

“The feeling has gone, only you and I, it means nothing to me”:

A discussion and comparison of self-expression and identity within the youth cultures of the
New Romantics and the present day

The short-form video format was invented in my generation's lifetime, yet it seems impossible to remember a time without it. Vine and all its descendants have established a system that not only encourages but requires that content be low-effort and homogenous to succeed, moulding our internet habits such that uninteresting content does not deter digital natives from scrolling, since we know that if we gamble for long enough, a payout of dopamine is guaranteed. As a result, the experiences that define contemporary youth culture are either ephemeral or intangible; in an interview with Wonderland, Eva Chen, Instagram's Head of Fashion Partnerships, outlined trends that are “driving global culture and content creation”, including “e-flirting”: “archiving or deleting old posts, ‘soft launching’ new romances ... liking stories, sending memes etc”.

As our digital interactions become more formulaic, the sense of self-expression that was once synonymous with youth culture falls to its knees. Responding to the dichotomy of their punk predecessors in a time of socio-economic conservatism, the New Romantics of 1980s Britain created a movement characterised by its sartorial and musical extravagance, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources: 70s glam rock, 30s cabaret, and English romanticism, for example. Additionally, youth culture of the New Romantics was forced to exist within physical spaces, where the spectacle of the gathering was often prioritised above all else, something that has no direct translation to the digital era. From the perspective of generation and for fear that we will be remembered only for “cottagecore”, or notes on Instagram, or suffixing any noun or adjective with “era” in an aesthetically-driven bid for self-improvement, this paper will compare these two periods in order to establish that belonging to youth culture is no longer as meaningful

or powerful a designation as it once was, as the youth culture of the New Romantics enabled a capacity for authenticity, creative freedom, and the meaningful construction of an identity that has been eroded by the ephemeral and algorithmic nature of modern youth culture.

Ashes to ashes and funk to funky / We know Major Tom's a junkie

Emerging in 1976 with the Sex Pistols, Vivienne Westwood, and Malcolm McLaren, British punk sought to (often violently) reshape the status quo. Characterised by “an aesthetic of rips, fractures, and tensions”, punk openly challenged its musical predecessors: “No Elvis, No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones in 1977”, Joe Strummer snarls on the Clash song “1977”. However, New Romanticism sought to reject punk’s “angry oppositionism [towards] glamour and aspiration” (Worley, 1) in favour of escapism and fantasy. Shared by both movements was the notion of authenticity and a self-constructed identity, developed as a response to the emergence of the “New Man”—a generalisation of the sharply-dressed men of the 1980s who adopted a more updated view of feminism, praised by some, and denigrated by others in the mass media of the time. The concern this brought upon the country was reflected in Margaret Thatcher’s enactment of Section 28 in 1988: legislation which prohibited the teaching of “the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” in schools, which was eventually repealed in England in 2003. The need for a queer outlet within youth culture, therefore, became stronger than ever, and this desire for an independence of identity was especially crucial within punk’s community—to be called a “poseur” was to be accused of a shallow adoption of punk’s aesthetics while neglecting its core values, and an article published by the online music magazine “Drowned in Sound” declared that “the poseurs and fashionistas fucked off to the next trend of skinny pink ties with New Romantic haircuts, singing wimpy lyrics”. Nevertheless, the Second British Invasion is evidence of these poseurs’ success—in MTV’s nascent years, the existence of relatively few American music videos meant that New Romantic acts such as Duran Duran, Soft Cell, and the Human League frequently had their own

music videos displayed to the American audience, cementing the New Romantic's impact on the Western, English-speaking, pop music world at the time, which will be the subject of this paper.

Wider, baby, smile and you've just made a million

"Times have changed" (Cole Porter, *Anything Goes*). Youth culture once congregated around clubs, music venues or fashion boutiques, often literally underground. Today, an interaction with anybody else can be done from almost anywhere. This has, arguably, both a liberating and restrictive effect on the formation of trends as well as an individual's affiliation with this generational culture: the participatory nature enables otherwise impossible communities to form at the potential cost of one's time and self-esteem. Even so, the cultural zeitgeist appears to rally *against* the algorithm, with its implications of Big, Scary Tech: living "on the grid" is a given, going "off the grid" is a remarkable act of self-sufficiency that seems somehow unthinkable despite its progenitors being no more than a generation above us. This cycle of inconceivable progress has been identified and critiqued along the history of technological progress. In *Amusing Ourselves To Death* (1985), educator Neil Postman compares watching television to consuming "soma", the drug in *Brave New World* that replaces any feelings with a state of pure enjoyment, and argues that television's "sequencing of information so random, so disparate in scale and value, as to be incoherent, even psychotic" leads to merely "disinformation" and "the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing". Similarly, within his essays *The German Ideology* (1932), Karl Marx rather theatrically questions whether "the Iliad [is] possible when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?" The beginnings of a contemporary parallel are that in June 2024, New York enacted legislation allowing parents to prevent their social media content being generated algorithmically in response to claims that social media needs warning labels akin to those on cigarette boxes.

