Fade To Grey:
Post-Punk and Lost Modernist Futures

Madelena Caron
Professor Longabucco (GLS)
Abstract

The many sub-genres that fall under the rather vague umbrella term, “post-punk,” tend to be characterized by a nostalgia and a rumination on cultural objects, movements, and aesthetics of the past—more specifically, of the modernist period, lasting from roughly the turn of the twentieth century through the 1940s. The scope of this project includes several bands from the United Kingdom and Germany that belong to various sub-genres of post-punk (of which there are many): Ultravox, Spandau Ballet, Japan, Visage, Cabaret Voltaire, and Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft. These bands share something in common, despite their sonic and aesthetic differences—namely, frequent citations of culture from the modernist period and, despite their historical references, formal experimentation with the boundaries of music and pop culture. The synthesizer revolutionized late-twentieth-century music, and each of these bands merges its retro themes and/or aesthetics with its sonically futuristic music in a slightly different way. This project delves into the following questions:

*In which ways and why did post-punk musicians engage in dialogue with, and take inspiration from, modernist culture in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s?*

*What about the political, social, and economic climates of the UK and Germany at this time contributed to post-punk musicians’ nostalgic, or simply historically reflective, approach to creating sonically new music (electronic music)?*

*What kinds of signifiers are used to constitute these post-punk aesthetics, and how do they take on or lose meanings when used in a pop-cultural context?*

*In which ways did these musicians, over forty years later, keep the modernist project alive?*

Given the visual and sonic nature of this material, I have created an audiovisual piece to accompany the written thesis. It contains the music and music videos that are discussed in the text, as well as some found footage that complements the atmosphere, aesthetics, or themes of the music it accompanies.

The video can be found at this link: vimeo.com/537515047

Password: Caron
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Introduction: Post-Punk Nostalgia and Lost Modernist Futures

On a crowded beach washed by the sun, he puts his headphones on.

His modern world revolves around the synthesizer’s song.

Full of future thoughts and thrills, his senses slip away.

He’s a European legacy, a culture for today.


Any retrospective attempt at describing the post-punk period in music—lasting from roughly the late 1970s through the early ‘80s—is bound to have an idealized undertone. These years saw some of the most significant twentieth-century innovations in music, from an instrumental perspective (synthesizers had become vastly more affordable by the mid-’70s), a purely musical perspective, a subcultural perspective, and perhaps most importantly, an aesthetic perspective. The post-punk moment infused a taste for the retro into late ‘70s/early ‘80s culture and managed to make it futuristic. Loaded invocations of historical aesthetics, signs, methods, and themes from the modernist period abound in the post-punk oeuvre, all with varying degrees of self-awareness and a range of semiotic effects. The era contains a near-inexhaustible reservoir of musical references to modernist remnants stored within collective cultural memory. Through this musical tendency toward the retro, post-punk musicians in the UK and Germany, in particular, placed themselves in dialogue with earlier generations, something rather unusual for popular music, which is typically concerned with rebelling against “old folks” and their culture. After nearly three decades of youth-driven pop music movements like Rock n’ Roll, psychedelic rock, and punk, which placed themselves in direct opposition to the perceived “stuffy,” wartime pop culture of their parents’ generation, any young Briton or German who voluntarily identified with culture of the modernist period was making a radical gesture. As such, post-punk was remarkable for its time, in that it showed a reverence towards the old and retro. There was a sense that nostalgia was not a sentimental emotion, but one perfectly compatible with futuristic musical experimentation, and there was a bold willingness to feel a longing for eras that came before one’s own. Lyrics like those from Ultravox’s “New Europeans” above blend images of then and now, offering a blurred and alienating, even ambiguously sinister, vision of the future—the subject’s “modern world revolves around the synthesizer’s song,” and “his senses slip away” as he listens on his headphones, drowning out the crowded beach around him. He is detached from his
environment, but somehow still wound up in it—“He’s a European legacy, a culture for today.” Another paradox—he is a subject formed by the culture of prior generations, yet he is emblematic of his own. These are post-punk concerns, and this is the post-punk subject.

Post-punk captures under its wide umbrella bands with sounds as varied as Cabaret Voltaire’s discordant, sample-heavy arrangements, Ultravox’s wailing synths layered over punchy beats, or the aggressive “electronic body music” of Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft. This project will consider two of the most iconic and distinctive post-punk genres that sprouted up in the UK and Germany: New Romantic (also called New Wave, when referring more broadly to bands not associated with the London Blitz club scene) and Industrial. These genres appeared spontaneously in politically complex geographic locations (London, industrial Northern England, and the heavily industrial Nordrhein-Westfalen region of Germany) and grew like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizome model, in which the connection being established (between then and now, between post-punk musicians and the early twentieth century—post-punk’s elaboration upon then’s modernism to forge now’s cultural vanguard), tells us more than any “root-tree” model that chronologically lists each influential work and innovation. A rhizomatic approach can better present and emphasize post-punk’s underlying nostalgic spirit by focusing on the connections themselves—the intergenerational dialogue between post-punk artists and their modernist reference points. Deleuze and Guattari write, “It is not a question of this or that place on earth, or of a given moment in history, still less of this or that category of thought. It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again” (Deleuze and Guattari 20). In the case of post-punk, the modernist project is what is “prolonging itself,” “breaking off and starting up again,” and finding new, or continued, expression in ‘70s and ‘80s music. For post-punk, the units that make up the rhizome are the cross-cultural and cross-generational connections (the non-hierarchical lines, rather than the points; the map, rather than the tracing) that comprise the post-punk collaboration with, and elaboration upon, modernism.

In Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures, cultural theorist Mark Fisher investigates the state of twenty-first century pop culture, caught in a perpetual cycle of nostalgic revivalism and recombination, unable to produce cultural forms that manage to express our
current, bleak, “capitalist realist” experience. Fisher describes his term, “popular modernism,” which refers to a sort of late-postwar-era popular culture crafted with modernist themes, methods, and aesthetics in mind:

The cultural ecology that I referred to above—the music press and the more challenging parts of public service broadcasting—were part of a UK popular modernism, as were postpunk, brutalist architecture, Penguin paperbacks and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. In popular modernism, the elitist project of modernism was retrospectively vindicated…Particular modernist techniques were not only disseminated but collectively reworked and extended, just as the modernist task of producing forms which were adequate to the present moment was taken up and renewed. (Fisher 22-23)

For Fisher, popular modernism is a “tendency” of culture at the postmodern juncture that welded “high-cultural” theory with “low culture,” i.e., pop cultural objects—post-punk, brutalist buildings, and Penguin paperbacks, for example, which made modernist thought and its representative works available to people outside of elite circles. Post-punk as a popular modernist creation reconciled modernism’s anti-mainstream, futuristic visions with musical subcultures that co-opted iconic modernist aesthetics and revived modernism’s prevalent themes—modern alienation, man vs. machine, socialism, pacifism, uncertain psychological states, irrationality, individualistic self-expression, etc. Post-punk’s “portals,” to use another Fisher term, led listeners into realms beyond music (cinematic, theoretical, political, artistic, literary), enacting popular modernism by making this “high culture” available to all listeners, irrespective of their social background. Post-punk subcultures like Industrial, goth, and New Wave could be highly intellectual and self-aware, which is part of what drew people to them—these genres were culturally perceptive, they were critical without being clichéd, and they offered an expansion of cultural and historical awareness to participants. What drove this notable intellectuality and nostalgia among musicians in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, then? Post-punk appeared at the dawn of what could be called the neoliberal era, marked by Margaret Thatcher’s administration in the UK and Ronald Raegan’s presidency in the US, when, according to Fisher, many social possibilities (welfare, state-funded

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1 For Mark Fisher, capitalist realism is our current state of collective existence, in which we believe there is no better economic system than capitalism. Paraphrased from both Fisher and Slavoj Žižek, it is easier for us to imagine the apocalypse than the end of capitalism.
universities, affordable housing, space for creation and subcultural exchange) of the more liberal, early postwar era vanished, due to privatization, corporate expansion, and the shift towards a post-industrial economy. This unsteady transitional period saw the rise of popular modernism, one last grasp at the social democratic and modernist projects, right at the moment when British culture appeared on the verge of being swallowed up by corporate, neoliberal capitalism—when it felt as though any popular modernist future would be lost.

Fisher adopts Marxist theorist Franco Berardi’s phrase, “the slow cancellation of the future,” to explain his concept of “lost futures,” those which we were led to expect, but which were made impossible and “cancelled” by neoliberal capitalist policy. With the late postwar-era shift in the UK and US from industrial- to service-based economies came the subsequent corporatization and gentrification of cities and spaces once conducive to artistic and musical creation, as well as the elimination of social programs that financially and enabled artists to experiment and create. Fisher cites such strictures (most of which are financial) in late capitalist societies as the main explanation for our current stagnancy in musical production and innovation:

It’s no accident that the efflorescence of cultural invention in London and New York in the late 1970s and early 80s (in the punk and post punk scenes) coincided with the availability of squatted and cheap property in those cities. Since then, the decline of social housing, the attacks on squatting, and the delirious rise in property prices have meant that the amount of time and energy available for cultural production has massively diminished. (Fisher 15-16)

The late ‘70s and early ‘80s saw the beginning of these gentrification and corporatization trajectories that have since displaced countless artists and contributed to a slowing in musical innovation by the new millennium, according to both Fisher and music journalist Simon Reynolds. In this sense, the “slow cancellation of the future” that Fisher writes about began during the post-punk period. He elaborates, “What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres—the spectres of lost futures—reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world” (Fisher 27). Fisher’s looming “specters of lost futures” are what post-punk musicians responded to in their work and what they confronted in their environments. These musicians processed these specters of lost futures through
nostalgia and found solace in mining history for cultural artifacts, styles, concepts, movements, political manifestos, and aesthetics with which to reinvigorate their presently crumbling realities.

In the same way that modernism is strongly connoted with Europe (some of the most iconic art movements—Dada, Cubism, Bauhaus, German Expressionism, Russian Constructivism—originate in Europe), capitalism is associated with America and its constant stream of commodified entertainment exports—Rock music, Hollywood films, and the like. With this background in mind, the British and German post-punk movements in music can be understood as a return to European roots and a distancing from those mainstream, somewhat corrosive American influences. Creating a distance from American music was important for German post-punk musicians in particular, given the divided state of the country and the massive American cultural and economic influence in postwar West Germany—American films, music, and consumer goods flooded West German markets, tampering with any efforts at reconstructing a non-fascist, distinctly German identity. In response, post-punks in Germany experimented with charged fascist signs and German-language vocals both as a provocation and as an attempt to create an entirely German contemporary culture by engaging with the Nazi heritage after decades of silence. British post-punks also took inspiration from pre- and interwar German intellectual and artistic production (Weimar cinema, German Expressionism, Dada), captivated by its loaded, complex history, as well as its distinctive aesthetics. Kraftwerk also offered an entry into the possibilities of retro-futuristic aesthetics, even when they hinted at Nazism in a detached, yet certainly self-aware, manner. By the mid-’70s, as a result of Kraftwerk’s groundbreaking electronic music and Bowie’s seminal “Berlin trilogy” (two fundamental influences for UK post-punk acts), what was “German” or “European” held a certain intrigue, by virtue of its proximity to early-twentieth-century modernism and to the unresolved, ever-taboo Nazi heritage. What British and German post-punks share is this reflective inclination towards aesthetics, themes, attitudes, and methods of the modernist period.

*Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past,* written by music journalist and author Simon Reynolds, tracks the nostalgic impulses of contemporary pop culture, which Reynolds claims escalated in the late ’80s, when musical portals became self-referential, leading more often to other music than to a range of non-musical media (*Retromania* 133). Since the post-punk period, Reynolds argues, retro has been a permanent, recurring aesthetic component of music: “Retro thus becomes a structural
feature of pop culture: it’s the inevitable down phase to the preceding manic phase, but it is also a response to the build-up of ideas and styles whose potentials have not been fully extracted” (Retromania 197). This pattern is essential to understanding the appeal of modernist objects and theories for British and German post-punk musicians—the idea that modernism represented, for them, “a build-up of ideas and styles whose potentials have not been fully extracted.” Of course, the extent of modernist artistic, literary, and theoretical representations of human alienation and change had not yet been entirely processed—modernism had not yet fulfilled its inspirational potential. The early twentieth century was characterized by so much war and rupture on all levels of society, which reverberated throughout the postwar decades—there was a second-wave alienation that these musicians, coming of age as late as the ‘70s, still felt to varying degrees. For Germans, the trauma of World War II and collective guilt for Nazism required extensive processing that was largely suppressed in the immediate postwar period, a time when most Germans were primarily concerned with survival and rebuilding. The secondhand guilt that German post-punk musicians born in the postwar period felt must have compelled them to address their inherited responsibility for Vergangenheitsbewältigung (“coming to terms with the past”) through musical experimentation with charged signifiers. For both British and German post-punks, the modernist project offered a vast amount of culture from which to extract aesthetic, mood, and meaning.
Of all the retro, stylish, and wistful music videos belonging to the appropriately-named New Romantic scene in late-1970s, early-'80s London, “Vienna” epitomizes the nostalgic, historically referential sensibility that actually defined the futuristic aesthetics of New Romantic/New Wave. “Vienna” defies pop-hit conventions—it is rather slow, long, and expansive, building with each verse toward a grandiose final crescendo. Its pace and melody mimics a piece of classical music, which was keyboardist Billy Currie’s intention:

I wanted to use my classical training. I said to the guys I was keen to do something that sounded like the late-19th-century romantics, like Grieg and Elgar…We’d been listening to music by this old German composer called Max Reger. He’d tried too hard to be successful and deliberately overdid it. That was why I did a violin solo that was overly vibrato and romantic. (Sullivan)

Currie’s classical training on piano and viola translated well to creating flowing, expressive synthesizer melodies and electric violin components, contributing what vocalist Midge Ure called “influences that reeked of Berlin and Prague” and conveyed a vague Central or Eastern European sensibility (Ure 84). Appropriately, the music video for “Vienna” mimics the song’s odes to Europe and its indiscriminate mixing of visuals from eras past, ranging from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s—the modernist period. The music video for “Vienna” serves as perhaps the best example within the New Romantic oeuvre of anachronism, which cultural theorist Mark Fisher defines as “the slippage of discrete time periods into one another” to achieve a sort of temporal flattening, an ambiguous moment in time.

