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The Chic of It

By Alexandra Kohut-Cole

Eighties' glamour and Parisian chic - SS17 designers paid tribute to the decade's icons

Pure glamour and MTV transformed Eighties' fashion into international show business – loud, bold, showy and perfectly hitched to the excesses of champagne yuppiedom when any time was party time. Recent runways depicted designer nods to the power-obsessed decade, the Dynasty-Dallas-esque outsize shoulder-cinched-in waist combo at one extreme, and Parisian chic body-con to the other – embracing all the slogan mania in between.

"Fashion truly lead the culture – music, film and pop culture were truly inspired by what was going on in the fashion world and vice versa" says Jene Park, creative director of rock inspired LA label Thomas Wylde. Snapping at the heels of recent allusions to the Seventies', perhaps its just chronological appropriation. "This latest nod to the Eighties' could be seen as chronologically appropriate, but is perhaps just a period of experimentation. The Eighties' saw new trends, new dimensions and new horizons in fashion, so perhaps the idea was that every designer was channeling that muse. The Eighties' just seem relevant again, a period of re-invention, re-thinking and drastically alluring fashion." says Antonio Berardi, the Italian designer known for his precise tailoring and sensual body contouring.

Time was when fashion bopped to the beat of frilly-shirted glossy-lipped new romantics Duran Duran and Adam and the Ants – and post-punk new wave synthpop became a thing. Fashion's soundtrack was everything from Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love', Tears for Fears' 'Shout' to the tribal emotion and sweeping rhythms of Paul Simon's 'Graceland'. It was such a strong decade of glamour and creativity that fashion now might simply be magnetized, clinging for something bright and shiny – a fantasy. "I don't really know if its a logical following" says French designer Alexis Mabille, "but I think its more a fantasy about a golden period with all that is dazzling around, I mean with everything happening in the world everyone needs happiness. So in my mind the Eighties' is a strong assumed period, and a lot of designers like myself were children, so its a reminder of our mums' looks and Dallas movies which were pushing the style in each home!"

Add to the mix the instantly recognisable vocals of Whitesnake's David Coverdale and Van Halen's David Lee Roth – all gravelly voiced and flailing long blond hair - or a screeching Axl Rose of Guns'n Roses; Peter Gabriel's 'Sledgehammer', Debbie Harry's 'Atomic' and Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video. This was fashion's soundtrack to the decade of extremes and unbridled creativity where anything was possible. "Living it...going to see 'The Police' in 1977, going to see the 'Clash' in 1978 as a teenager, watching Dynasty every Wednesday night, going to shows, being punk rock, being extremely creative kids...now it can all be goggled and seems uninteresting and sad...the world is unexciting compared to them for sure..." are the overriding memories of Johnson Hartig, from cult LA label Libertine.

Diverse was the word from the exuberant ruffles of 'the last grand couturier' Emanuel Ungaro to the overt embellishment and inventor of puffball skirts, Christian Lacroix. By the mid-Eighties' everyone in the British Vogue fashion department was parading around in short stretch figure-hugging head to toe black, paying homage to Azzedine Alaia's pioneering female form-embracing perfection. Shrink fit Levi 501s catapulted model and singer Nick Kamen to fame as he stripped to his boxers in the launderette to a rendition of 'I heard it Through the Grapevine'.

The return to slicked back hair and red lips by creative directors Carol Lim and Humberto Leon for SS17 at Kenzo, the vibrant Parisian label founded by Kenzo Takada in 1970 and a big name in the Eighties', was reminiscent of Robert Palmer's 'Addicted to Love' video, which screamed Parisian chic and the decade's glamour in spades. Modern day queen of Parisian chic, Isabel Marant's roaring red power-shouldered metallic dress reeked Eighties' glam. Yet, over at Chanel, Lagerfeld – whose Eighties' muse, Ines de la Fressange, wrote the book on Parisian chic – brought us Star Wars Stormtroopers. And Nicolas Ghesquiere did visible shoulder pads at Louis Vuitton.