However, I believe that social media poses a different threat than the printing press or television, whose critics argue have acclimatised us to media that has an upper limit in the meaningfulness of the information it can convey. Firstly, previous criticisms have concerned media we consume as opposed to an entire media environment—television and the printing press distributed specific material with limited modes of control. Secondly, it is not art or truth at risk of being reduced in this way—it is us in our desperation to be perceived that we are encouraged to be the most marketable in the images we construct online, through hashtags, stories, trends, sponsorships, podcasts, filmed podcasts, live podcasts, clips of podcasts filmed live ... social media has commodified the mere act of being. Predictable, algorithmic additions to modern youth culture cheapen the value of those to come—the success of “Barbenheimer” meant that “Glicked” (*Gladiator/Wicked*) was inevitable. Though one might liken this process of homogenisation to the strict dress codes of Blitz, wherein deviation led to rejection, there is a clear distinction found between the New Romantics and social media’s relation to the status quo. The former was a group on the fringes of society finding solidarity in rejecting what they saw when they looked inwards—milliner Stephen Jones recalls that “if you copied somebody else’s look, you were drummed out to Coventry [the surrounding area outside Blitz], and the kiss of death would have been someone telling you that you looked ‘fashionable’”. Algorithmic social media feeds, however, reward content that already appeals to an existing market, and repetition is not only encouraged but monetisable. There already exists a depressingly lengthy canon of pseudo-celebrities whose claims to fame can be simply summarised by an “descriptor-noun” structure, including, but not limited to: “Walmart yodelling kid”, “Salt Bae”, “Costco Guys”, “Island Boys”, “Grumpy Cat”. In my opinion, this facile attitude towards self-expression is most evident when comparing the music and fashion of the New Romantic era than those of today.

Electric blue for me and you / The shape of things to come

Music production of the New Romantic era underwent a complete overhaul with the invention and introduction of many new technologies amongst recording studios. The nascent

digital drum machine, in particular the Roland TR-808 and the Linn LM-1 of the 1980s, was crucial in curating a new sound, veering away from the live performance punk artists required to enact their brashness. The Roland TR-808, though initially a commercial failure due to its artificial and synthetic sound, saw a later rise to popularity due to its greater processing power and storage, allowing for more intricate drum rhythms and more variety within songs; the New Romantics' desire for fantasy and extravagance was reflected in drum lines that were often unplayable. Similarly, the digital synthesisers of the 1980s were able to record and play back samples at different pitches, and also featured built-in audio effects that could be applied to the samples. With respect to youth culture, these machines offered both a similar resistance to the mainstream in favour of glamour and extravagance. The New Romantics seized back artistic control over what music might sound like, and thus their means of self-expression. These digital advancements were thus a means of creative expansion, rather than the simplification (and bastardisation, many musicians of a certain generation will claim) of these analogue tools found within the contemporary production tools that now dominate the industry.

The introduction of the DAW, digital audio workstation, for mass use since the late 1980s, after the decline of the New Romantics, was perhaps one of the greatest advances in both music's production and consumption. Similarly to before, it is debated whether this encourages or stifles the diversity of music with every coming era. New artists can now use professional software anywhere on personal devices, which makes both experimentation and imitation more accessible; synthesisers and drum kits in DAWs, for example, have countless settings that can be adjusted to create unique combinations of sounds, but these can also be pre-configured by downloading samples of any existing artists. With such an abstract term as "variety" and such a massive corpus of music available, contemporary research differs in its methods, evident in the results produced. In 2012, the Spanish National Research Council acknowledged that "each of us has a perception of what is new and what is not in popular music" while also noting that some trends outlined "less variety in pitch transitions, towards a consistent homogenization of the

timbral palette and towards louder and, in the end, potentially poorer volume dynamics”, while the *Economic Inquiry* found that the advent of Spotify in 2009 was “associated with a robust increasing trend for acoustic diversity”.