The video’s visual aesthetic was based—unconsciously, Ure recalls—on the iconic postwar British film noir, The Third Man (1949), directed by Carol Reed and shot in bombed-out, rubbled postwar Vienna (Ure 92) (Figures 1, 2). Like The Third Man, the first part of the “Vienna” music video abounds with shadows cast on buildings, beams of light reflecting off cobblestone streets, half-hidden figures crouched behind imposing columns or statues, and men wrapped up in long trench coats, their smoky breath twirling in the frigid winter air. The opening sequence evokes both aching and indifference, and its images are simultaneously 1940s-period and 1980s-contemporary. In the next sequence, we notice further temporal layering in the clothing of these partygoers—there are women wearing flapper dresses, long
strands of pearls, and intricate hats reminiscent of the 1920s; some men are dressed in tuxedos, others in
what look like prewar military suits decorated with badges and medals. Yet there is something off about
this at-first-glance “period” image—the period being invoked is imprecise and deliberately anachronistic,
spanning prewar Vienna towards the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1920s Weimar-era cabaret, and
1940s-'50s film noir. There are even moments when a distinctly ‘80s style glimmers through the women’s
dramatic, colorful makeup or Ure’s characteristic pointed sideburns. In particular, the grotesque,
nightmarish elements throughout (the tarantula; the man with the bandaged face) interrupt our encounter
with this fashionable party and its opulent setting. These jumbled period details—like Ure’s presence
throughout as a removed observer, almost like a classic film noir detective character slinking around dark
dark street corners—detach the video from any immediately recognizable or real time period.

The cinematic quality of the “Vienna” music video demonstrates an engagement with iconic
cultural objects from an earlier generation—in this case, films made forty years earlier and several years
before Midge Ure, Billy Currie, Chris Cross, and Warren Cann were born. Even in Ultravox’s early years
in the late ‘70s, before Midge Ure had replaced John Foxx (who went on to have a solo career) as
vocalist, the band made a point of referencing canonized postwar European films remembered for their
cinematic accomplishments—for example, one of the better-known songs off of their 1977 album is
entitled, “Hiroshima Mon Amour,” after the 1959 French New Wave film directed by Alain Resnais. The
band’s fascination with the World War II and postwar periods also extended to fashion—Ultravox drew
upon clothing from the 1940s, recognizing its visual connotations with the war and the mood of European
countries left in rubble afterwards, particularly Germany and formerly occupied countries attempting to
rebuild their cities and societies after the trauma of the war. Ure reflects on Ultravox’s style in the early ‘80s: “We had a definite, distinct look: we were into dead men’s clothes; we bought old 1940s double-breasted suits from second-hand shops, wore shirts with a pair of braces. It was a film noir look, based on that mean and moody, mid-European imagery that complemented our music” (Ure 121). Not only did they strive to look straight out of a film noir in their trench coats, pleated trousers, and double-breasted suit jackets, but they intentionally bought these inexpensive and abundant articles of secondhand clothing that appeared dated and old fashioned by the standards of their time (Figure 3). In *Sweet Dreams: The Story of the New Romantics*, journalist and author Dylan Jones suggests why there was an abundance of ‘40s-style suits in secondhand stores back then: “Of course, many of these suits had been owned by men who hadn’t come back from the war, and whose wives and girlfriends—and boyfriends, perhaps—had had to eventually divest themselves of their wardrobes” (Jones 184). These literal “dead men’s clothes” that Ultravox in particular, and the New Romantics more broadly, repurposed soon resembled a retro-modern style more futuristic than antiquated, perhaps by virtue of their use alongside a distinctly new, electronic form of music centered around the synthesizer.

In his 2011 book, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past*, British music journalist Simon Reynolds defines “retro” using four main identifiers: 1) retro refers to the past within living memory, 2) the rediscovery and reproduction of retro styles is largely reliant upon “the ready availability of archived documentation (photographic, video, music recordings, the internet),” 3) retro is synonymous with pop cultural artifacts, particularly the “lowbrow” ones, and most importantly, 4) “retro is actually more about the present than the past it appears to revere and revive. It uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital (hipness, in other words) through recycling and recombining” (*Retromania* xxx-xxxi). Part of retro’s appeal, according to Reynolds, is its relative proximity to the present era—the rediscovered retro must be within “living memory,” while also being
long enough ago to hold a certain magical allure, a charming quaintness. For Ultravox, the period of the 1920s through the ‘40s struck this balance—it was fascinating and aesthetically rich because it was just out of reach, part of recent collective memory, but beyond the band members’ own living memory (they were born in the early ‘50s). These were the cultural objects of their parents’ generation, those who lived through World War II and watched newly-released film noirs in theaters. Finally, Reynolds posits that retro operates as a sort of aesthetic well from which “subcultural capital” is “extracted” for contemporary uses. The success of Ultravox’s visual style, then, also functions on this level—they utilized modernist artifacts and styles as aesthetic tools to reinvigorate their sonically futuristic music, which centered synthesizers, the newly-accessible electronic instruments of their time.

“Herr X”- 1980

References to Germany abound on Ultravox’s 1980 Vienna album—there are two German-language track titles, “Herr X” and “Alles Klar,” and the music video for their single, “Passing Strangers,” recreates the high-contrast, expressionistic visual features of Weimar cinema. Also consistent throughout Vienna is a Kraftwerk-informed use of the synthesizer—long, drawn out, minor synths that enhance Ultravox’s ambiguous, even menacing, lyrics, which are delivered with much the same cadence as in a voiceover narration from a classic film noir. The narrator is usually an outsider or a detective, someone who enters into a circle or world with shady characters, moral ambiguity, and secrets, and then recounts the story in first-person past-tense, punctuated by *if-only-I’d-known-then* statements. The classic Orson Welles Noir, The Lady from Shanghai (1947), in which a seaman (Welles), takes a job as a yacht driver for a beautiful woman (Rita Hayworth) and her husband and finds himself framed for a falsified murder, is a perfect example. Welles’s character tells the story in a grave tone throughout, still haunted by memories of this surreal encounter. “Herr X” is the German recording of “Mr. X,” the English version included on the original release, and both versions (but perhaps more so the German) seem like a homage to Kraftwerk, whose elongated analog synth melodies are known for their minimalist quality (Kraftwerk’s sound was initially described as “cold” and “mechanical”). The lyrics to “Mr. X” are particularly cinematic, again demonstrating a fascination with the aesthetic qualities of 1940s film noir—in this case, its characteristic voiceover narration (even spoken with an American accent) as a stylistic element:
I found the perfect picture of a perfect stranger
It looked as if it were taken in the forties sometime
Judging by the style (…)
I almost thought I saw him, standing, whistling on a bridge
I asked him the time, but when he turned around
I saw it wasn't him at all
I'm still searching. (*Vienna (Deluxe Edition: 40th Anniversary)*)

Alongside their nostalgic use of film noir conventions, Ultravox draws from more contemporary German influences—Kraftwerk, in terms of sonic possibilities of the synthesizer, and German producer Conny Plank, who produced Kraftwerk’s *Autobahn* in 1975 and three Ultravox albums, 1979’s *Systems of Romance*, 1980’s *Vienna*, and 1981’s *Rage in Eden*. Plank is best known for his work with ‘60s Krautrock legends Neu!, Cluster, and Harmonia, all of which are often mentioned in the same breath as Kraftwerk, despite using analog synthesizers alongside traditional instruments and tending towards a more prog rock-adjacent aesthetic, in stark contrast with Kraftwerk’s completely electronic music and vaguely old-fashioned look. Around the same time as his work with Ultravox, Plank also produced Düsseldorf-based duo DAF’s 1981 album, *Alles Ist Gut*. An incredibly prolific and influential figure, Plank deeply influenced the trajectory of experimental German music of the late twentieth century. With “Herr X,” and throughout *Vienna* more broadly, Ultravox clearly cites Kraftwerk as a musical influence (and, to a certain extent, an aesthetic one—Kraftwerk were some of the first to reject denim and long hair, in favor of suits and slicked-back hair) (Figure 4). These citations can be read as an effort at imitating Kraftwerk’s perceived European-ness, even their German-ness.

John Foxx, founding member and lead singer of Ultravox before Midge Ure, remarks on the effect of Kraftwerk’s exaggerated, if not caricatured, German aesthetic in David Buckley’s book, *Kraftwerk: Publikation*: 

![Figure 4. Original album cover for Kraftwerk’s classic 1977 record, *Trans Europe Express*](image)
Kraftwerk’s aesthetic was a studied rejection of almost everything Anglo-American culture stood for, and an often witty take on Germanness: ‘I think they long ago became conscious of the rest of the world’s stereotypical view of the efficient, intellectual German, and decided to play up to this,’ is John Foxx’s analysis. ‘The suits and haircuts that Florian [Schneider] introduced seem to bear this out, and so does their general demeanour—unexcitable yet engaged, dignified, precise, detached, analytical, dryly humorous or comically over-earnest—or both.’ (Buckley 65)

Foxx identifies what it was about Kraftwerk that captured the British New Romantics’ (Ultravox included) imagination: their European-ness and their (from an Anglo-American perspective) German-ness. Like Bowie, another revered figure among the New Romantics, Kraftwerk challenged the Anglo-American tradition of rock—which, until punk in the mid-70s, had largely become wound up with hippie associations and signifiers—by infusing art and technology into music. In many ways, Kraftwerk’s wide-reaching influence cannot be explained solely by their groundbreaking innovations in electronic music, but rather, owes much to the way they merged aesthetic, conceptual, technological, and sonic realms:

...leading on from this rejection of the Anglo-American tradition of popular music comes a rejection of music being conceived of as being purely about music. ‘The ideas reflected in our work are both internationalism and the mixing of different art forms,’ said Ralf [Hütter] in 2006. ‘[It’s] the idea that you don’t separate dance over here and architecture over there, painting over there. We do everything, and the marriage of art and technology was Kraftwerk right from the beginning.’ (Buckley 46)

The ways in which Kraftwerk and Ultravox share a musical philosophy, then, are clear—where Kraftwerk was preoccupied with the technological, Ultravox was concerned with the cinematic. The “mixing of art forms” that Kraftwerk’s Ralf Hütter describes actually formed the underlying basis for Ultravox, even in the late-’70s John Foxx era. For Simon Reynolds, John Foxx-era Ultravox was unique for its dedication to both vivid imagery and atmospheric music:

What made Ultravox crucial precursors of 1980’s synthpop explosion was their European aura and singer/lyricist John Foxx’s frigid imagery of dehumanization and decadence. The group’s

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2 Founding member of Kraftwerk, along with Ralf Hütter.
style was based on rejecting rock’s standard ‘Americanisms’; Billy Currie, their keyboardist, was a classically trained viola player and determinedly avoided blues scales. ‘We feel European,’ said Foxx, when NME asked why they’d recorded *Systems of Romance* with Kraftwerk producer Conny Plank at his studio near Köln. ‘The sort of background and melodies we tend to come out with just seemed to be…Germanic even before we came here.’ (*Rip It Up and Start Again* 325) In the mid-to-late ‘70s, Ultravox sought to create an alternative, more “European” sound and image to counter the very “American” mainstream rock popular in ‘70s Britain, contemporaneously to Kraftwerk’s slightly more radical efforts in West Germany, a country similarly inundated with Anglo-American rock. Kraftwerk invented the electronic sound that now connotes Germany in response to the dearth of distinctly German music (i.e., something not derivative of psychedelia/prog rock) in the postwar period. Hütter describes the cultural atmosphere in which Germans born after the war grew up:

> The only people we could relate to, we had to go back fifty years into the twenties….There was no current musical movement other than the fifty-year-old musical thing or semi-academic electronic music, meaning psychologically we had to get ourselves going. And that has only been possible with our generation. You can see the generation before ours, which is ten years older, and they could not do it. The only thing they could do was get fat and drink. There was so much accumulated guilt that it took another generation to be productive. (Jones 54-55)

These intergenerational dynamics strongly shaped the German postwar situation and had become more blatant by the time Kraftwerk began experimenting with analog synthesizers in the early-to-mid-‘70s, helping to create a new, postwar German identity. Kraftwerk and other Krautrock musicians (along with Bowie, of course) are perhaps the most heavily-cited reference points for New Wave/New Romantic musicians, and their music helped to renew perceptions of German culture globally, but particularly in the UK, where it struck a chord on the level of mood and aesthetic. Foxx’s association of Ultravox’s melodies with a “Germanic” sensibility was largely informed by Kraftwerk and indicates a sort of link in the (post-punk) British mind between Germany and *modernism*, as well as Germany and the *future*. Weimar-era interwar Germany is remembered for its German Expressionist art, cinema, and seedy-glamorous cabaret decadence, while Germany in the late ‘70s was often recognized for its advent of the synthesizer, for Krautrock, Kraftwerk, and Bowie’s Berlin trilogy, and for its intriguing symbolic *mystique* as bridge
between Western Europe and the Eastern Bloc. Among post-punk musicians in the late twentieth century, Germany signified modernism in its pre-Nazi artistic iterations (and occasionally, modernism in its corrupted, fascist iterations, when presented in a decontextualized, floating form in a cultural object), as well as the future, associated with the postwar Germany of Kraftwerk, the synthesizer, and the German division.