“There are references of what people think is chic for French allure, like the YSL make up style from this Eighties' period with the Guy Bourdin iconography or Antonio drawings with his strong power women, strong as men but ultra feminine... people forget that a liberated woman doesn't mean being unattractive...”, says Mabilie, “for me Parisian chic is this intelligent way to be cool even overdressed or being super chic with something very simple just by the way of wearing it.” His SS17 show was a very French reference to the summer heat wave, with a sensuality, frivolity and “sex appeal with a strong sporty power woman attitude, kind of Adjani girl in the movie 'L'Été Meurtrier'. Its colourful, Pepsi, happy and glam.” So what's the allure of Parisian chic? “I think I'm just French, with a cultural textile love, and since my childhood I was interested in clothing and history costume, so everyday in my mind I'm playing with my codes; I just do what I love and I love to make women beautiful and appealing for men. That's my target!”

“For me, Parisian chic is all about the fit and the cut”, says Berardi. “I like complexity, not that it should ever be obvious and over-wrought, but a garment should be thought about and constructed in a total 360 degrees manner. Everything should be considered, but it should look effortless, and timeless. If I think Parisian chic, I think of Alaia, I think of Deneuve, of Saint Laurent, and Galliano's early tenure at Dior”. He goes on to explain, “I am a child of the Eighties, it is when I began to live and breathe fashion. It is something that has become a part of who I am and what I do. I am really a London designer who lives in Italy but whose mind-set when it comes to clothes is more French than anything else. The petite mains are every designers dream, and unfortunately they are in Paris, and my philosophy is such that even in ready to wear, the clothes should last forever.”

Full-on and subtle tributes to Eighties' icons during SS17 season abounded, yet some tributes were so subtle they were almost silent. Berardi showed quietly sophisticated chic, pastel baby doll dresses, paisley, natural faces and dresses with corset silhouettes on the outside. His main inspiration was re-invention, “Looking at things that I had barely touched on in various collections, but never taken forward, ideas that had been toyed with but never fully imagined. It was really an exercise in all that is Antonio Berardi, re-thought, re-worked and re-mixed.” So was his delicate purple paisley a tribute to Prince and nostalgia for bygone heroes? “The paisley was actually a tiny phoenix, that was woven into the fabric. It looked like paisley, and yes it was a tribute to Prince. It was masculine yet feminine at the same time, subtle but full of symbolism, just like him and

his music. Never obvious, but thought provoking and a testament to all he stood for. It was done out of reverence, but without screaming it out loud, just as the man would have done.”

Eighties’ icons have stepped back into the spotlight. At Valentino, Pierrepaulo Piccioli, in his first collection following the departure of Maria Grazia Chiuri to Christian Dior, asked Zandra Rhodes, the designer famous in the Seventies’ and Eighties’ – celebrated for her hand drawn prints – to design the prints for his collection taken from the Hieronymus Bosch triptych, 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'. And Kris Van Assche asked Boy George, the DJ and Eighties’ singer with Culture Club, to feature in his current Dior Homme campaign. Perhaps this identifies a vacuum of cultural identity for a new generation seeking fresh icons. “I think they are icons of a new culture and way of life”, says Mabile, “Today the world is more open minded... so we can’t compare its different, and in my case, I love the glam of the Eighties’, but fashion was very border line, I think its what fascinates our generation about this period, its strong with a style common to the whole world.”

But there are those who have declared 'no more Eighties’, as Park did of her first show for Thomas Wylde. In her SS16 Evolution collection she was actively not referencing it. "I think with each fashion era we enter, it is always all about the proportion – whether it is mini, maxi, wide shoulder, over-sized, super shrunken, or super-wide leg pants, I felt that in order to change the perception of the brand, I couldn’t really just change details to make it more modern or updated. So to me, I had to change the proportions of the collection completely, from wide and broad to more shrunken and fitted, and then brought everything closer to the center of the body.”

The Libertine collection included beading, rhinestones, sequins, Union Jack suiting for the boys and fluorescent mini dresses for the girls. “Our inspirations don't fluctuate much from season to season really. We've done overt decoration for 15 years, and now that most every other designer has jumped our train we work hard to outdo them in wittiness, cheekiness and our unique brand of never taking any of it too seriously. Growing up in the late Seventies’ and Eighties’, I lived punk rock, new wave, and art school and it left an indelible impact on my psyche and imagination. Our thing has always been mixing high and low, smashing different cultures together, and a more is more sense of elegance, its in my DNA”.

