Defying and feeding the culture industry: the New Romantics subculture

The notion of subcultures has been widely discussed since the birth of cultural studies, especially thanks to the work of Dick Hebdige. Hebdige thought this phenomenon had the privilege of a birth outside dominant culture, but was eventually going to be reincorporated through a process of “co-optation”. This is evident in subcultural groups of every form and nature, such as for example, the New Romantics of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The almost exclusive presence of theories that privileged a pessimistic notion of audiences up to the 1960s made it almost impossible to think of anything like subcultures. Culture industry theory, for example, denied the possibility of escaping the realm of dominant discourse: every form of culture or association, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is already born within the culture industry. When cultural studies came along with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of Birmingham, in the 1960s, audience agency was re-evaluated and given a prominent position. The work of Stuart Hall, starting from his seminal essay “Encoding / Decoding”, was instrumental to the discovery of reception as a fundamental step in the communication process and to the consequent analysis of reception by specific social groups. The acknowledgement of the existence of groups and of their importance in the creation of meaning from a cultural text constitutes the starting point for Hebdige’s analysis of subcultures.

In his essay "Subcultures: The Meanings of Style", Hebdige always qualifies subcultures as "spectacular", hereby referencing the work of Debord and his notion of
"spectacle". In Debord's writings spectacle is understood as the dominant hegemonic discourse, the image-saturated world in which we are all unescapably submerged and that mediates all our experiences. Within the spectacle, however, Debord allows for what he calls the "detournement". The detournement is a very similar process to that of subcultures, because it involves the production, within the spectacle, of art by turning the spectacle against itself.

Hebdige writes observing and living a period, the 1960s and 1970s, in which subcultures are proliferating: from the so-called Mods to the Punks, the latter of which he writes extensively about. Right after the Punk movement, the London scene saw the rise of another subcultural group, that of the New Romantics.

The New Romantics were a restricted group of people, mostly art students coming from a working-class background, who were active around the area of Soho, London, between the end of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. The New Romantics were tied to a specific environment, which was that of the dance clubs, and more specifically the scene that developed around the Blitz club in Covent Garden, which got them the name of “Blitz Kids”.

Graham Smith recalls the atmosphere of the club: "Undeniably, the Blitz was a haven for the idiosyncratic, a mad, barking celebration of British recalcitrance. It had indeed begun, in the aftermath of punk, as a watering hole for those for whom excess was second nature and punk was now just too bland. The ethic was individuality, with ensembles mixed and matched from secondhand stores and jumble sales, or handcrafted by their wearers. It was not a 'look'; there was no defining style. It was not about conformity. It was about being you. And anyone, then or now, who pegged themselves as a 'Blitz Kid' or a 'New Romantic' as the press dubbed the scene, was considered a buffoon." (Smith)

First of all the New Romantic movement is defined by a specific style, achieved
through the excessive use of make-up, flamboyant clothes recalling the nineteenth century, and practices of gender-bending. The New Romantics' was a search for individuality, an individuality that had been sought by previous youth cultures as well, but that eventually became the mainstream. It is indeed from the delusion with the punk movement's assimilation and vulgarization that this new youth culture, made of androgynous and over-the-top people, came to life. As George O’Dowd - better known as Boy George - recalls in his autobiography *Take it Like a Man* “Punk had become a parody of itself, an anti-Establishment uniform, attracting hordes of dickheads who wanted to gob, punch and stamp on flowers” (O’ Dowd, 139). Plus, punk could not and would not cope with the need for the new youngsters to express, along with uniqueness, a certain amount of sexual freedom, which was not seen positively by the strict punk scene, and even worse by the mainstream. "Punk, despite its abandon-all-rules pretensions, had little room for poofers" (O’ Dowd, 104) Boy George remarks. The New Romantics nonetheless arose from the ashes of punk, and retained much of it, for example the DIY ethos. This was not only a marker of originality or uniqueness, but also a choice dictated by the harsh times that working-class England was facing in those years. Indeed, during Thatcher's government, England faced times of unprecedented economic backlash and unemployment ratings sore sky-high. Consequently, working-class kids could not afford the luxury of high street shops, and instead resorted to second-hand clothes as a starting point for the construction of their own flamboyant persona. As Hebdige underlines, a subculture is never overtly political. Nonetheless even elements of style, as noticed before, act in concealed ways as responses to a particular political environment. Style was also a way to elevate oneself from the masses to a status of celebrity within the group, and it was a conscious rejection of the mainstream dictating the rules of fashion or establishing the celebrity-status: as Boy George writes "You didn't have to be rich to be famous. If you had the 'look' you were a star [...] Fashion was no longer dictated by the High
Street chains." (O’Dowd, 71).