The underlying paradox within New Romantic and New Wave is the idea that a revival of old-fashioned-ness actually generated the vanguard of pop and experimental music in the late ‘70s/early ‘80s. Kraftwerk’s self-conscious adoption of their fathers’ retro suit-and-tie, clean-shaven 1930s demeanor—with an implied, ironic nod to the Nazi ambitions of efficiency and technological progress (e.g., Hitler’s Autobahn project)—paired with their revolutionary, futuristic synthesized instrumentation, created the blueprint for New Wave bands and musicians like Ultravox, Gary Numan, and Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. In other words, the more intentional New Romantics were, in the tradition of Kraftwerk, intuitively crafting a new wave of culture for the future by picking up on modernism’s early-twentieth century remnants (whether clothing or cinematic stylistic conventions), extracting their aesthetic capacities, and channelling their moods into retro-futuristic pop-cultural objects. On some level, Ultravox and other New Romantics understood that modernist cultural objects frequently express alienation, distrust, or unease in modern society. Ultravox merely updated these modernist concerns in their postmodernist, Thatcher-era music—they channeled the German Expressionist mood and the film noir mood into synthesizer melodies that yearn, reminisce, and convey a sense of modernist alienation fitting for early-‘80s Britain.
Floating Signifiers: Spandau Ballet, Japan, and Visage

Spandau Ballet - “To Cut A Long Story Short” - 1980

In 1979, when DJ Rusty Egan moved his weekly Bowie-themed “Club for Heroes” on Tuesday nights from Billy’s in Soho to the Blitz, a themed wine bar in Covent Garden, it became the founding- and gathering-place for the New Romantic scene (Ure 52). Appropriately, the Blitz club was named in reference to the bombing of London during World War II, and as such, was decorated to look like a wine bar from a 1940s film (Figures 5, 6). If it weren’t for the futuristic and overwhelmingly European-sounding “machine music” Egan played—a mix spanning Berlin-era Bowie and Iggy Pop, Giorgio Moroder, Brian Eno, and Kraftwerk—and the equally eclectic fashion of the “Blitz kids” inside, the club might have retained its ‘40s theme. An original Blitz kid himself, Midge Ure of Ultravox recalls, “Walking into the Blitz was like stepping out of time. Like Bladerunner, you never knew what period it was set in. Maybe the future, maybe the past. It was a mishmash of style, Batman, old cars, old suits, blurred genders, full make-up for boys and girls, film noir and modern technology” (Ure 55). The New Romantic scene was shaped by groups and individuals like Steve Strange, Boy George, Spandau Ballet, and Siouxsie Sioux, whose styles were deeply informed by both nostalgia and glam rock, with Bowie upheld as a sort of prophet for androgynous, period-influenced, avant-garde dress. Fashion was essential to the New Romantic scene—one could even say that glamour and daring style justified the music that came out of the Blitz scene. In the late ‘70s, when denim, jumpsuits, and button-downs with exaggerated collars were the rule, Egan’s Club of Heroes event created an environment for young people to retreat into the nostalgic imagination—here, the glamour and drama of old Hollywood,
Weimar-era Berlin cabarets, and even the aristocratic Edwardian era provided inexhaustible reservoirs of aesthetic raw material.

The Blitz on Tuesday nights was a place of aesthetic exchange—Club of Heroes regulars would spend the week scouring secondhand shops for clothes and planning their outfits in advance. The band that came to be known as the Blitz “in-house band,” Spandau Ballet, were also deeply invested in their style and image, to an excess. Their glam orientation helped set the tone, and the subtle air of vanity in the room was part of what made the Blitz, according to Ure:

…in comparison to punk the Blitz was soft. It was a very non-aggressive, non-violent environment…While the Blitz was very glam, it was quite sedate and there wasn’t all that punk testosterone flying around. Spandau Ballet, for instance, were a bunch of lads who were more interested in not getting their ties ruffled, in making sure the line of their jackets were straight and not creased so they could stand at the bar and pose properly. (Ure 56-7)

In a television interview, Spandau Ballet lead singer Tony Hadley even indulged this image, describing the band early on as “fashion conscious” and stating that “Everyone has got their individual set of tastes, although they follow the same line, and that line is a question of elegance and romance” (Soul Boys of the Western World) (Figures 7, 8). Besides the 1940s decor, a nostalgic impulse characterized the Blitz scene—thrifted vintage clothing was abundant, and so was a vague impression of early twentieth century glamour—the “elegance and romance” Hadley spoke of. Perhaps Blitz fashion could be described as retro-eclectic—overtly period clothing pieces that, when put together, create a temporally ambiguous elegance.

Spandau Ballet’s music video for their first single, “To Cut A Long Story Short,” illustrates this temporal ambiguity and drama for its own sake—the band are dressed in traditional clothing of the Scottish Highlands, all while playing music in what looks like a dimly lit stone church. Vocalist Tony Hadley wears some sort of Scottish sweater with a cropped ‘50s army jacket slung over his shoulder (a purely decorative touch), while bassist Martin Kemp has on a white button-down with matching red plaid
sash and trousers tucked into thick, white socks. The saxophonist, Steve Norman (playing guitar in the video), is dressed in a maroon kilt, white knee high socks, and what appear to be Irish-dancing shoes. The band is clearly attempting a theme here, but they make a statement regardless, one unusually old fashioned for characteristic pop music attempts at newness and provocation. Instead, Spandau Ballet manage to make Scottish sweaters and kilts look remarkably modern while performing this punchy, highly danceable synth-pop track. The old-fashioned-ness is extracted from these clothes and used for drama, while the lyrics for “To Cut A Long Story Short” describe in evocative language the struggles of a young man returning from war—a theme belonging more to the World War II generation than to the Thatcher era:

Soldier is turning / See him through white light
Running from strangers / See you in the valley…
Sitting on a park bench / Years away from fighting
To cut a long story short, I lost my mind.
Standing in the dark / Oh, I was waiting for a man to come
I am beautiful and clean / And so very, very young
To be standing in the street / To be taken by someone. (Spandau Ballet)

These lyrics are somewhat dark for a pop song, but this is typical for the New Romantic genre—lyrics are not merely about sex, drugs, and partying, but rather paint an image of a moment and create a distinct mood marked by some sense of foreboding or paranoia. The second part of these lyrics could almost be a first-person voiceover narration from a film noir—“Standing in the dark, I was waiting for a man to come.” If the single didn’t have such a catchy synth melody and what Simon Reynolds calls a “gimmicky, ping ping syn-drum,” “a sonic signifier for ‘early eighties,’” these lyrics might have taken on a more menacing quality (Rip It Up and Start Again 328). Instead, Hadley’s soul-boy singing style tempers the seriousness, as well as the electronic sound—Spandau Ballet were at the height of their synth-pop phase
here, and they would soon make a drastic pivot in image towards a more Soul-adjacent sound, best exemplified in their only U.S. hit, 1983’s “True.” Even in their later years, Spandau’s Blitz roots continued to inform their “fashion-conscious” image—whether they were citing ‘50s American early rock bands by wearing tidy retro suits or co-opting ‘70s Soul fashion with their ruffled shirts, there was an obvious attempt at nostalgic glamour (Figure 9).

Undoubtedly, the Blitz scene had escapist aspirations—during Margaret Thatcher’s administration, beginning in 1979, the UK experienced an unemployment rate as high as 25 percent, mining and factory closures, subsequent coal miners’ and union strikes, and reductions in spending on social welfare. Thatcher’s agenda of economic de-regulation, industry privatization, welfare reductions, and the shift from a heavily industrial to a knowledge- and service-based economy left many working-class people unemployed and frustrated (Thatcher’s insistence upon “personal responsibility,” rather than reliance on social welfare, was a central fixture of her moral and ideological stance). For creative young people living during the Thatcher era, then, music and subcultural identification were essential—finding self-definition through association with a cultural tribe, whether punk, teddy boy, hippie, soul boy or girl, or New Romantic, offered escape through immersion in a world separate from the economic challenges and dislocation of the time. For those who had been too young to participate in punk, the Blitz provided a space for experimentation with music, fashion, and the arts. Martin Kemp recalls, “Among the strange mix of ex-punks, art school students, soul boys and soul girls, there was us—working-class kids from North London” (Soul Boys of the Western World). As described, the crowd at Club of Heroes was rather mixed in terms of class—middle- and working-class youth alike found inspiration, self-expression, and community in the Blitz scene. Similarly, Gary Kemp reflects, “Intellectually, it was about aspirations outside of our class and certainly outside of what I would have grown up with—spending all your money on clothes and making yourself look grander than a kid in a council house should be looking” (Jones 216). For Spandau Ballet, subcultural self-identification through dress had a significance for working-class youth in particular, and during the bleak Thatcher era, New Romantic/synth-pop/New Wave
provided more than identity—it offered, to use Mark Fisher’s term, a “portal” into the stylish, ambiguous, poetic decadence of the modernist past it endlessly cited.

In an early ‘80s interview, when asked why Spandau Ballet dressed up in such dramatic clothes, Tony Hadley responded with slight defensiveness, “It’s just an attitude that’s always been with young kids, like Gary said, it’s inherent in the working class. In the middle class, if anything, they’re the ones who want to play it down and wear scruffy jeans and go kicking tin cans down the street—that’s not a working-class idea!” (Soul Boys of the Western World). Hadley spoke of a drive among working-class youth towards clothing as a form of self-expression, insisting that it doesn’t have the same depth of meaning for the middle class. Similarly, Gary Kemp reflected decades later in a 2009 interview, “One of the most difficult things is explaining what style is to middle-class journalists because they always connect style with being bourgeois and they spend their whole lives trying to escape it.” (Johnson).

Perhaps to elaborate on the class dynamics Hadley and Kemp describe, we can look to an earlier band, this one more proto-New Romantic, that shares both Spandau’s working-class background and glam aesthetic: Japan.

Japan - “Ghosts” - 1981

Japan were in no way related to the Blitz scene and even rejected the “New Romantic” label, although their post-1979 sound has much in common with bands like Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran, both of which are associated with the more funk- or soul-infused side of New Wave. And although their style didn’t reach a Blitz level of flamboyancy, Japan adopted the retro, suit-and-tie look and embraced androgynous makeup, two stylistic choices that, by 1981, had become visual signifiers for New Romantic. David Sylvian, Steve Jansen, and Mick Karn had formed Japan in 1974 in their hometown of South London, originally going for a glam rock sound until they shifted towards synthesizer-oriented New Wave with their 1979 album, Quiet Life. Mark Fisher devotes a section in his book, Ghosts of My Life, to Japan (as well as the title, a reference to their song, “Ghosts,” from 1981’s Tin Drum), drawing particular attention to the band’s working-class upbringing in South London and how “art pop” (referring to ‘70s Bowie, Roxy Music, and the like) provided exposure to aesthetic tastes beyond what these young men knew growing up:
They came from Beckenham, Catford, Lewisham, the unglamorous conurbation where Kent joins South London—the same suburban hinterland from which David Bowie, Billy Idol and Siouxsie Sioux had come. As with most English art pop, Japan found their environment only a negative inspiration, something to escape from. ‘There was a conscious drive away from everything that childhood represented,’ Sylvian has remarked. Pop was the portal out of the prosaic. Music was only part of it. Art pop was a finishing school for working class autodidacts, where, by following up the clues left behind by earlier pioneers—the allusions secreted in lyrics, in track titles, or in interview references—you could learn about things that weren’t on the formal curriculum for working class youth: fine art, European cinema, avant-garde literature… (Fisher 36)

These “high cultural” objects deeply inspired New Wave musicians of the early ‘80s, whether experienced firsthand or secondhand via the “portals” that ‘70s art pop masterpieces like Bowie’s “Berlin trilogy” (Low, Heroes, and Lodger) established. Some track titles on these Bowie albums refer to Berlin and Eastern Europe (“Warszawa,” “Neuköln”), others to early twentieth-century art (“Art Decade,” “Sons of the Silent Age”), while an air of melancholy, even sparsity—a sonic representation of West Berlin and the Eastern Bloc—pervades the synth-heavy second sides of both Low and Heroes, evidence of Brian Eno’s influence. Taking Bowie’s widely influential Berlin trilogy as an example, we can identify the various “portals” his work opened for listeners back in the UK—into the allure of Berlin and Eastern Europe (connoting a certain bleakness, but also a complex and ideologically fraught history) and into the artistic moments and cultural objects associated with Berlin and Germany, or more broadly, with “the East.” One could argue that these musicians, themselves looking at rather dismal job prospects upon graduation from high school in the mid- to late-‘70s, felt some sense of kinship not only with Bowie, who had come from a similar economic background, but with the themes he expressed through lyric, sign, and sound in his Berlin trilogy—namely, the alienation and existential dread felt while living in a foreign hinterland divided by a wall, an island in the middle of a more politically fragmented society than even Thatcher’s UK. Nonetheless, West Berlin provided lasting inspiration for Bowie, and young musicians received much secondhand inspiration from Bowie’s Berlin trilogy—sonic, thematic, and most importantly, atmospheric. “Ghosts” shares a certain simultaneous sparsity and fullness with Low’s second-side tracks (“Warszawa,” in particular), which lend themselves in both songs to an evocative soundscape
that somehow perfectly complements, even mimics, the vast terrain of undeveloped, late ‘70s West Berlin, and perhaps even that of suburban South London. This may be the kind of “negative inspiration” Fisher describes when comparing “Ghosts” with Japan’s usual, more upbeat sound.