One man on a lonely platform / One case sitting by his side

Regardless of whether this convergence occurs or not, I would argue that social media not only has some homogenising impact on both music and identity, but also that it desensitises our critical judgement regarding popular music. Philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno argued that repetition is central to the homogenisation—in the case of social media, commodification, through the focus on streamlined production for mass appeal and focus on marketable identities over artistry. Adorno proposes the notion of “plugging”, excessive repetition that makes listeners “so accustomed to the recurrence of the same things that they react automatically”; in hearing a chorus or a hook, Adorno suggests that we are deceived into thinking that it is more successful than it actually is. Additionally, Adorno points to “flimsy rationalisations”, external of plugging, that exert a social pressure on the listener, such as radio or television, that feature popular music as a secondary, yet largely present component of the medium.

This has obvious parallels to the ways in which today’s music is consumed compared to that of the New Romantics. Improvements in recording and distribution technology are synonymous with an increased control over music. In a 2016 interview, Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran himself notes the transformative effect the invention of the 1980s Sony Walkman had on the consumer’s relationship to music to be “the fact that people listen to their own music, and they have their own playlists, their own set of likes. You don't have to listen to everybody else’s choice”, arguably the forebearer of the modern streaming services. (Potentially further propelling my argument, there is a grim irony inherent to any text that both champions individualism and was written prior to 2020). However, Spotify and the like no longer dominate the music consumption industry as they once did in the early 2010s amidst cries from artists concerning

the centralisation of power streaming services enacted; Taylor Swift, in 2014, temporarily withdrew her music from Spotify, shunning the “grand experiment” of streaming platforms, citing concerns over “an experiment that I don’t feel fairly compensates the writers, producers, artists, and creators of this music”. These cries are now voiced concerning short-form video content—the master of plugging. According to research carried about by the University of California, Los Angeles, increases in song length from 1930 to 1990 were arguably attributed to improvements in recording technology—moving from single- to multi-track tape, for example, might have encouraged more instrumental sections between verses or in bridges of songs. However, data analysis today, including UCLA’s research universally agrees that pop songs are shorter, and lyrics are more repetitive than they once were, as a mean of 259 seconds in 1990 has fallen to a measly 197 in 2020. Therefore, I would contend that popular music has sacrificed musicality for popularity. User-generated content (UGC) specifically perpetuates this trend by encouraging artists to centre songs around a strong hook with recognisable production, lyricism, or context. From TikTok’s US Top 10 Songs of the Summer 2024, consider the self-deprecation (and repetition) of Sabrina Carpenter’s “Please Please Please” with its chorus an entire octave higher than the verse, or the pugnacity (and repetition) of Kendrick Lamar’s “Not Like Us” amidst his feud with Drake, or the irreverence (and repetition) of Tinashe’s “Nasty” over a futuristic, robotic instrumental whose sparsity allows her lyrics to be the focus of the song.

Simon Le Bon’s appeal to the legacy of his work despite the ease of consumption today is to acknowledge “the value of the ephemeral moment, of the band onstage, that thing which can’t be recorded because it’s you and how you feel”. Plugging and flimsy rationalisations, however, have cheapened this value. Experiencing music is no longer the event that it was for the New Romantics; there is no going to a concert surrounded by those in attire that constructs, challenges, or liberates one’s notion of identity. Instead, one pays various tech conglomerates a standing order to be individually granted the opportunity to listen to only the most marketable portion of a song.

To engage with today's music is to invite isolation—listening to a vinyl was necessarily an experience open to all, whereas we now seek out noise-cancelling technology, prioritising our own experience of the music above the world around us. Further developments in audio equipment have not only continued this obsession with individualisation, but also pride themselves on it—Apple's marketing for the original iPod featured the tagline “1,000 songs in your pocket”, while the Ray-Ban Meta Smart Glasses promises to “capture your unique perspective”. Similarly, some might contend that early recordings of bands in the 1940s and 50s encouraged musicality, as limitations in technology meant that musicians were recorded live in the same room, arguably enabling more communication and improvisation than the soundproofed, isolated recording booths used in studios today. Therefore, as a result of technological advances, there has been an (often self-imposed) trajectory towards isolation in every stage of the music process—the artist, the producer, the distributor, and the consumer now seek technology that separates each from the other.

