed his show with this very same song released for the first time on that occasion). The collection is a wonderful example of cross-dressing between humanity and animality, of how nature can impact fashion. McQueen explained that the collection was based on the idea of the reversal of evolution, how life would evolve back into the water if the ice caps melted and humanity were being reclaimed by nature. Engineered prints represented the morphing of species, natural camouflages and aerial views of the land. Sarah Burton, currently creative director of the fashion brand Alexander McQueen, explains that he was “interested in this concept of hybrid [...] juxtapositioning [...] different fabrics [to see] how they would react together”. In McQueen’s words:

With me, metamorphosis is a bit like plastic surgery, but less drastic. I try to have the same effect with my clothes. But ultimately I do this to transform mentalities more than the body. I try and modify fashion like a scientist by offering what is relevant to today and what will continue to be so tomorrow. (McQueen)

- 19 *The Horn of Plenty* Autumn-Winter 2009 collection featured a black-sprayed rubbish pile towering in the centre of a circular stage. Among the televisions, tyres and sinks, there were various props from past McQueen shows. Models with Geisha-like white-faces and clown-like glossy lips à la Leigh Bowery teetered around on enormous platform shoes, with various paraphernalia on their heads: upturned umbrellas, woven baskets or feathered lampshades. The final two dresses were made entirely of feathers, for McQueen had a life-long fascination for birds: one looked like a black cocoon and the other had its white feathered overskirt pulled up to hide the model’s head. All of McQueen’s collections encapsulate Englishness in all its oddities and his love of extremes, with a touch of black humour, subversion and respect for tradition. His creativity permanently crosses-over various art practices⁶ and historical periods. In his 1997 Fall show,⁷ slashed, gothic long sleeves, pale faces with colourful eyebrows, in-flight haircuts, transformed tailored jackets and stiff shoulders were inspired from historical costumes already diverted by the New Romantics. With them, he also shared a unique ability to use garbage waste and potentially raise it to the level of haute couture, using a variety of contrasting materials like taffeta, wool, vinyl, leather, snake or tiger skins.
- 20 McQueen’s clothes with peaked shoulders and monastic cloaks had a medieval formality dating back to the New Romantics. In the same vein, Gareth Pugh imprinted his sartorial mark via his dramatic, often sinister, inflated creations. In his 2015 fashion show, Gareth Pugh used red as a powerful signifier of Britannia making its way onto the models’ faces, adorned with Saint George’s Cross make-up. Pugh has designed outfits for Kylie Minogue’s world tours, Beth Ditto from indie rock band Gossip, or Beyonce, once more showing how artists from the music world rely on fashion designers. Conversely, the fashion world is as much interested in what is happening in the streets as in the music world and nightlife. Popular spaces, the streets and the clubs were and are the stage upon which the everyday is transformed. The soundtrack for Pugh’s 2015 show introduced distorted samples of Sunderland football fans chanting a classic football chorus – “Who are ya?” – sounding as the designer’s musing on British identity in slow techno mode.

Conclusion

- 21 From the 1980s onwards, the "tribes" of modern Britain defined fashion, music and style – New Romantics, Goths and High Camp all together – and were documented by fashion photographers who followed the cultural movements that contributed to build what it might mean to be British today. Punk might have become a parody of itself. However, this does not seem to be the case with the New Romantic movement, in spite of its Camp and over-romanticized extremes, since its extravagance and freedom still pervades the fashion scene today in an upcycled manner.
- 22 Has the New Romantics movement not survived co-optation, i.e. the process through which the subculture/tribe originating outside of dominant culture eventually gets reincorporated into the cyclical life of the "culture industry"? The New Romantics' style was integrated in fashion collections such as Vivienne Westwood's "Pirate" 1981 ethnic collection and eventually by mainstream shops, even recently with a 2016 TopShop collection. The music scene was no exception to this co-optation and artists coming from the Blitz scene like Spandau Ballet, Culture Club or Visage all dominated the Top Charts in the early 1980s and appeared on national television on Top of the Pops. The 80s subcultures' disorderly inventiveness and "transgression of sartorial codes" (Hebdige 31) was in a way domesticated, but not quite transformed "into meaningless exotica" (Hebdige 97) to repair the cracked social order, and incorporate the spectacle of the dominant ideology – from which it, in part, emanated. The New Romantic cross-dressing counterhegemonic tactics were never a pretence to live entirely outside dominant dynamics: its members dressed up to be in the spotlight, none of its performers ever refused success. However, the Blitz Kids successfully managed to develop a style and lifestyle of their own, outside the boundaries established by dominant culture. Tim Walker, one of the most influential British fashion photographers of our times, often hijacks and thwarts New Romantic aesthetics and ethos to break fashion codes and mix genres, verging on the Steampunk. In his 2013 "Stranger than Paradise" series for *W Magazine*, he combines historical items with anachronistic technological props reminiscent of science-fiction scenarios. Tilda Swinton in her golden *lamé* Vera Wang dress with angular lines reminiscent of the 1980s looks like a sci-fi semi-goddess with grinding teeth, a modelling act of resistance to show that fashion still has lots of cross-dressing tricks to play to challenge globalizing excesses.
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NOTES