Fisher considers “Ghosts” entirely unlike Japan’s other music, partly due to the slower pace and aforementioned unembellished sound, and partly owing to the lyrics, through which Sylvian self-consciously muses over the limits of success:

Just when I think I’m winning
When I’ve broken every door
The ghosts of my life blow wilder than before
Just when I thought I could not be stopped
When my chance came to be king
The ghosts of my life blew wilder than the wind. (Japan)

Fisher posits that “‘Ghosts’ was paralysed by very English anxieties… In England, working class escape is always haunted by the possibility that you will be found out, that your roots are showing” (Fisher 37). For these British musicians, the potential for their working-class background (“the ghosts of their lives”) to glimmer through their more stylish facade remains constantly in the back of their minds, according to Fisher’s interpretation. Bands like Japan and Spandau Ballet mediated their “working class escape” through a curated, fashionable image, which drew from the glamour of decades past via two avenues: secondhand, through art pop’s and glam rock’s “portals,” and firsthand, through direct engagement with cultural objects of the modernist period. Within the New Romantic/New Wave genre, escapism meant not only distancing oneself from the late ‘70s/early ‘80s as a time period, but also from British working-class identification, its geographic localization, and its intimate relation to the grim early Thatcher era.

*An Aside: the floating signifier*

When thinking about post-punk, a genre rich in signifiers and references, the concept of the *floating signifier* provides a method for understanding how certain signs operate when placed in a musical, pop-cultural context. Following a poststructuralist understanding of semiotics, the “floating signifier” refers to a signifier without a clearly identifiable signified—what, exactly, is being alluded to or
referenced, beneath the purely aesthetic-symbolic level, remains vague. Writing in 1977, semiotician Roland Barthes briefly describes the floating signifier in *Image, Music, Text*: “…all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others” (Barthes 39). The floating signifier is detached from any fixed signified—it remains either empty or ambiguous, open to potential contradicting or overlapping meanings.

Whereas punks and hippies are remembered for engaging in blatant forms of political protest through song lyrics or lifestyle choices, post-punk musicians communicated through more subtle historical references, gestures, and provocations, many of which were imprecise floating signifiers. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdidge analyzes subcultures in the UK from a semiotics perspective at the height of the punk moment: 1977. He juxtaposes punk and teddy boy styles throughout to demonstrate the ways in which subcultures use signs to either generate or resist meaning. On the concept of the floating signifier, Hebdidge writes,

…not all subcultural styles ‘play’ with language to the same extent: some are more ‘straightforward’ than others and place a higher priority on the construction and projection of a firm and coherent identity. For instance, if we return to our earlier example, we could say that whereas the teddy boy style says its piece in a relatively direct and obvious way, and remains resolutely committed to a ‘finished’ meaning, to the signified, to what Kristeva calls ‘signification,’ punk style is in a constant state of assemblage, of flux. It introduces a heterogeneous set of signifiers which are liable to be superseded at any moment by others no less productive….Cut adrift from meaning, the punk style thus comes to approximate the state which Barthes has described as ‘a floating (the very form of the signifier); a floating which would not destroy anything but would be content simply to disorientate the Law’ (Barthes, 1977b).

(Hebdidge 126)

In post-punk, ambiguity often is the message—detached, purely symbolic aesthetics are transmitted through such floating signifiers. Like punk, post-punk genres of the late ‘70s/early ‘80s are also in a “constant state of assemblage,” with much variation between sub-genres—plenty of post-punk bands were not concerned with a signifier’s “‘finished’ meaning,” but instead, with its evocative capacity. Other
post-punk bands chose certain signifiers with the intention of allowing their signifieds and connoted meanings (however many) to work along with the music.

These genres draw from such a wide range of decades, movements, and media that signified meanings can become voided, but to the benefit of the genre’s aesthetic wealth. For example, New Romantic/New Wave groups like Spandau Ballet, Japan, and Visage suspend time by reassembling fragments or glimpses of the modernist period (vintage clothing from mixed eras, film noir cinematic conventions, Weimar-era artistic styles and cabaret aesthetics, etc.), without much serious regard for the potential connotations these signifiers may contain. In the case of Spandau Ballet’s “To Cut A Long Story Short,” unrelated assemblages of period- and culture-specific clothing, paired with moody lyrics about returning traumatized from an unnamed war, generate a link between the twentieth-century world wars and the New Romantic music scene. Steve Strange’s fascination with Victorian- and Edwardian-era fashion (the Victorian “Inverness” coat, the cravat, the Edwardian military suit) provides another link to the aristocratic opulence of an earlier time. These examples offer a “heterogeneous set of signifiers which are liable to be superseded at any moment,” but which also act together to resist any singular, overarching meaning—what are Spandau Ballet actually saying about the world wars? Why does Strange gravitate towards prewar aristocratic fashion at a time and place when large swaths of the British population faced unemployment and many young people had slim job prospects? The bottom line: there is no ideological stance or political philosophy to decipher here. The modernist fragments that bands like Visage and Japan use are floating signifiers, “content simply to disorientate the Law,” to make space for aestheticism, escapism, and contradiction. When placed alongside one another in a music video, album cover, or song, these otherwise unrelated floating signifiers, each belonging to a different period or aesthetic realm, become associated with a band or genre and come into dialogue with each other, but often purely on an aesthetic level. These signifiers are further absorbed into the nostalgia-tinged world of post-punk symbolism. Using retro modernist culture, art, manifestos, and aesthetics as raw materials, post-punk bands undertook the modernist project of creating cultural objects that reflected and spoke to the mood of their generation, one that inevitably shared certain concerns with the modernist period—political shifts, economic disruption, social upheaval, technological developments that birthed new art forms. The obvious difference between war-torn, early-twentieth-century Europe and late-postwar-era Europe is, of
course, the relative peace and economic prosperity achieved in the postwar era (excepting large parts of officially “poverty-free” East Germany and the Eastern Bloc). Yet somehow, despite material differences, post-punk musicians felt a familiarity, even if only an aesthetic or imagined one, with modernist cultural objects, the themes they expressed, and the world they captured.

The logic of the floating signifier can also explain how use of more politically-charged signs function within a post-punk cultural object. Mark Fisher’s analysis of Japan (whose name itself is a weighty sign) offers an example of a signifier with a direct signified that is somehow suspended when used in a cultural object that seeks an aesthetic over any political meaning:

Japan had pursued art pop into a sheer superficiality, which exceeded even their inspirations in its depthless aestheticism. *Tin Drum*, the 1981 album from which ‘Ghosts’ came, was art pop as Barthes pop, a conspicuous playing with signs for their own seductive sake….Sylvian, his heavily sprayed, peroxided fringe falling artfully over his Trever Horn specs, sits in a simulation of a simple Chinese dwelling, chopsticks in hand, as a Mao poster peels from the wall behind him…. Here he is, one of the last glam princes, and perhaps the most magnificent—his face and body rare and delicate works of art, not extrinsic to, or lesser than, the music, but forming an integral component of the overall concept. All—social, political, cultural—meaning seems to be drained from these references. (Fisher 37) (Figure 10)

For Fisher, the signs arranged on the *Tin Drum* album cover (chopsticks, bowl of rice, Mao Zedong poster) are most accurately read as purely aesthetic, “a conspicuous playing with signs for their own seductive sake.” Japan found inspiration in East Asian cultures, yet only on an aesthetic level—in the case of *Tin Drum*, Japan’s lyrics hold no blatant or hidden communist messages, and their invocation of China’s dark and famine-stricken Mao era do not strive to uphold the leader as an inspirational figure. Rather, according to Fisher, Sylvian poses in a highly stylized, artificial environment (a “simulation of a simple Chinese dwelling,” Mao poster and all) that recalls a particular historical period, its ideology, and
its human tragedies, but does not make gestures of nostalgia for or idealization of it. Instead, Japan pulls some signs from this period to craft a rather detached (even audacious), but visually striking, album cover. The floating signifier here is the Mao poster, whose static, signified meaning becomes almost negated when used in this purely aesthetic, pop-cultural context.

Post-punk musicians put themselves in dialogue with history by using these floating signifiers for their aesthetic currency. By creating and expanding portals, even if these portals lead to an ideologically ambiguous aesthetic-symbolic realm, post-punk musicians differed from most twentieth-century subcultural movements (again, taking hippie and punk subcultures as examples), whose styles pitted participants radically against historical narratives and put forth firm, coherent political messages. One could even argue that post-punk musicians (particularly New Romantics) were the first to cultivate an aesthetic through reflection on collective cultural memory, rather than through a resentment-driven dismantling of dominant culture, past or present. Instead, New Romantics were charmed and fascinated by iconic modernist images and used the period’s signs, charged and uncharged, to their advantage. Post-punk genres are, on some level, an exercise in playing with modernist signs and floating signifiers for aesthetics’ sake—some bands and artists are more provocative than others, some more successful than others, but what makes these genres so interesting is this habit of indiscriminately mixing signs for their evocative potential. Most often, no coherent meaning—no Nazi- or communist-adjacent ideological stance—is intended, only the sign’s minimal aesthetic capacity. (The “floating,” decontextualized, non-ideological nature of the signifier makes this possible). Over time, these genres (finding new life through post-punk-derivative contemporary musicians) have become self-referential—the same signs, now subsumed in the genre’s ethos, connote both post-punk and their modernist origins. The connections being established between overtly historical signifiers and modern music, and the diverse ways that bands and artists make these connections, with varying degrees of camp and provocation, are what distinguish post-punk genres from their late-‘70s and ‘80s contemporaries.

Visage - “The Damned Don’t Cry” - 1982

Visage was a rather short-lived side project for Club of Heroes DJ Rusty Egan and Ultravox’s Midge Ure and Billy Currie, but its distinctive aesthetics and abundant modernist-era citations perfectly
exemplified the New Romantic (and broader post-punk) mood. Steve Strange, one of the Blitz scene’s most recognizable figures (he was the Club of Heroes doorman), contributed vocals and extravagant fashion ensembles to the band’s image. Strange was Rusty Egan’s roommate, and as doorman, he was responsible for maintaining the retro-avant-garde ambience inside the Blitz by filtering out anyone in line (reputedly, with a snobbish tone) who didn’t dress daringly enough. Reynolds writes that Strange’s “… ever-changing image defined the Blitz Kid style: a blend of futuristic and retro elements that jumbled bolero hats, gold braid, toy-soldier coats, Russian cummerbunds, geometric haircuts and pill-box hats, along with stylized make-up that turned the face into an abstract canvas” (Rip It Up and Start Again 326).

As the public face for Club of Heroes, and as one of the more stylistically adventurous Blitz kids, he set the standard for Blitz and New Romantic fashion—his period vintage clothing pieces paired with voluminous hair and a full face of striking, asymmetrical makeup achieve a vaguely nostalgic, yet distinctly modern look. Whereas punks destroyed and distressed retro artifacts, Strange played up their retro-ness, embellishing old-fashioned silhouettes to make them confronting and bizarre, laying the groundwork for what the bolder side of ‘80s style would become.

In keeping with the Blitz’s overarching mood, Visage was all about theatricality and visions of old-fashioned glamour, and Strange was far more concerned with his fashion and image than with his contributions to the music. He was known as the dramatic, stylish frontman for Visage, at least while Rusty Egan, Midge Ure, and Billy Currie were involved enough in the project to supply catchy synth melodies, wistful lyrics, and compelling images of old-world decadence for the band’s album art and music videos. Visage’s aesthetics share a retro visual style with Ultravox’s “Vienna” music video, in which details (the mixed vintage clothing, cinematic undertone, and air of alienation) spanning the breadth of the modernist period overlap and generate a temporal ambiguity—are they invoking prewar Europe or 1920s, interwar Weimar Republic? Perhaps the only possible answer is: both and neither.