Somewhere there's a sound of distant living / Locked up in high society

One might respond by pointing out that, in the age of Gen Z, we are more interconnected than ever before through the internet. The act of meeting new people, therefore, is not restricted to one ticketed event on one night at one venue—it can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time. I suggest that there is a crucial difference; it is not us that is being perceived on social media, it is the intangible, curated, facade of selfhood that one evaluates when “meeting” someone online. However, evidence (researched and anecdotal) suggests that social media rewards raw, spontaneous content: in 2017, marketing analysts Jonah Berger and Alixandra Barasch found that participants were more interested in getting to know, being friends with, and dating people in “candid” photos than posed ones, as well as perceiving them to be more genuine. This desire for ephemerality amongst social media's hypervisibility is reflected in the number of features that disappear after a certain period, arguably allowing users to interact in a more natural way, such as by sharing more mundane or sensitive information. To be part of

youth culture, therefore, is to struggle with the tension of being compelled to “be real” but in such a way that this “realness” can be shared with the world; philosopher Judith Butler describes this retroactive construction of identity as performative, with “constituting acts” that are “not only [...] constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*”. Social media, therefore, is a panopticon dressed up as a dollhouse, albeit with a ring light in each cell: a stylised simulacrum of spontaneity that forgoes authenticity for a picturesque veneer of relatability. This authenticity, alongside identity, has been commodified in our bids to satisfy the expectations of both the algorithm and our audiences; our “realness” is something that can be consumed and quantifiably validated by others.

Contrastingly, particularly through their fashion and sartorial decisions, New Romanticism rejected these notions of spontaneity and ephemerality in several ways. Firstly, the dependence on and engagement with physical spaces such as Blitz meant that their personas were curated not to be candid, but to be ostentatious, emphasised by the rise of the 1980s “style press”, such as *The Face*, *Blitz*, and *iD*, with their visual focus on style and classy design, as well as the popularity of the music video within clubs alongside music, showcasing the artists themselves who led these fashion trends. To be young was to be seen, and to be seen was to be unapologetic. Fashion was therefore a form of prosthesis for the New Romantics’ sense of self, such as through androgynous clothing, hair, and makeup, as opposed to modern aesthetics’ amputative relation to the self; today, to dress a certain way is a mode of subscribing to pre-existing personal values or traits, such as “emos”, “VSCO girls”, or “indie sleaze”, for example. One could go so far as to argue that these resurrections of 00s subcultures speaks to the unoriginality or lack of creativity in youth today, although this feels somewhat harsh considering that most aesthetics in the digital age appear to undergo a “cool”-“rejected”-“retro/nostalgia”-“ironic” life cycle. Though one might suggest that the referential nature of retro or nostalgic aesthetics is comparable to that of the New Romantics, I would argue that the New Romantics’ multi-layered synthesis of historical influences was far

more varied and intentional than contemporary acknowledgements of past aesthetics. The decadence of glam rock, sensuality of 30s cabaret, and egalitarianism of English romanticism were used as genuine outlets for gender fluidity and social commentary to the extent that the New Romantics would invest time and money into an art form that sufficiently expressed their views. To adopt an aesthetic today, however, only requires a cursory engagement, and many subcultures have entered our lexicon as adjectives rather than entities within themselves: Spotify has an “emocore” playlist, and you can buy a “hippie” outfit on Amazon for \$19.99.

To cut a long story short, I lost my mind

It is intriguing to think that this resistance of technological homogenisation—and the embrace of certain forms of technophobia—might itself become what modern youth culture is remembered for (or depressing, if this resistance fails, and we are the first generation to be consumed by The Machine). Perhaps this anxiety and frustration surrounding originates from youth culture’s relative inability to act against our technological overlords—and if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Technophobia is arguably more useful at a legislative level, where activism can be translated into law. California, under Governor Gavin Newsome, has already begun to vote on various artificial technology bills that would, for example, require transparency when AI has been used to generate content or provide summaries of data used to train AI, preventing youth culture from receiving mindless content, engaging with it, and having it fed back to us in a vicious, homogenising cycle of our interests. Issues have arisen between the need to regulate “frontier models”—the most advanced technologies—while factoring in the contexts in which they are deployed as well as smaller corporations that might not be able to meet stringent regulations.

Such legislation offers some glimpse of hope: an opportunity for youth culture to reclaim agency from the algorithms shaping our digital lives. As opposed to the New Romantics, whose rebellion against mainstream culture took place in physical spaces with music, fashion, and shared identities, today’s youth wage a more abstract battle against the reduction of authenticity, identity, and community to a series of hashtags and trends, far removed from the New

Romantics' wielding of music, fashion, and spaces to assert identities that were never threatened to be quantified by likes or shares. Instead, they celebrated the unrepeatable moment and the spontaneity of performance, neither through ease nor ephemerality, but in a shared spectacle that defied commodification or commercialisation. In drawing parallels between these two youth cultures, it becomes clear that digitalisation has fundamentally redefined what it means to merely be. It is up to this generation not to reject the digital outright, but to resist its demand for homogeny and embrace the extravagant, or, as David Bowie put it, to bear "a repulsive sort of need to be something more than human [...] Fuck that. I want to be a Superman."

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