Style is never simply style for its own sake, but style is part of a broader, unitary statement that brings together members pertaining to the subculture and creates a specific and exclusive environment. This is what Hebdige calls "homology". Among the Blitz Kids style is first and foremost a way of life. It symbolizes the socio-political uneasiness and the need to feel unique and prominent against all odds, but most of all it symbolizes a particular mindset that allows for sexual freedom. This is matched by their taste in music, which was very close to what Dyer defines as disco music in his article "In Defense of Disco". The Blitz Kids therefore listened to soul and disco, but also glam rock: musical styles that will eventually be tied to gay culture. In response to the closure of the government and of other youth cultures to different sexualities, the New Romantics movement originated as a safe haven where queerness, or just plain ambiguity, was celebrated and overt.

Subcultures seem to have as a primary aggregator but also as a primary outcome, music. As Sarah Thornton in her book "Club Culture" remarks, "Youth subcultures tend to be music subcultures. Youth [...] listen to more recorded music than anyone else. Youth television is to a large extent music television, while young men's magazines are predominantly music magazines. Youth leisure and identity often revolve around music." (Thornton 19) This becomes all the more applicable to the New Romantics movement when we think that its followers were actually the first "TV generation", meaning the first generation to be born in a televisual environment. As Thornton underlines, much of the youth television was centered around music and programmes like "Top of the Pops". It is from there that the Blitz Kids got their fascination with the media and with figures such as David Bowie or Marc Bolan, who eventually became their stylistic but also musical influences. In the documentary "Soul Boys of the Western World" Gary Kemp, guitarist from Spandau Ballet, recalls Bowie's performance of "Starman" on Top of the Pops in 1972 as being "such a
seminal moment for my generation”. It is Bowie, for example, that prompted the birth of the Blitz: DJ Rusty Egan and Steve Strange decided in fact to host every Tuesday a night dedicated to Bowie's music at a new club, later baptized as the Blitz. The posters were saying "Bowie night. A club for heroes". Indeed, Thornton remarks how important it is to such cultures to have a shared taste that would bring his members together: "Club cultures are taste cultures. Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media, and most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves." (Thornton 3) At the Blitz this attitude was brought to its extremes by the scrupulously selective entrance policy. Steve Strange himself stood at the door deciding who could enter and who could not: if you were not sufficiently over-the-top and in line with their philosophy, you would have been left out. This elitism, Boy George recalls, was instrumental to both creating a safe community and avoiding public scrutiny, as many journalists tried to slip in to cover this new underground frenzy.

People went to the Blitz to dance the night away to glam rock, soul, disco and avant-garde European music, to be outrageous and to freely express their own individuality. This is why that of the Blitz kids’ can be labeled as a dance culture as well, and as Sarah Thornton remarks "Dance cultures have long been seen to epitomize mass culture at its worst. Dance music has been considered to be standardized, mindless and banal, while dancers have been regarded as narcotized, conformist and easily manipulated" (Thornton 1). However, not all dancing is about mindless consumption, as previous dance cultures such as Northern Soul proved. For the New Romantics it was mainly about escapism: escapism from conservatism and escapism from the harsh conditions that England was facing at the time. "None of us were content with what was mapped out for us and we all clubbed together and looked for something else. It was a world I didn't think was possible [...] outside it was Britain, lurching towards 1980, mass unemployment and class conflict. Our superheroes were no elitists, but
refugees from a class war they didn't belong in, penniless aesthetes creating bourgeois spectacles on dole queue budgets." (Smith)

Hebdige remarks that "[A subculture] communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown" (Hebdige 155). What defines a subculture is, indeed, its specific use of already existing cultural products that are devoid of their original context and re-framed in a new discourse. Thus, the Blitz Kids took Bowie, Roxy Music, the electronic sounds of Kraftwerk and the atmospheres of Cabaret, and not only created their own personal subcultural identities, but crafted their own musical style that would later feed into the so called New Wave and would eventually constitute the Second British Invasion. That of the new generation was a search for novelty in response to the decline of the dying swinging London and subsequent punk scene, in lifestyle as much as in music. The New Romantics' ethos and aesthetics is best represented in bands such as Spandau Ballet or Culture Club, which arose specifically from the Blitz scene. Theirs was an attempt to go beyond rock's classical aesthetics and to challenge it by trying to give authenticity to pop and the electronic sounds of dismissed instruments like the synth. Moreover, especially in the case of Culture Club's frontman Boy George, it was a way to challenge established gender norms and to bring queerness into the spotlight.