Again, we are within the post-punk realm, full of modernist floating signifiers and elusive meanings. This similarity is not surprising, given Ure’s and Currie’s involvement in Visage, and given the wider post-punk engagement with modernist artifacts and themes—however, Visage heightened the drama. The band’s first major UK hit, “Fade To Grey,” emblematizes London in 1980, the year that the Blitz scene
and its New Romantic bands began to gain attention from media, jumpstarting the UK’s brief-but-glorious synth-pop phase and initiating a lasting shift in public interest toward electronic music.

“Fade To Grey” encapsulates the New Romantic moment, with its range of aesthetic preoccupations and modernist reference points. It is incredibly dramatic—Strange’s fashion and makeup in the video, the softly-spoken French interludes, lyrics that send listeners themselves into an alienated, film noir frame of mind (“One man on a lonely platform / One case sitting by his side / Two eyes staring cold and silent / Shows fear as he turns to hide”—but these self-consciously indulgent, avant-garde details make it a New Romantic landmark (“Fade to Grey”). The track, and Visage as a project more broadly, merged modernist-era nostalgic glamour, avant-garde fashion, and electronic music in a way that inspired even Bowie, who would include Steve Strange in his quasi-surrealist “Ashes To Ashes” music video, also released in 1980. Even the album art for Visage’s 1980 eponymous debut album, to which “Fade To Grey” belongs, looks like a staged 1950s image of a couple dancing, but darkened in coloring to a more bluish-greyscale color palette (Figure 11). Again, several elements in the image—the uncharacteristic dark colors (normally, the ‘50s are connoted using pastel-colored, period clothing or advertisements for consumer brands), the dark makeup, and the woman’s cropped, New Wave hair—disrupt the image’s ‘50s theme. Signifiers from previous decades are used, but they are altered, resulting in an image that perfectly represents the early-’80s New Romantic moment. Small semiotic gestures such as these abound in Visage’s early music, which seems to exist solely to exude themes of yearning and alienation against the backdrop of pining synth melodies.

Visage was the preeminent Blitz band, in that it represented the full extent of the New Romantic inclination towards modernist nostalgia. Reynolds describes how Visage exemplifies the Blitz’s and New Romantics’ escapist aspirations:

Visage’s timing was perfect: the Blitz scene was the vanguard of a general shift in pop culture back to fantasy and escapism. According to Strange, the new breed—now confusingly known as
New Romantics and Futurists and Blitz Kids—were ‘people who work nine to five and then go out and live their fantasies. They’re glad to be dressed up and escaping work and all the greyness and depression.’ And yet, weirdly, for all its brisk electrodisco rhythms, Visage’s music was sepia-toned and at times almost funereal, with Strange’s vocals exuding a fey sadness. Songs like ‘Fade to Grey’ and ‘The Damned Don’t Cry’ conjured what Mark Fisher called ‘the Euro-aesthete’s “exhaustion from life,”’ especially in tandem with the videos, which evoked a pre-war desolation derived from *Cabaret* and Fritz Lang. (*Rip It Up and Start Again* 326-7)

The Blitz indeed represented a “vanguard” of culture, teetering on the edge of the postwar era, its proponents clutching onto inspiring modernist remnants, while detecting and expressing an acute anxiety over the looming neoliberal era. New Romantics were at once nostalgic and futuristic, mournful for the modernist past and enthused by possible futures; they were simultaneously technophobic and technophilic, full of both modern alienation and enthusiasm at the prospect of breathing one last breath into twentieth-century British culture, at initiating the last great *New Wave*. The way Reynolds describes such apparent contradictions in Visage’s (and other post-punk) music draws our attention to its underlying nostalgic quality—“for all its brisk electrodisco rhythms, Visage’s music was sepia-toned and at times almost funereal, with Strange’s vocals exuding a fey sadness.” Death, isolation, and cinematic touches—among them, sepia-toned images—feature in Visage’s music video for “The Damned Don’t Cry,” which, like Ultravox’s early track entitled “Hiroshima Mon Amour” or its “Vienna” music video, takes cues from postwar cinema, the most obvious reference being the track’s title, derived from a 1950 Joan Crawford film noir of the same name (Figure 12). The film noir citation continues throughout the music video, with its images of train platforms enveloped in smoke, men in World War II-style Navy uniforms, and the overarching “plot” of the video, so to speak, in which an isolated Steve Strange wanders through an old, wood-paneled train car, looking for someone, or perhaps looking to escape himself—“Time to close my mind and drift off / To other scenes…I see myself in rain-soaked windows / In a different place” (“The

*Figure 12. Film poster for The Damned Don’t Cry* (1950)
Damned Don’t Cry”). Instead, he encounters nightmarish visions, “nameless towns with faceless people,” or his own isolated self-image (“The Damned Don’t Cry”). These lyrics speak of escape from an ageless modern alienation and invoke the condition of Weimar-era Germans, postwar veterans, and early-’80s working-class youth alike. Reynolds identifies the thread that connects these eras—Visage’s expression of a “pre-war desolation derived from Cabaret and Fritz Lang” draws a line from Visage to film noir to Fritz Lang, whose iconic Weimar-era films (Dr. Mabuse the Gambler (1922), Metropolis (1927), and M (1931), to name a few) tremendously influenced both the themes and visual aesthetics of American film noir, and who also directed a number of film noir classics (The Woman in the Window (1944), Scarlet Street (1945), The Big Heat (1953)). As such, Visage connects itself to the Weimar cinematic legacy, both thematically (it grapples with isolation, decadence, alienation, escapism, distrust—all that is dark and uncertain, yet infinitely poetic) and aesthetically, in its use of vintage 1920s and ‘40s clothing, as well as stylistic features derived from Weimar cinema and refined in film noir (obscuring smoke, high-contrast shadows, uncanny camera angles and blocking).

Besides referencing Weimar cinema by means of film noir, “The Damned Don’t Cry” video mixes these decades together anachronistically (in Fisher’s sense of the word), achieving the same brand of temporal ambiguity as Ultravox’s “Vienna” music video. “The Damned Don’t Cry” even acts as a sort of sequel for “Vienna,” which first introduced this indiscriminate blending of eras to the New Wave oeuvre. Some of the same techniques are used here—for one, in the opening shot, Steve Strange wears a Victorian-style Inverness coat that looks vaguely vampirical (along the lines of cult classic Dark Shadows’s Barnabas Collins, perhaps?) and appears immediately at odds with his voluminous ‘80s hair and the 1940s-reminiscent train platform on which he stands (Figure 13). There are various incongruous signifiers of this kind throughout the video—women wearing 1920s cloche hats and long strings of pearls, Strange’s Victorian-style coat and (perhaps World War I-era) white military suit—that each immediately signify a particular period. As with “Vienna,” we must take the video’s temporal ambiguity at face value and look at the
aesthetic effect of the music video—it assembles a cohesive projection of the modernist era’s most iconic images; it opens up a portal to this golden age of twentieth-century style, collectively disowned in most pop culture by the late ‘70s. As Reynolds writes, “Mark Fisher argues that the pop-group-as-portal works most potently when the connections being made cut across ‘different cultural domains’: from music to fiction or cinema or visual art” (Retromania 133). Visage mastered this portal-creating across “cultural domains”—their chosen aesthetics and signifiers were culturally recognizable enough to make an impression on listeners, but still unusual enough to distinguish them from the majority of pop bands (at least, those outside of post-punk genres), whose portals often led to other music within a particular genre or trajectory. The portals that more intentional New Romantics like Visage established for listeners were successful for this reason—they struck the right balance between popular images stored in collective memory and modernist-era cultural output, ranging from decadent ‘20s Berlin cabaret styles to highly psychological Weimar cinema to film noir, with its wealth of era-defining fashion and subtle socio-political commentary. Although not as theoretical or political as the average portal within the Industrial music genre, it is worth noting that New Romantic portals provided rich aesthetic reference points that could be considered needlessly old-fashioned, or even bourgeois, for the average Briton living through the early Thatcher period. And yet, the New Romantic scene’s stylistic “frivolity” justified the entire scene—on the whole, it promoted aesthetic escapism, glamour, and nostalgia at a time when everyday life in the UK was the opposite. On some level, New Romantic and New Wave were escapist, but on another level, they embodied Fisher’s concept of “popular modernism” by establishing portals to the kinds of aforementioned “high cultural” objects and themes from the modernist period that had been momentarily discarded amid the social movements and cultural changes of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

New Romantic musicians had a keen eye for aesthetics and eras—they were drawn to nostalgic visuals, but were also futuristic in much the same way as modernist artists, meaning, they experimented with the formal and aesthetic boundaries of pop music using electronic instruments, the newly-affordable technology of their time. In this way, New Romantic represented a return to the early twentieth century, a re-enactment of the modernist project, in that its proponents seemed to feel an aesthetic, even a spiritual, kinship with modernist artists, cultural objects, aesthetics, and drive towards formal experimentation, as well as with its recurring themes of modern (often urban) alienation, psychological instability, challenges
to traditional value systems and lifestyles, and institutional mistrust. There was a longing for the world these cultural objects depicted and evoked—one riddled with political volatility, war, and unraveling societies, but one that simultaneously witnessed a “golden age” of culture with immense artistic innovation, iconic fashion, and new forms of popular culture. This music was marked by some degree of internal contradiction—it was simultaneously nostalgic in aesthetic and futuristic in sound, escapist and culturally involved (insofar as it expressed contemporary alienation using modernist-era aesthetics), and historically referential in its use of signs, without being ideological (many of its signifiers remain ambiguous, “floating”). New Romantic itself floats and toggles—between past and future, between modernism and synthesizers, and between London under Thatcher and Europe amid the world wars.
Sheffield’s Dystopian Soundscapes: Leftist Musings in Early Cabaret Voltaire

“Baader Meinhof” - 1974-'78

Of all the northern English cities significant for music history (Liverpool and Manchester, to name a couple), Sheffield spawned bands on the more experimental end of the spectrum, bands that would have an extensive influence on electronic music. Cabaret Voltaire is, perhaps, the most significant of these bands—their musical trajectory ranges from their earlier noise and sample-based avant-garde compositions to their later, more approachable industrial dance music, and their influences span from postwar dystopian novels and modernist art to Sheffield’s urban geography. Simon Reynolds writes that Sheffield in the ‘70s was known for its heavy steel mining and manufacturing industries and corresponding urban industrial areas:

…its enduring popular image is grim and grey, based on the inner city and the industrialized East End. ‘That’s where I lived with my parents,’ says Richard H. Kirk of Cabaret Voltaire. ‘You looked down into the valley and all you could see was blackened buildings. At night in bed you could hear the big drop forges crunching away.’ (Rip It Up and Start Again 150)

As Kirk describes, Sheffield’s cityscape and ethos were shaped by its industry. Even the city’s post-punk musicians adopted synthesizers and electronic instrumentation techniques rather early on—in the early ‘70s, in Cabaret Voltaire’s case. Economic deprivation was not at the core of their drive towards innovation (the city’s steel industry somewhat bolstered it against the wave of factory closures and unemployment that hit other northern English cities in the late ‘70s) but rather, a desire to critique systems of control through radical, futuristic music, taking cues from Brian Eno, William S. Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, and Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film adaptation of Anthony Burgess’s classic dystopian novel, A Clockwork Orange (Rip It Up and Start Again 151). For many Sheffield youths, Wendy Carlos’s iconic soundtrack for the film was their first exposure to electronic music, and for those who went on to make music themselves, it had an enduring significance. In a city whose spirit consisted of working-class pride, leftist politics, and industrial labor, however, creative Sheffield youth went out of their way to immerse themselves in the worlds of glam rock and science fiction—in Reynolds’s words, “If there was deprivation, it was cultural” (Rip It Up and Start Again 150).
Industrial music scholar S. Alexander Reed’s book, *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music*, includes a chapter on Northern English Industrial bands, devoting a hefty section to Cabaret Voltaire and the Sheffield post-punk scene—Clock DVA, the Human League, and ABC, among others. Reed quotes Cabaret Voltaire’s Chris Watson, who describes the cultural drought of sorts in Sheffield by the mid-twentieth century: ‘Chris Watson of the Sheffield band Cabaret Voltaire recalls in the late 1960s ‘being taken on school trips round the steelworks…just seeing it as a vision of hell, you know, never ever wanting to do that.’ This outdated hell smoldered in spite of the city’s supposed growth and improvement…” (Reed 59). That a cityscape bearing the traces of mines and factories served as the conceptual and sonic-aesthetic inspiration for what would come to be known as *Industrial* music is fairly obvious. Reed argues, however, that this is too reductive an analysis for a band as intentional, even intellectual, as Cabaret Voltaire. Instead, he suggests we look at the way Cabaret Voltaire expose mechanisms of social control enabled by modern technology, both in Sheffield and beyond, through samples-, sounds-, and lyrics-as-signifiers—through their *industrial* quality. He writes,

If the likes of Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle [of Kingston upon Hull, Yorkshire] experienced the surrounding signs of northern England’s industrialization as limiting, then we shouldn’t merely hear their music’s burnt-out soundscape as just a vague reflection of the city, assuming that somehow geography “shapes” music. Instead, we can understand the industrialness of their music as a specific reaction against the perceived control…Not only were the steel mills hellish and the new highrises faceless, but together they contributed to a lurking cultural and financial depression—one that the government attempted to answer with ubiquitous offices that arose to employ a generation of laid-off workers and despondent students. (Reed 60-61)

Reed argues that Cabaret Voltaire reacted to both the political conditions that shaped Sheffield and a vague impression of the city’s textural quality in their music. In contrast with bands like Einstürzende Neubauten, who used scrap metal and hammers to create an industrial sound (in the most literal sense of the word), Cabaret Voltaire relied on samples, tape loops, and oscillators to create multilayered soundscapes that somewhat resemble a collage. In fact, their use of samples was inspired by experimental Beat-era novelist William S. Burroughs’s “cut-up” method, in which signs are decontextualized, juxtaposed, and layered to “deprogram” readers from “control machines,” which Reed describes as such:
…he uses the term control machine to refer to technology, religion, government, and language. The control machine as an idea can be seen as a peculiar version of Debord’s spectacle, or of what Marx calls “the whole superstructure,” or of philosopher Theodor Adorno’s notion of “the culture industry.”…In order to hold dominion, a control machine needs to inhabit a stable domain, and so the gross nonsense of Burroughs’s writing denies the control machine any kind of stable space. (Reed 28-29)

Cabaret Voltaire adopted Burroughs’s cut-up method for music, replacing decontextualized words, phrases, and signs with decontextualized samples and found sounds, effectively “denying the control machine a stable space” to inhabit within each track. Sampling in this contextually detached, Burroughsian fashion is a semiotic exercise in itself, one that would become a trademark of the more intellectual and experimental strains of Industrial music.