1. McLaren and Westwood's shop SEX introduced fetish and bondage wear to the club and Punk music scene in the mid 1970s. Fetish re-emerged in a more glamorous form in the 1980s.
 2. David Gwinnutt is an artist and photographer of the most influential gay people from the last 30 years. "The gay scene took its lead from America in everything – Judy Garland, [...] lumberjack shirts, Levi 501's, moustaches, Broadway musicals, the rainbow flag... This was about to change as a generation of creative and original kids found each other on the gay club scene of London making their own identity, as far removed from the US clone as possible. The nucleus started at Blitz then played out at Hell, Club for Heroes [...]" (Gwinnutt).
 3. High Camp can be defined as a high form of Camp with its sensibility, shocking excess, impertinence and extravagant artificiality defying the dominant norm (Meyer).
 4. This Butlerian approach has long been criticized and might now seem reductive, constraining the New Romantics to evolve behind the closed doors of small night venues.
 5. Michel Maffesoli argues that mass culture has disintegrated and that today's social existence is conducted through fragmented and proliferating tribal groupings, organized around the new codes of consumer culture and lifestyles (Maffesoli 98).
 6. For example, his 1997 Spring show "La Poupée", or "The Doll", was inspired by artist Hans Bellmer who fetishistically rearranged toy dolls. McQueen disturbingly trussed the models in various metal restraints and experimented with proportions.
 7. In this show, the models were given a feline aspect with mane-like hair and animal skins, referring to H.G. Wells's novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, the story of a vivisectionist who creates humanoids out of animals.
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ABSTRACTS

The creativity of fashion and the music world often relies on transfers and collaborations in which fashion designers and music celebrities interact to feature a common project. In Britain, New Romanticism was one of the 1980s musical movements most characterised by eccentric fashion experiments that were entirely part of the artistic performance and addressed cross-dressing issues. Documenting the gender-bending club youth and stars of the London underground scene, Derek Ridgers, Graham Smith or Anita Corbin have showed how fashion challenged normative dress codes and introduced a form of social disruption through the use of clothing. Magazines such as *i-D* questioned the hybrid style of documentary and fashion photography which shaped British identity and is still at work today. This paper explores the endless possibilities of the crossovers often found in music and fashion photography, focusing on the rejection of a simplistic reduction of gender to male and female opposites.

L'élan créatif né des interactions entre mode et musique s'appuie sur des transferts et des collaborations particulièrement visibles au Royaume-Uni dans les années 1980. Durant cette période, le Nouveau Romantisme fut l'un des courants les plus caractérisés par des tentatives vestimentaires excentriques entièrement intégrées à la performance artistique, bouleversant les codes vestimentaires établis d'un genre à l'autre. En documentant la jeunesse londonienne de la scène underground, Derek Ridgers, Graham Smith ou Anita Corbin ont montré comment la mode, en défiant un code vestimentaire normé, pouvait introduire une forme de désordre social par

l'utilisation du vêtement. Des magazines comme *i-D* ont ainsi questionné l'hybridité de la photographie de mode dont la dimension souvent documentaire a contribué, et contribue encore, au modelage de l'identité britannique. Cet article explore les possibilités artistiques infinies qu'ouvrent les interférences entre mode et musique, en rejetant une lecture simplifiée et binaire des échanges qui s'opèrent entre genres féminin et masculin.

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