

The Eighties. For an Overall View

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The distance that separates us from the Eighties, forty years now, allows us a double series of observations, one of a final nature, since the decade in question is far away in time, and therefore consolidated, analyzed and incensed in all its faces, the other, instead, with a projective background, in a sort of delayed side effect on those who tasted and introjected the products of that crazy, intensely contradictory yet beloved period. The broad response of insiders to the Call has constituted a testimony of wide-ranging enthusiasm, given that all the scholars have grasped the many souls of the Eighties, some with the knowledge of those who were there and lived the exuberance of decade as a first-hand experience, in addition to those who have metabolized that culture in a reflex and postponed way. The fact is that the cross-section of the Eighties is very suggestive as a whole, beautiful and passionate in its various aspects of investigation. Leaving our integrations on the subject for the second part of this essay, we allow ourselves to provide a quick overflight summary of the many topics dealt with, both as a duty of gratitude to the authors and to connect interventions to each other in a more fluid whole. Among the disciplinary fields representing the many contributions, one in particular allows a privileged view, the one related to the visual arts, certainly not for a banal cultural hazing, the art just as an old lady to pay unconditioned homage to, rather for the compactness of its appearance, precise and without ambivalence, unlike what happens in the world of fashion, in which the Eighties manifested everything and more, intertwining and enveloping the tangle of interpretations and even any philological mapping. Visual arts that, moreover, in their wide range of action encompass the field of photography and video art, including music videos, well represented with an essay in this issue. The most evident phenomenon of the art of the Eighties is the return of pictorialism, of solutions therefore played on the reappearance of techniques — and often of contents — tested by tradition, in a quotationism that time and time again was expressed in Italy by the three main groups of the decade, the Nuovi Nuovi whose leading guide was Renato Barilli, the Anachronists supported by Maurizio Calvesi, and finally the Transavanguardia, guided by Achille Bonito Oliva. Without going into the details of these currents, all characterized by an iconic-figurative soul and another abstract-decorative, among the alignments there is undoubtedly a common feature that can be seen in the logic of the remake and, as we said earlier, in the relaunch of painting. In this sense the essays by Pasquale Fameli and Federica Stevanin are very useful and well documented; the first investigates the US group Pattern and Decoration, placing it intelligently in postmodernism, or rather in the end of modernism, to be understood as recourse to hard means and pure geometric shapes in vogue, between the Fifties and Sixties, especially in architecture, as a panacea ready for post-war reconstruction, and declined in art through the Minimalism of the same period; but also the use of ethereal tools and black and white concepts, together with extra-artistic means, in the whole represented a hard-fought that had come to an end. Once banished every singular ornament by the purism of such solutions, as in the proverbial crime exorcised at the time by Adolf Loos, decoration resumes its appeal in the Eighties, it becomes an aesthetic duty refracted on a vast scale and reverberating on every field of culture. By opening the dances of fashion, a crucial theme of the Call and of the magazine that hosts the essays, it is appropriate to emphasize the uncontrollable spread of “pattern and decoration” even among the designers of the Eighties, in the lines of research that best represent its freshest and liveliest soul, the one conducted in Italy by Gianni Versace, Moschino, Alberta Ferretti, then Romeo Gigli, Enrico Coveri, Angelo Marani, Roberto Cavalli, in France by the fashion of Jean Paul Gaultier, Christian Lacroix, Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, full of ornamental elements and bright colors in total opposition to the Euclidean rigors of the minimalist counterpart. We will return a little further on the protagonists of Minimalism in fashion, above all Giorgio Armani, Gianfranco Ferré and Jil Sander. Meanwhile, the decoration works as a *trait-d’union* between art and fashion, in a platform of expressions relied upon the thread of the quote, of the pastiche and of the resumption of elements fished from the past in a mix of high culture and low culture also from the point of view of technical solutions. To recover painting and tradition in fact means safeguarding and refreshing the executive procedures of the past times, as explained in the excellent essay by Stevanin on embroidery in art in the Eighties, to which the scholar, however, provides a long pedigree of origin, finding the roots of the pioneers of the phenomenon, then joining the work of Maria Lai, who is known to have collaborated on several occasions with Antonio Marras. But of course, embroidery and fabric still recall the quotationist-revivalist line of fashion, eager to overcome the coldness of Minimalism with a generous supply of sensuous-decorative elements, sometimes lush and abundant, to the point of authorizing a bustle of ingenious aesthetic cate-

