

CHAPTER SIX

Liquidities for the Essex Man: The Monetarist Eroticism of British Yacht Pop

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The symbolism is vivid. Roxy Music at the Birmingham Odeon on the night Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister.

The socialist utopia that had financed the art schools and filled them with Lennons, Keith Richards, Kinks, Hockneys, Bryan Ferry and Enos was over. We were due a season in hell.

(STEPHEN DUFFY, FORMERLY OF DURAN DURAN, RECALLS 1979, QUOTED IN MALINS 2005: 19)

I remember my first cheque for £1 million. I was only twenty-one. Fifty per cent went to Mrs Thatcher but even still.

(ANDY TAYLOR, OF DURAN DURAN, RECALLS 1982, QUOTED IN MALINS 2005: 85)

The tendency for the music video to be a kind of ambient appreciation of a single – often unsubtly visualizing or lazily dramatizing lyrical content while presenting the group/singer in a way that is sufficiently familiar to reassure fans and yet new enough to merit attention – can betray a conception, on the part of the makers, of those for whom the music video is intended, or should ideally be intended. This chapter considers the nature of the ambience of the music, in terms of how the music video came to recalibrate the pop

single as allied to the evolving idea of a glamorous and enviable lifestyle for these intended – that is, how the music video became aspirational, and what kind of new subjectivity such aspirations seemed to signal, and for which imagined constituency.

This consideration is dated to the moment of two significant cultural shifts in the early 1980s. Firstly, the birth of MTV engendered a vacuum in pop music culture, with the sudden need for videos for singles ushering in a whole new genre of music entertainment. As we have argued elsewhere (Edgar et al. 2013), this was effectively a radical remaking of pop music *per se* – demanding a doubling of output, as it were: audio now streamed with visuals. And, as has been noted of Duran Duran's career, MTV's playing of their music videos resulted in substantial sales of records in areas where the singles were not played on radio stations, and controversy later ensued when singles were first debuted on television rather than radio (see Malins 2005: 105, 124, 125 respectively). Secondly, this vacuum occurred at a point of transition in white popular music, in the British experience, from a period of punk and post-punk, and its overlapping with New Romantic subcultures to forms of music that could be considered to be more palatable as entertainment.

The success of a number of British groups at this moment, capitalizing on the imperative of making and releasing music videos, had made for a second 'British Invasion' (as journalists of that moment termed it, around 1983) of North American popular music. And that success was not a matter of revisiting and so validating aspects of North American popular music, as had been the case with a number of British 're-interpreters' of the 1970s, but had been the case with a number of concerns. From New Romanticism of proposing and advancing a new set of concerns. From New Romanticism (and the legacy of glam rock), came a kind of post-gender-bending New Romantic 'leading man'. The tension that needed to be resolved, at the behest of the new markets opened by MTV, was over engaging with metrosexuality (as it would later be termed; see Halligan 2011) while not challenging or wrong-footing a pervasive heterosexual hegemony. The New Romantic leading man was in touch with his feminine side, but not to the freely exploratory 'excesses' that had been associated with, say, David Bowie in the previous decade. Indeed, even Bowie seemed to work to distance himself from that period with the aggressively heterosexual music video for 'China Girl' in which, as per the erotic imaginings of some ghastly cut-price package holiday, he winds up having missionary position sex on a beach with a local girl.¹ All waves of 'British Invasion' of North American pop charts seem to have been powered by marginally freer expressions of sexuality, troubling the home-grown mores of the former colonies, as with the longer hair of The Beatles, or the overt sexuality of The Yardbirds and The Rolling Stones. This is not to say that heteronormativity exerted complete domination of the Top 40 charts of the early 1980s – especially since the progressive worth of pop music, for informed commentators, and in terms of identity politics, can be identified with a more subversive glam

rock/Bowie tradition (as seen in the personae of Freddie Mercury of Queen, Boy George of Culture Club, and, later, Morrissey of The Smiths). But it is telling that one of the initial promotion challenges for Duran Duran was to dispel the potentially damaging sense that they were maybe not entirely heterosexual, as Malins notes (2005: 78). Even Andy Warhol expressed confusion, in 1981, when he first encountered the group: 'They all wore lots of makeup but they had girlfriends with them from England, pretty girls, so I guess they're all straight, but it was hard to believe' (Warhol 1992: 525).

Ambitious British pop music was remade as it came to recalibrate itself to the new musical culture associated with MTV, and the need to provide promotional video material for television programming more widely, where live performances were not possible.² Such a turn resulted in those now forgotten (and often long out of print) media artefacts of discographies, the Video EP and the Video Album. At their best it now seemed that the evolving and nuanced conceptual continuity once discernible across lyrics, themes, album covers, and live performances for Prog Rock groups and concept albums had been relocated to sequences of music videos. This realignment was especially true of Duran Duran, whose integration of video into their oeuvre (so that they would have been taken more as 'video stars' than 'radio stars') is perhaps the reason why there is little to no critical writing on the group, and they go unmentioned for music journalists, now tending to rewrite British 1980s pop music as essentially dissenting.³

Country house to yacht

The operation of music video as ambient appreciation can be seen in Roxy Music's 'Avalon' (1982, from the album of the same name; video directed by Howard Guard). In a *Country Life* magazine-style country house, the band in tuxedos (Bryan Ferry's is white; the others' are black) play to an immobile audience of ball-goers, seemingly – as the lyrics have it – 'so tired', 'now the party's over'. The music – specifically the warm synthesizer wash which introduces the first chorus – animates a super-model-like lone woman (Sophie Ward; smoky eye make-up, trussed-up blonde hair, pearl and gold earrings, silk ball gown) who entices Ferry away. They dance, and sit, and she then dances alone. Cuts associate the woman with a hooded falcon.⁴ And this falcon is presented as a cypher for consideration: is the falcon the female, as enticed to earth by Ferry? Is the falcon a fleeting presence in the proceedings, akin then to the 'could have been' encounter with the woman (both as deadly, noble, and graceful?), who then seems to depart from Ferry? Or is the falcon – as suggested by a two-shot in which both Ferry and falcon simultaneously shift their gazes directly to the camera – in fact Ferry: the hunter who, flying high above social gatherings (he is first seen singing