Hartig this season also referenced Bob Marley who, although he died in 1981, can still be described as an Eighties’ icon, as well as embellished Rolling Stones’ motifs. Was it nostalgia behind his choices? “ I've always marched to a different drummer”, says Hartig, “its why Libertine succeeded in the first place. Its almost a matter of having to know the rules before one can break them. There just doesn't seem to be much substance behind these trends that occur in fashion, and with us its different...we don’t do overt embellishment because its cool, we do it because we travelled to Bali, and Java, and India as a family when I was a kid and saw these cultures...it left such a strong impact on my sensibility and my vision... its an incredible frustrating time in the world for me, as authenticity isn't something that’s held as a premium”.

Slogans and text on t-shirts reflected bold power political statements through fashion during the Eighties’ logomania wave. Think Katherine Hamnett sporting her slouchy t-shirt emblazoned with “58% Don’t Want Pershing”. Lady Thatcher came to power and oversaw the City of London’s Big Bang of 1986. Sogans and texts ruled the catwalks at Paco Rabane ‘Futuresex’, Stella McCartney ‘Thanks Girls’, Haider Ackerman ‘Silent

Soldier' and Dior tells us we should all be feminists. Fausto Puglisi at Emanuel Ungaro went all out Eighties' exaggeration yet saved the slogan T 'Fausto' for himself. Now, in the wake of the US election and Brexit, uncertainty rules, is it reflecting political uncertainty or mere coincidence? "I find it to be more eighties than anything else. Look at Katherine Hamnett. The slogan t-shirt was hers, and that was a product of the Eighties', perhaps a time of uncertainty, but also a time of bold statements, and statements people were not afraid to endorse and be proud to do so" says Berardi.

However, Mabile just wanted a fun kind of "skateboard tag". "I loved the idea of a non branding, I mean its my name but the way its on the clothes could be a sport team name or the girl's boyfriend's name etc. I wanted a fun allusion to text on a t-shirt I didn't wanted to do anything political, I think fashion is done to forget that and make people happy and positive."

Libertine have been doing text on clothing since 2001, its their thing, a big part of their work and what they're known for. Their SS17 show declared "We Hate Everything" on the back of a jacket, what was behind it? "We've always loved text on our clothing but the "We Hate Everything" slogan was a joke really, the previous seasons before everything was "Love, Love, Love", so it only made sense to follow that up with the bold pronouncement "We Hate Everything!" Does he have nostalgia for the Eighties'? "Not in the way these other kids in fashion that didn't live through it do, mine's a much more refined, informed nostalgia, less obvious". He doesn't think it reflects political uncertainty or that its mere coincidence, "Its a sign that most designers aren't clever enough to come up with their own ideas, that's for sure!" He says he has no idea why Eighties' style obsessions are being referenced now, "I don't pay attention to an once of it, too busy trying to keep ahead of all the MAJOR brands knocking us off".

Maybe fashion will soon be all caught up with having revived itself and will have to come up with something new. "That is what I constantly think about each time I design and put the collection out, coming up with something new. I am lucky in one way that I interact a lot with my end customers so I have a clear idea of what the Thomas Wylde customers come to the brand for and what they expect of the brand. But that sometimes impedes the complete newness I want to bring to the collection. It's always a battle between the commercial success of a safe collection vs taking a risk and bringing something completely different and hoping for a payoff. I feel I need to be smart and balance it all well, but constantly reinventing the brand", explains Park.

"Everyday we recreate fashion" says Mabile, "its our job, because as designers, we work for an ideal life that we have in our minds, we want to recreate to make people different every season to embellish them, to make them go to new trends, its a liberation of stress, and a way to express each ones personality." So has it all been done? "Everything has been done, everything has been seen, every story has been told, but it's the context of seeing doing and telling that keeps things fresh and new" says Berardi. "Slowly but surely fashion will evolve, perhaps not as quickly as some things, but in it's own small way, it will always be looked back on as a sign of the times."

Berardi encapsulates his Eighties' in a nutshell, "Kylie Minogue modelling in my first show, Prince coming to my fourth show, and Madonna wearing one of my dresses on her album cover. How Eighties is that !!!"