The band’s quasi-collage compositional technique also demonstrates the conceptual inspiration they found in one of the most radical, transgressive art movements of the early twentieth century: Dada. The band’s name is even a potent signifier—Cabaret Voltaire was the Dada gathering-place and performance space in World War I-era and interwar Zurich. Burroughs’s cut-up method is often traced back to 1916, with Tristan Tzara’s radical poem performance there, in which he pulled words from a hat at random to form phrases by chance (Reed 33)—similar to Duchamp’s assertion that his work, The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, was at last completed after dust had accumulated on the forms inside and its glass case was smashed during transit. In these Dada artworks, an element of chance disrupts the creative process, but also expands it—there is some level of preordained irrationality involved. We can understand Cabaret Voltaire’s abstract, jarring soundscapes in the same spirit—they are intentionally irrational, taking after Dada and Burroughs. Dada was a peculiar reference point for the band, given that the movement took place during World War I and the interwar period nearly sixty years before. The world that Dadaists inhabited was entirely different from Chris Watson, Richard H. Kirk, and Stephen Mallinder’s 1970s Sheffield environment, although Dada art dealt with themes that may have felt familiar—industrialization, modern alienation, leftist critiques of capitalist control, rapid technological development, anxieties about technology, but also fascination with its potential. Watson initially discovered Dada in his formative teenage years:
Chris Watson was a Dada fiend who’d stumbled on a book about the movement as a teenager in 1970, an experience that ‘just hit me so hard it changed the way I’ve thought ever since.’ Dada’s assault on meaning and taste, along with its techniques of collage and photomontage, fired the group’s imagination. ‘To us, it was Dada to call ourselves Cabaret Voltaire, ‘cos we were ripping them off,’ Watson told NME. (Rip It Up and Start Again 156)

For Watson, naming the band Cabaret Voltaire was a sort of play on Duchamp’s readymade concept, “ripping off” a found object by placing it in a gallery context and providing a conceptual rationale. To elaborate, “Cabaret Voltaire” was already a signifier, and by reusing it with a conceptual intent, the band added another layer of signification—by now, this word combination is perhaps (at least among post-punk audiences) primarily associated with the band and secondarily with the Zurich Dadaists. In terms of form, Cabaret Voltaire applied the Dada ethos and its methods to music—the cut-up via sampling, morbid lyrics on their earlier music, provocative track and album titles (“Fascist Police State,” “Do The Mussolini (Headkick),” Voice Of America, Red Mecca), and their discordant, sample-littered experimental sound.

Cabaret Voltaire’s distinctive sound and method opened up a “portal” for listeners (among them, later post-punk musicians) to some rather intellectual reference points: Dada, including its leftist political manifesto advocating disorder and anti-logic, and Burroughs’s experimental, sometimes dystopian, fiction. In particular, the portal to Dada that Cabaret Voltaire established demonstrates a fascination with what were recognized as historical art movements by the 1970s, and more broadly, with European modernist aesthetics. Like both Burroughs and the Dadaists, Cabaret Voltaire were political leftists, but unlike Punks, they didn’t use blatantly political lyrics to shock (“God save the queen, the fascist regime” seemed a bit too obvious). In a 2013 interview for the British cultural magazine The Quietus, Kirk recalls, “We weren’t fans of people who used politics in a sloganeering way, like The Clash—it was too unsubtle for us. Mal [Mallinder] tended to write about alienation and paranoia” (Doran). Their semi-ambiguous critiques are instead scattered across tracks, small enough to be contained in a single sample, a few lines of lyrics delivered in a monotone voice, or a split-second of ironically juxtaposed sounds and samples. Often the source of the sample is unrecognizable, but its “deprogramming” effect remains, according to Reed and Genesis P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle, the band cited with inventing Industrial music:

Taking a cue from Burroughs…Genesis P-Orridge writes, ‘No matter how short, or apparently
unrecognizable a ‘sample’ might be in linear time perception, I believe it must, inevitably, contain within it (and [make] accessible through it), the sum total of absolutely everything its original context represented, communicated, or touched in any way.’…in sampling and cutting up, the disruption of time brings the voice of control to the fore while shedding its content. In this way, it can serve as an all-points bulletin to alert listeners to the insidiousness of its source. (Reed 60)

The sample has an ideological effect insofar as it is unrecognizable but clearly enough comes from some ubiquitous news or entertainment media source. Reed explains that the sample disrupts our perception of musical time with a glitchy interference that “brings the voice of control to the fore while shedding its content”—in effect, the sample is not about its linguistic meaning, but about disorienting the listener with a decontextualized, sonic glimpse of a political or social “voice of control.”

Perhaps the best example within the Cabaret Voltaire oeuvre is “The Voice of America / Damage Is Done” from 1980, which begins with a sample from a 1966 Beatles concert, in which the Memphis police deputy informed audiences, “you will go to…the first-aid man, and he will furnish you with earplugs, so as to keep you from having a headache…We have a detention room set up within the colosseum…We will not allow any dancing, running up and down the aisle. Is that clear with everybody?” (“The Voice Of America / Damage Is Done”). A sizzling beat and other synthesized sounds, among them a gong-like, hammer-on-metal sound, drift in and mingle with each other. Decontextualized from its source and placed within this futuristic soundscape, the deputy’s words seem strangely dystopian—the “voice of control” within the sample becomes perceptible. In a way, the sample operates as a sonic floating signifier, minimal enough that it holds no precise meaning, but instead adapts to its context and redirects the listener’s attention first to its content and then to its effect. Used in this way, the sample-as-floating-signifier enables the listener to shift in status from a passive consumer of music into a participant, an interpreter. When it comes to early Cabaret Voltaire (i.e., music rarely described as pleasant for the ear), the listening experience is more about intentional listening and theorizing than consumption and enjoyment.

The band’s early music (pre-1983) requires close listener attention not only because the sample-heavy form and cut-up method create an unconventional sound, but also because the meaning is ambiguously political, almost detached. “Baader Meinhof,” one of Cabaret Voltaire’s early tracks from
the mid- to late-‘70s, demonstrates the extent to which the band’s early music posits political questions without endorsing any one political ideology or agenda, and even without explicitly commenting on contemporary political figures. The target of their political discontent and paranoia remains abstract and their questions more nuanced—Cabaret Voltaire understood that political control and manipulation are not enacted by a single party or figure, but by the entire apparatus—by the capitalist engine, both private and public sector, and by culture industry creators and consumers alike. All enable these “voices of control” to varying degrees. Reynolds writes that the band’s politics “were of the anarcho-paranoid kind. They blended a Yorkshire-bred bloody-minded intransigence in the face of badge-holders and bureaucrats… This almost superstitious attitude to power as a demonic, omnipresent force was boosted by reading Burroughs and absorbing his notion of ‘Control’ (*Rip It Up and Start Again* 171). Reynolds is right—their suspicions of political and social control are steeped in Burroughs and dystopian fiction, and their work expresses suspicions towards the whole system, not only the government. In “Baader Meinhof,” Cabaret Voltaire consider the Red Army Faction, a West German communist militant group that engaged in terrorist activities in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The RAF originally grew out of the leftist student movement of the ‘60s, uniting around their central anti-imperialist, communist claim that West Germany was still a fascist state run by former Nazis, and that they had to arm themselves against the state. They carried out bombings, assassinations, arson, robberies, and kidnappings, as well as received training and support from the Stasi, the East German secret police.

The track opens with a German TV or radio broadcast commenting on members of the RAF who had been arrested and put into prison, where they all committed suicide. This sample also exposes a voice of control—news media, seeking to maintain its hold on the individual’s attention. The sample is in German, but the newscaster’s cadence and the white-noise quality of the recording still clearly mark it as a radio or TV broadcast. Despite the potential language barrier, listeners are distanced from the sample’s linguistic meaning, their attention instead directed toward the textural quality of the medium and the voice of control it represents: news media, those with the authority to speak to an audience, and those who strategically control which information will be transmitted and which omitted.

Among a series of sporadic, horn-like, synthesized sounds, a voice reads out the following:

Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader both died in a prison cell. Who found the government
killed Baader? Who pulled the trigger? International loudspeakers that told the world of their exploits stay silent about the legal mass-murder known as war. Urban guerrillas seeking solutions with bombs and bullets. Gun runners. Hijackers. Bank robbers. The Baader-Meinhof army are the descendants of a previous generation of fanatics. Do they feel the guilt of their Nazi ancestors, or are they the bored middle classes, seeking outlets for their frustrations? (“Baader Meinhof”)

Warlike, apocalyptic sounds frame these musings, a sonic version of an “urban guerrilla” landscape along the lines of *A Clockwork Orange* that mirrors the lyrics. The band’s leftist upbringing and engagement with Burroughs show through not only in their conspiratorial suggestion that Baader’s and Meinhof’s suicides may have actually been state-organized murders, but also in their provocative description of “legal mass-murder known as war,” which aims a vague criticism at “international loudspeakers”—either politicians or news media, or both. Their distrust of information from centralized sources meant to appear reliable (i.e., bourgeois and bureaucratic sources with a vested interest in maintaining control) is the kind of “anarcho-paranoid” attitude (in Reynolds’s words) that is characteristic of Burroughs and other classic dystopian novels (*Brave New World* and *1984*, perhaps). Cabaret Voltaire made their music in the lineage of these earlier, seminal dystopian works, while also showing interest in a heritage that is not their own: German heritage, with its fraught questions about secondhand and collective guilt over Nazism, and (at least in West Germany) *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”). Members of the Baader-Meinhof group considered the same questions about postwar Germany: who is responsible? How can all remnants of Nazism be purged from West Germany under capitalism, given the prevailing American (“imperialist”) economic and cultural influence? The band uses the same leftist language as the Red Army Faction but finds no solution or clearly defined object of blame—they criticize biased news media for casting the Baader-Meinhof terrorist acts in a different light than state-sanctioned wars with massive numbers of casualties, but they also acknowledge the group’s naiveté for turning to violence to express their political discontent (“Urban guerrillas seeking solutions with bombs and bullets”). They even conclude the track with the controversial question, “Are these the heroes or the villains of the modern world?” (“Baader Meinhof”). By extension, Cabaret Voltaire are asking, *what place should far-leftism occupy in the world? What can we trust about the narratives we are being sold, and who benefits from our trust?*
As a whole, Cabaret Voltaire engaged with Dada (meaning, with modernism, more broadly) on two levels: conceptually and thematically. The formal qualities of their early music—including their irrational, collage-like sound and use of the Dada-via-Burroughs cut-up method—work to convey their anti-capitalist, paranoid, leftist messages, which themselves were unconsciously or consciously informed by Dada, Burroughs, and other leftist artists. As discussed, the sample itself has a semiotic dimension and can magnify a mechanism or voice of control when decontextualized from its original source. In this sense, for Cabaret Voltaire, the form truly *is* the message. With this conceptual and thematic approach to Industrial music, the band intentionally used nostalgia as a constructive force, allowing the influences they chose to remain full signifiers with deliberate meanings. They actively invoke particular methods and political ideologies of the modernist period, rather than indulging aesthetically in its physical artifacts (clothes, design, cinema) as the New Romantics did. While Ultravox’s image as a band fused their futuristic synthesizer music (informed by the “Germanic” sounds of Bowie, Eno, and Kraftwerk) with a nostalgic, cinematic aesthetic steeped in Film Noir, Cabaret Voltaire’s nostalgic impulse took shape in the methods (sampling, the cut-up) they borrowed from radical modernist art movements like Dada, which they adapted for music. As such, Cabaret Voltaire’s invocations of Dada, Burroughs, and dystopian novels are intentional semiotic gestures and are not entirely motivated by aesthetics (as opposed to Japan’s detached, apolitical use of signs, for example). Ironically, Cabaret Voltaire’s music evokes a sense of paranoid technophobia—likely informed by Dada, Burroughs, and their technologically-reliant, industrial Sheffield environment—despite being made with synthesizers, oscillators, and other electronic instruments.
As industrial music goes, German duo Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft (commonly abbreviated as “DAF,” for obvious reasons) represents the more percussive, danceable strain of the genre, dubbed “electronic body music,” as opposed to “noise” industrial à la Berlin’s Einstürzende Neubauten or East Yorkshire’s Throbbing Gristle. DAF was formed in Düsseldorf, capital of the Nordrhein-Westfalen region of (then) West Germany, where some of the most influential Krautrock bands, Neu! (Düsseldorf), Can (Cologne), and Kraftwerk (Düsseldorf), had first experimented with electronic instrumentation in the late 1960s/early ‘70s. Nordrhein-Westfalen is historically the most industrialized German state, with its coal mining and steel industries, located mainly in the Rhine-Ruhr region, providing energy, materials, and economic stimulus to West Germany during the postwar era. In this respect, the region shares much in common with Northern England, whose heavily industrialized cities experienced a general economic downturn as the late-postwar-era shift from industrial to postindustrial economies dawned. Nordrhein-Westfalen experienced a similar economic transformation and displacement beginning in the late ‘60s, but in contrast with large, Northern English cities like Sheffield, Düsseldorf did not have a cultural or artistic deprivation, but an abundance of both.