In spite of all the secrecy and exclusiveness, the New Romantics movement as well would not survive to what Hebdige calls "co-optation". By co-optation we mean the process through which the subculture, that managed to originate outside of dominant culture, eventually gets reincorporated and feeds into the cyclical life of the "culture industry". Hebdige distinguishes two forms in which a subculture can be co-opted, which are easily intertwined: through the "commodity form" and the "ideological form". By commodity form he means incorporating the novelties of the subcultural products into the commercial system so to produce profitable commodities. In this way the industry destroys the shield of
homology, because it appropriates one or more of its elements and therefore breaches the wall of meaning that the subculture had created. In Hebdige's own words: "Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise." (Hebdige 156) Thus, the New Romantics' style was incorporated in fashion collections such as Vivienne Westwood's pirate collection from 1981 and eventually by mainstream shops. On the matter, Gary Kemp recalls "Suddenly the high street was full of the New Romantics look, even Topshop was selling ruffles, piecrust collars and knickerbockers". The music scene is no exception to this co-optation and artists coming from the Blitz scene like the above-mentioned Spandau Ballet and Culture Club, but also bands like Visage, Soft Cells or Human League, all dominated the Top Charts in the early 1980s and appeared on national television on Top of the Pops. The final stage of incorporation was probably the release of Band Aid's single "Do They Know It's Christmas" in 1984, when exponents of the New Romantics scene became fully entitled to stand up next to the "establishment" of pop music.

The success of the New Romantics in the musical scene crosses over with the "ideological form", which is what Hebdige refers to when talking about how the ethos behind the subculture is reframed by dominant ideology. "In most cases, it is the subculture's stylistic innovations which first attract the media's attention. Subsequently deviant or 'anti-social' acts [...] are 'discovered' by the police, the judiciary, the press; and these acts are used to 'explain' the subculture's original transgression of sartorial codes." (Hebdige 154) There are different ways in which this "explanation" can be done, especially by media outlets: "First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied ('Otherness is reduced to sameness'). Alternatively, the Other can be translated into meaningless exotica [...] In this case, the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis."
In the case of the New Romantics, the strategy adopted was probably the second one. First of all, the term itself "New Romantics" or "Blitz Kids" was coined by the press, seemingly to isolate the phenomenon to a niche that would not threaten the established order. As shown by the "Soul Boys of the Western World" documentary most of the discussion around the new trend was then deviated to amused and at the same time judgmental observations on the peculiar style and on its alleged sexual connotations. This treatment reframed New Romantics behavior not only as a deviation, but as a fascinating exotic style relegated to "them" and not to "us". For example it was only within the extravagant world of Boy George that someone like Boy George was actually possible and thinkable, not outside in the "real world".

Co-optation is seen by Hebdige as a natural, inevitable step into the subcultures' lives. "It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as 'folk devil, as Other, as Enemy'" (Hebdige 155) Capitalism is understood as a dynamic mechanism that survives precisely thanks to incorporation. Capitalism goes where the market is, and to simply ignore such cultures when gaining increasing popularity, would mean risking on losing an ever-growing segment of the consumers. Hence, the need to be always up-to-date, without losing however control over the products, which is when the "reframing" of the possible subversion becomes necessary. That of the New Romantics movement was never a pretense to live completely outside of dominant dynamics: its members dressed-up to be celebrities, to be in the spotlight, none of its performers ever refused success - even if requesting creative control - and was never ashamed of making it to the mainstream. However, the Blitz Kids successfully managed to develop a style and lifestyle of their own, outside of the boundaries established by dominant culture. Eventually, through co-optation, such novelties rejuvenated the culture industry and transformed the New
Romantics into "the next big hit" of the 1980s.

**Works Cited**