Rudi Esch’s Electri_City: The Düsseldorf School of Electronic Music provides an overview of Düsseldorf’s contributions to electronic music through interviews with musicians, producers, record label managers, and others within or inspired by Düsseldorf’s electronic music scenes. DAF’s tour manager, Jäki Eldorado, describes Düsseldorf as a sort of cultural inverse of Sheffield: “Düsseldorf always had this elitist artistic flair; it was all about being chic and elegant and even the local punk bands looked like high school students….In Düsseldorf you had more of a chance to come across an art performance than an honestly felt ‘no future’ protest” (Esch 210). In a city characterized by its “elitist artistic flair,” one would expect a music scene comprised of bands with relatively bourgeois origins like Kraftwerk, which saw itself not only as a musical act, but as an art ensemble drawing from a variety of media. For Krautrock musicians in the late ‘60s and through the ‘70s, this was largely the case—analogue synthesizers were large, expensive instruments and only became more affordable towards the late ‘70s. DAF, on the other hand,
used self-aware, critical, provocative aesthetics and an experimental approach to the synthesizer that would become emblematic of West German post-punk by the early ‘80s.

As in the UK, punk in West Germany gave way to post-punk by the late ‘70s/early ‘80s, leaving behind its underlying critical, DIY spirit for post-punks to pick up on. These younger musicians, however, ditched traditional instruments in favor of synthesizers, sequencers, and drum machines. DAF represents this post-punk fusion of punk’s DIY attitude, socio-political critique, and provocation with an electronic sound. Although Kraftwerk were one of the first bands to record music using only electronic instruments, DAF did not view themselves as part of the Kraftwerk or Düsseldorf electronic tradition—they wanted to distinguish themselves by using synthesizers in a less calculated way. As Robert Görl of DAF commented in hindsight, ‘At that time in Europe there were only rich guys with their huge synthesizers, the guys like Kraftwerk or Tangerine Dream. They always used their equipment in a really accurate manner and…we really disliked this kind of approach. We wanted to use it in a completely different way, the free way.’ (Stubbs 419). While also hinting at a class and generational gap among Düsseldorf musical circles by the late ‘70s, Görl’s remarks demonstrate how DAF strove to place themselves sonically in opposition to the electronic instrumentation of musicians born a decade earlier in the late 1940s. Simon Reynolds elaborates on their efforts: “DAF espoused techno-primitivism. ‘Most bands get a synthesizer and their first idea is to tune it!’ Görl told Melody Maker. ‘They want a clean normal sound. They don’t work with the POWER you get from a synthesizer…We want to bring together this high technique with body power so you have the past time mixed with the future’” (Rip It Up and Start Again 340).

DAF presented a harsher, more “powerful” alternative to Kraftwerk’s precise, tame synthesizer melodies, and their visual iconography, filled with politically-charged signs and images conveying “body power” also contributed to their provocative, contrarian persona (Figure 14).

The band experimented with more blatantly-charged aesthetic content, taking Kraftwerk’s ambiguous, subtle nods to Nazi aesthetics and technological ambitions to a more confronting and
controversial level. By invoking the Nazi history with decontextualized semiotic gestures and floating signifiers, DAF commented on the contemporary West German state and its failure to adequately address the Nazi past. Like Cabaret Voltaire, DAF were leftists who used provocation and semiotic gestures to raise political questions—specifically, questions about Nazi heritage, German identity, contemporary fascist tendencies and policies of the West German state, and the Cold War-era German division. DAF engaged with distinctly German postwar questions by using fascist signifiers and gestures that, once detached from their original, modernist-era ideological framework, may reassume their “pre-ideological states,” to use philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek’s words (*The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*).

DAF’s name itself represents the ironic, critical tone consistent throughout their work—“Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft” means “German-American Friendship,” which alludes to the actual postwar German-American “friendship” premised upon American economic influence over West Germany via the Marshall Plan (which helped to rebuild West Germany and, in part, provided supplies to West Berliners during the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49) and the mass-export of American consumer goods and entertainment (intended to “deprogram” the German people from fascism, share with them the American values of “freedom and liberty,” and band together with them to, yet again, “make the world safe for democracy”). Görl recalls that the band wrote possible names on pieces of paper and voted on them, ultimately deciding on Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft because of its “provocative” and “political” overtones (Esch 208). DAF vocalist Gabi Delgado-López, a Spanish immigrant whose family fled Francisco Franco’s dictatorship in the ‘60s, remarks further on the political dimensions of the band’s name:

> Back in those days if you drove through East Germany you could read all those posters: ‘Long live the German-Soviet Friendship.’ In contrast, we had slogans such as ‘Drink Coca-Cola.’ That’s how it was in the East and West, we always saw the parallels. We wanted a hard and provocative name, and DAF was exactly that. It was abstract and served as political propaganda. (Esch 209) (Figure 15)

According to Delgado-López, the name refers not only to West German political dynamics, but to the international political climate at large—it comments on Cold War-era power relations from a critical distance, likening the “German-Soviet Friendship” to a “German-American Friendship,” and by extension, likening the Soviets, with their massive, socialist Eastern Bloc, to the Americans, with their
global military presence and postwar pop-cultural influence (at least in West Germany). Although put vaguely, Delgado-López seems to view the ubiquitous advertisements for American consumer goods in West Germany as perhaps an even more pernicious form of propaganda than the self-evidently pro-Soviet posters in East Germany—an advertisement subliminally instructing passersby to “Drink Coca-Cola” induces them to also accept a degree of American cultural dominance, with attractively-packaged consumer goods and pop-cultural objects offered in exchange. In this sense, Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft as a name operates as what Delgado-López calls “political propaganda” by revealing, in the format of Soviet-style propaganda, the postwar political and economic dynamics between West Germany and the U.S.

The Anglo-American influence on postwar German culture was especially glaring in the sphere of music—German musicians often imitated popular Anglo-American music styles and sang in English. Even a number of early-’70s Krautrock and kosmische Musik (cosmic music) bands experimenting with more avant-garde, synthesized sounds sang in English and used English track titles. It wasn’t until post-punk, termed “Neue Deutsche Welle” (“New German Wave”) in Germany, that German musicians would return to singing in their own language, thereby probing its fraught connotations and unique musical capacities. Görl describes the significance DAF’s German lyrics had on their image, as well as on the reception and perception of German music both within Germany and abroad: “It was important that we sung in German; that such progressive music was possible in the German language was a big thing for us. Up until then the Brits and Americans had the monopoly on modern music. We broke their domination” (Esch 218). DAF’s German vocals were experienced as a breakthrough, one step in reconstituting a wholesome, post-Nazi German identity. As Görl suggests, the sudden proliferation of the German language in music—used by both Germans and non-Germans—in the late ‘70s/early ‘80s evidenced a burgeoning new German culture, led by a younger generation that engaged with the Nazi past through irony and decontextualization, instead of avoiding it entirely. Although British post-punks also

Figure 15. “We force peace: Month of German-Soviet Friendship 1950”
flirted heavily with both Nazi signifiers (e.g., Joy Division, Siouxsie Sioux, Nitzer Ebb) and the German language in their music (as discussed, Ultravox’s “Herr X” and “Alles Klar,” or the German interlude in the Sisters of Mercy song, “Marian”), any Nazi flirtations on the part of Germans had a far more provocative effect, given the verboten status of such charged signifiers and the country’s uncomfortable relative proximity to the National Socialist period (only thirty-five years stood between 1980 and 1945). Reynolds comments on DAF’s German-language vocals, which at times approximated a Hitler tone or cadence, despite being sung by Delgado-López, a non-native German speaker:

Even Delgado’s sinister vocal style seemed too evocative of Germany’s recent past, as he himself acknowledged: ‘The singing…isn’t like rock ’n’ roll or pop singing. It’s sometimes like in a Hitler speech, not a Nazi thing, but it’s in the German character, that CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! way of speaking.’ For DAF, the German language’s precise rhythms fitted better with their strict rhythmic regime of sequenced synth-pulses. (Rip It Up and Start Again 340)

DAF probed the extent to which the German language itself still had residual Nazi connotations, regardless of the lyrics’ varied linguistic content and meaning. Delgado-López acknowledges this quality in his singing, as though it were intentional—for him, the “Hitler speech” element is simply “in the German character,” meaning the language’s general, perceived “harsh” sound (to those who don’t speak German or who learn it as a foreign language) almost cannot be distinguished from Hitler’s raging speech voice. While Delgado-López stops short of admitting that his vocals sound vaguely Hitler-esque (instead, he insists they sound characteristically German), he invokes the preeminent German postwar question: To what extent did Hitler and Nazism permanently imbue the German language with sinister undertones? Perhaps this Hitler-voice sonic signifier throughout DAF’s music can actually be understood as an attempt to redeem the German language, to drain its Nazi associations by decoupling fascist ideology from fascist signifiers. It is possible that Delgado-López’s vocal style actually presents a radically pre-Nazi iteration of the German language, all by revealing, in a pop-cultural context, the reflexive connotations the language itself is capable of evoking. As an example, Delgado-López’s Hitler voice imitation reaches a peak on the track, “Die Lustigen Stiefel,” from DAF’s second album, Die Kleinen und die Bösen (“The Small Ones and the Evil Ones”), released in 1980. The track's content is also quite provocative—the only lyric throughout is “die lustigen Stiefel marschieren über Polen” (“the merry jackboots march all over Poland”)

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("Die Lustigen Stiefel"). DAF attempts an obvious provocation here, but what is most interesting about this track are the brief moments when Delgado-López bursts into a frenzied, enraged, and unintelligible Hitler voice, an imitation of his orating voice, but exaggerated to a near-comical extent. This sonic signifier is immediately recognizable because it is made so extreme—it critically exposes Hitler’s voice as absurd and allows the listener a minimal delight in being able to identify this signifier. When signifiers are politically charged, however, what does this do to the music? Can the logic of the floating signifier explain how DAF’s use of a loaded, ideological sign in an artistic context actually voids its fascist dimensions?

the floating fascist signifier: “Der Mussolini” - 1981

Over the years, there has been widespread academic debate on how fascist signifiers used in art and cultural objects should be interpreted, whether they should be used at all, and whether they risk inspiring actual fascism. Some theorists have argued the latter—for example, Susan Sontag wrote that any use of a fascist signifier, regardless of its detached context or ironic intention, only results in widespread public desensitization to fascism (Reed 196). In short, for Sontag, what looks like fascism is fascism, or at least, its signifiers keep fascism’s taboo “allure” alive—by extension, an enjoyment of fascist aesthetics indicates an enjoyment of fascist ideology. This theory seems to presume, at least partly, that the public cannot distinguish ironic invocations of fascism from real-existing-fascism, so such politically-charged signs should be left in the past altogether. In complete contrast, Slavoj Žižek posits that fascist signs, when used ironically in decontextualized, pop-cultural or artistic objects, become voided floating signifiers, their aesthetic capacities separated from their prior ideological meanings. Žižek has discussed these themes frequently over the years, using as examples the ‘80s Slovenian industrial/metal band Laibach and ‘90s German metal band Rammstein, the former of which set a tactical blueprint for the latter. In a 1997 essay entitled, “Plečnik avec Laibach,” scholar Andrew Herscher considers Žižek’s various comments and writings on Laibach, compiling them into an explanation of Žižek’s complex claim that Laibach actually subverts fascist signifiers and dismantles fascist ideology with their music. The method of analysis Žižek presents (and Herscher explains) can also help us understand DAF’s use of
ideologically-charged signs and gestures—in fact, DAF formed two years before Laibach and, in many ways, first tested the boundaries and capacities of fascist signifiers in a musical context.

To begin, Herscher describes how the floating signifier (the original, “pre-ideological” form of the signifier) is absorbed into an “ideological field” that imbues it with connotations and meanings:

…Žižek refines Louis Althusser’s non-super-structural model of ideology by drawing upon Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s notion of preideological or protoideological ‘floating signifiers.’ These floating signifiers become solidified into a field through discursive articulation; as they are affiliated into a discourse, their meaning becomes fixed and the ideological field is constituted. For Žižek, this field is a Lacanian ‘quilt,’ structured through the intervention of a ‘nodal point’ that confers a precise and fixed signification to the field’s other elements. It is this nodal point, or ‘pure signifier,” that guarantees the consistency of the ideological field, rather than any referent, any ‘real object.’ (Herscher 66)

Accordingly, for every set of floating signifiers, there is one “pure signifier,” a signifier without ambiguity, whose meaning remains fixed and “guarantees the consistency of the ideological field”—it confers certain meanings onto the formerly “preideological” floating signifiers contained within the field. Let us take as an example DAF’s most well-known song, “Der Mussolini,” from their 1981 album, *Alles ist gut* (Figure 16). The title already contains a fascist sign (Benito Mussolini’s name), but its overall structure, in contrast, follows disco conventions, with Delgado-López instructing listeners, with the conviction of a totalitarian leader, to “clap your hands,” “shake your ass,” and “dance the Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Jesus Christ, and communism” (“Der Mussolini”). In a 2007 interview on German public television, Delgado-López comments on what these ideological gestures mean for him: “It’s even a demystifying song, and it goes, ‘Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Jesus Christ, communism.’ It also demonstrates the interchangeability of totalitarian ideologies. Even negative [ideological] monuments are monuments, and I know this from my family, who really suffered under Franco” (“DAF - Der Mussolini (1981)”). For him, fascist references belong to a wider network of totalitarian signs, all of which are negatively charged with traumatic
histories. To relate back to Žižek’s analysis, each of these signs in “Der Mussolini”—Mussolini, Hitler, Jesus, communism—belongs to a different “ideological field” (excepting Mussolini and Hitler, perhaps), but they are treated with equal amounts of irony in the song, which, according to Delgado-López, “demonstrates the interchangeability of totalitarian ideologies.” Despite this intention, DAF were criticized by German media outlets, who accused them of being fascists. Along Žižek’s reasoning, however, the song contains no “nodal point,” no overarching ideological structure that can define or give true fascist ideological signification to these individual signifiers, which are entirely detached from their original, varied contexts and then adapted to mimic disco conventions.

On one level, we have these names-as-signifiers (Mussolini, Hitler, Jesus, communism), and on another level, the German language, Delgado-López’s vocal style, and the strong, hard, almost militaristic musical quality also act as sonic signifiers. For Žižek, particular signifiers (in the context of Laibach, which incorporates elements from Slovenian Christian socialism, Soviet socialist realism, and Nazi Germany) connote fascism only insofar as they are contained within an actually fascist “ideological field.” Žižek argues that an “alienation of the ideological field” allows Laibach to successfully uncouple fascist ideology and fascist aesthetics. Herscher elaborates,

In Žižek’s account of Laibach performances, this alienation occurs through an extraction of signifiers from the discursive matrix that originally endowed them with meaning. Laibach accomplishes this extraction by juxtaposing signifiers from different, and incompatible, discourses within a single, unprecedented nondiscursive space….For this effect of alienation to be sustained, the new context of these ‘pieces’ must remain prediscursive, a ‘senseless network;’ the context of the Laibach performance cannot restructure the pieces into another discursive formation. In Žižek’s account, then, Laibach Kunst is purely appropriative, purely reflective, because there is no new ‘nodal point’ around which the pieces of the different discourses can recoalesce. These pieces become ‘floating signifiers,’ dispersed in a space that is logically, if not temporally, prior to their endowment with meaning. (Herscher 67)

Similarly to Laibach, DAF juxtaposes signifiers from various “discourses” or “ideological fields” into an equally “nondiscursive space,” a pop-cultural object or oeuvre that is more provocative than ideologically motivated in nature. Incompatible ideological fields are combined within the band’s imagery—fascist
aesthetics (the German language, Nazi-tinged words, such as “Volk” or “Stiefel,” mentions of Hitler and Mussolini) inhabit the same “nondiscursive space” as communist aesthetics (*Die Kleinen und die Bösen* album cover, the band’s name having been inspired by a GDR propaganda poster, the “tanz den Kommunismus” lyric), resulting in an imagined space, where mutually exclusive political tendencies harmoniously overlap and merge (Figure 17). “Der Mussolini” in particular, and DAF as a project more broadly, creates “a senseless network” of signifiers that lacks any fixed ideological framework for these charged fascist or communist signifiers to inhabit—they are effectively reverted to their pre-ideological states.

Another element of Žižek’s Laibach analysis has to do with his understanding of how the Lacanian concept of *enjoyment*, a sort of perverse pleasure found in pain, functions under fascist rule—the individual must sacrifice pleasure, freedom, the self, out of sheer obedience to the leader, while deriving enjoyment from this act of sacrifice (Herscher 67). As Herscher writes,

> The fantasy of fascism is, for Žižek, the renunciation of enjoyment in the face of the fascist demand for total obedience. The fascist subject is to obey authority not out of *desire*, but rather, out of *obligation*….Thus, in fascism, enjoyment comes from groundless obedience, which is to say, from the renunciation of enjoyment. (Herscher 67)

Under fascism, enjoyment becomes paradoxical—the individual has no choice but to obey and sacrifice the self, which results in a lack of true enjoyment and an authority-mandated enjoyment in this very lack, according to Žižek. In the context of music that co-opts fascist signifiers, then, this mandate to obey is lifted—music is, at its core, about finding pleasure in sound and vision. Since Laibach does not express an imperative to obey or sacrifice, music cannot establish Žižek’s conception of the fascist fantasy, but instead, results in enjoyment alone:

> In the Laibach spectacle, however, there are fascist signifiers with no fascist fantasy; or, in other words, fascist signifiers are identified with only on the level of pleasure, without the fantasy project that typically enables such identification. Laibach thus transforms fascism’s renunciation of enjoyment in favor of action into nothing but enjoyment, using the thematic and material
For Žižek, Laibach replaces the fascist demand for obedience, and for the subject’s perverse enjoyment in obedience (the “renunciation of enjoyment”), into pure enjoyment. In the context of DAF, this operation occurs throughout “Der Mussolini”—Delgado-López’s symbolic voice of authority (specifically, fascist authority, based on the German-language vocals and Hitler-speech cadence) in the song, demanding audiences to obey, to enjoy the drilling beat, clap their hands, “tanz den Mussolini,” out of desire, all conveyed in the lyrical conventions of a disco song. DAF challenges our expectations—Delgado-López’s spoken orders, set against this sharp, militaristic synth beat, appear at first reminiscent of Nazi commands (“schnell, schnell!!”), but shed their Nazi tone when what is being commanded is for us to enjoy the beat, to take pleasure in these decontextualized, pre-ideological floating signifiers (Mussolini, Hitler, Jesus), renamed as though they were dance moves. We are commanded to do what we would already do if we heard a song as bold and catchy as “Der Mussolini”—dance, sing, enjoy. DAF’s fascist mandate is not a renunciation of enjoyment in the name of the leader, but an all-consuming enjoyment in this new vanguard of German pop music.

DAF were revolutionary musically, aesthetically, and conceptually—they were provocateurs, and they certainly had critics. As semiotician Roland Barthes writes, “…in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes 39). DAF, as well as most music within the industrial oeuvre, does not attempt to “fix” the floating signifier, but to leave it floating, in all its ambiguity and potential “terror.” As a result of bands like DAF and Laibach, all kinds of charged, political signifiers have become subsumed in the post-punk and industrial symbolic realms, and now take on associations beyond, and detached from, their historical meanings. Following Žižek’s analysis to its logical conclusion, these signifiers have found new expression in pop cultural objects, which, by nature, prioritize enjoyment in aesthetics—and by enjoying these aesthetics, we resist the fascist demand to give up enjoyment in obedience (The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology). DAF’s brand of historical reflection differs from that of the New Romantics, for example, in that it does not idealize the past, nor does it have an ounce of nostalgia for Third Reich-era Germany or the Soviet Union under Stalin. Rather, at this thirty-five-year temporal remove from such fraught and traumatic historical periods, DAF and other German post-punk musicians reflected on the Nazi heritage...
and continued, in their own, provocative way, the incomplete postwar project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past). German post-punks did not live through the Nazi period, but they responded to the silence of their parents’ generation and to the contemporary West German political establishment, one filled with ex-Nazis who had fought in World War II. They strove to construct a new German identity that challenged West German discourse on Nazism, and they did so using the very signs and aesthetics that Nazism created or turned taboo. In a sense, German post-punks like DAF, akin to British post-punks, also responded to perceived “lost futures”—in the case of Germany, these futures were conceptual or imaginary futures, lost (in lives) during the war, lost (in modernist-era cultural objects) under Hitler and National Socialism, lost after the mass-bombings of German cities, and lost again with the walling-off of East Germany and the ever-heightened Cold War tensions between the two German states. There was a cultural loss in the immediate postwar period, referred to as the “Stunde Null,” (“zero hour”), in which the German identity formed under National Socialism had to be scrapped, and in which the search for a wholesome, pre-Nazi and post-Nazi German heritage and identity began. These losses, although not experienced firsthand by our German post-punk subjects, remained largely unresolved in the German collective memory, and as such, remained “specters of lost futures”—perhaps especially lost *modernist* futures—of a sort, felt even by postwar generations.
Conclusion:

As discussed and demonstrated, post-punk is vast and takes many forms. Its sounds, aesthetics, influences, moods, and semiotic methods vary among sub-genres, and especially among bands and musicians. The common thread that holds post-punk together as a category, however, is the apparent influence post-punk musicians took from modernist-era material, as well as the ambition to create radically, sonically new forms of music, to expand the possibilities for cultural expression. This is, ultimately, a modernist ambition—post-punk continued the trajectory of formal experimentation in art that had begun to accelerate during the modernist era, this time by fusing electronic instrumentation with retro themes, aesthetics, and signs. Post-punk musicians combined formal newness and aesthetic or thematic oldness to revive the modernist project—this is what I would like to call post-punk nostalgia. It is not pure nostalgia, nor is it pure futuristic experimentation—it is a way of seeing the world that reconciles past and future, and it can be directly contrasted with contemporary nostalgia.

Since the true post-punk era, the reservoir of post-punk symbolism has been ransacked time and again for post-punk-derivative and proto-post-punk musical projects. Bands like Interpol, Xeno & Oaklander, Boy Harsher—even, as Mark Fisher points out, the mega-popular Arctic Monkeys—and whole genres like electroclash in the early aughts have co-opted various sub-genres of the post-punk movement for their inherently retro work. Acknowledging the unmistakeable retro quality of this music does not have to mean that the music is bad—only that it is not, in any immediately discernible way, new. In this sense, Fisher’s and Reynolds’s contemporary claims about our collective formal “retromania” have intensified since the ’80s, as evident in popular (and even unpopular) music that reproduces, with every drum machine beat and analog-reminiscent synthesizer sound, music from forty years ago. It is as though we have tried, culturally, to prolong this last new cultural era for as long as possible, in the hope of warding off Fisher’s “specters of lost futures” indefinitely, while failing to see that these revivals themselves are the specters—they are evidence of our widespread cultural stagnation. What distinguishes contemporary nostalgia from the more sophisticated post-punk nostalgia is the closure of portals so that references are made to a condensed set of vague sonic or visual signifiers that have become “iconic” of a decade. In many cases, those cultural objects that have become “iconic” to contemporary, twenty-first
century eyes are the ones that have been dumbed down to the point of near-universal recognizability. The intertextual references that reach across various media, genres, and aesthetic worlds—and beyond the banal towards the niche or intellectual—now seem to be missing from contemporary nostalgia.

Perhaps I live in the wrong place—or, more likely, in the wrong time. I had come to this conclusion already by the time I was thirteen, and some feeling of cultural deprivation keeps me returning to it. Fisher describes a “feeling of belatedness, of living after the gold rush” that I have always identified with, at least culturally, and at least since I was old enough to begin consciously selecting retro over contemporary culture, to begin retreating into it when my surroundings felt mundane or inadequate (Fisher 8). I saw kindred spirits in these ‘80s post-punks, who found solace in what was retro for their time (film noir, dystopian novels, old-fashioned glamour, modernist art), except I looked back, both at them and through them. I wore my parents’ old ‘80s clothing to school, and I let the soaring, melancholy (and, according to my peers, “old-fashioned”) synthesized sounds of Visage and Ultravox color the brown, suburban Minnesota landscapes I saw out the school bus window. For me and for other belated post-punk souls, this music fills voids—it reassured me that, as Fisher writes, “The problem wasn’t (just) me but the culture around me” (Fisher 29). The lost futures he described still haunt me as I continue to wonder whether there will ever be a cultural moment that resonates with me the way post-punk does, or if nostalgia so strongly shapes our contemporary culture and informs my own experience that I would be lost without it. Ultimately, I find solace in the realization that I have inherited the post-punk ethos—its musical-aesthetic remnants, its portals to other cultural objects, and its nostalgic tendencies. I revel in being a post-punk subject reincarnated, drawing connections, mining the past, feeling alienation, nostalgicizing, aestheticizing, intellectualizing, grieving lost futures and glorious pasts.
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Figure 2: The Third Man. Directed by Carol Reed, performed by Joseph Cotton, Alida Valli, and Orson Welles, British Lion Film, 1949. YouTube, youtu.be/WCgDZQSwJEE.

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