gories including the «neo-baroque» age by Omar Calabrese, or, for music, «barock'n'roll» by Brigitte Brophy. As in the visual arts quotationism is exemplified by two high-impact precursors such as Luigi Ontani and Salvo already in the Seventies, something similar happens in the Progressive Rock of the Genesis, Jethro Tull, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, of King Crimson, in Italy of the Goblins, of the Premiata Forneria Marconi, all very skilled in the rewriting of medieval, renaissance and baroque music, with the Queen, in this case, on the front lines, in the classical and intentionally kitsch rhapsody of their albums. All under the banner of a «lightness» — so well theorized in the Eighties by Italo Calvino in one of his famous *Lezioni americane* — which Alessandra Olivares investigates in her rich intervention, with precious references to the «pensiero debole» of Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo, and to the philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard. Curiously, the end of the «great narratives» identified by the latter, to be understood in the wake of Nietzsche's aphorism number 125 of *La gaia scienza* as the decline of monolithic visions, at the level of signifier corresponds in fashion to a return of innumerable and colorful micro-narrations, in the sense that the prints of the many designers host luscious nuclei of storytelling, icons and stories wrapped around a body in a sort of walking painting.

If the essay by Olivares includes photography, the excellent intervention of Claudio Marra embraces it in toto through two prominent representatives, Helmut Newton and Ferdinando Scianna, who started from a photographic experience-type report, both, however, reallocated in a direction capable of conjugating excellently a conceptual mood with the most mercantile needs of fashion. Moreover, the scholar mentions an indispensable source in the density of his words, Pier Vittorio Tondelli, touching another capital point of the Eighties, being the writer from Correggio one of the big names of the so-called «new novelists» together with Aldo Busi, Andrea De Carlo, Vittorio Tabucchi, among others.

Turning to fashion in particular, an intervention on the exhibitions of the Eighties was desirable, and so it happened in the reconstruction of Gabriele Monti, impeccable in facing the praiseworthy activity of Grazietta Buttazzi at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli and in unraveling her pioneering activity, to then widen the gaze to fashion journalism, in a tight analysis of exhibitions concluded with the examination of Gianni Versace: *Labito per pensare*. Monti also cites a long-time couturier, Yves Saint Laurent, from the work of Diana Vreeland, who, despite the weight of her smart intuitions, insists on the confused and misleading notion of «genius», without inserting the stylist in a line of continuity that brings him back to Surrealism and in particular to Elsa Schiaparelli. Saint Laurent has never hidden his passion for «the artist who makes clothes», as Coco Chanel called her, in a convergence at a distance again reallocated within the Eighties. How not to recognize, in fact, that a «shocking» style is the basis of Versace, of Moschino, of Gaultier, in short, of the polychrome and acrobatic excesses of the decade? And by transitive property, how not to see the same rhapsody in Saint Laurent's style, in his declared homage to the world of art and quotation? There is a baroque soul in the post-Dior Saint Laurent, an exacerbated and rococo pictorialism that goes deeply into the tackiness of Versailles, in the First and Second Empire, among the crinolines of Worth and the fancies of the Belle Epoque; we have to credit Vreeland for organizing an excellent show on the great Parisian couturier, but scholars and researchers must be careful and bring order to the continent of the saint-laurentian collections, and interpret them in a quotationist-revivalist key. In the perfect style of the Eighties, in short.

Remaining on the same frequencies, two excellent interventions proved to be fundamental according to the Call, one by Valentina Rossi, the other by Rita Airaghi, who analyzed the work of Krizia and Gianfranco Ferré. The first, formerly a fashion designer established even in the Sixties, is a good representative of a geometric line at her debut, cold, «minimal»; as Rossi well shows, Krizia is however attracted over time by the force of the quotation to the point of being inspired by the great contemporary artists, Mondrian, Calder, in one refraction of references in which the fabric curls recall the Ionic capitals of some Greek-Roman column. Ferré, on the other hand, also because of his education as an architect, which would guide him in a design style banked on solid volumes and «substance», indeed shows two operational poles, one resolved on softness, on the softness of a feminine principle as Airaghi testifies, the other, instead, declined on the ratio of a masculine principle, with decidedly more minimal and geometric tones. However, Ferré proves to be very skilled in mixing the deck, casually hybridizing the two gender channels, bringing the male elements into the female wardrobe until, first with the Alta Moda collections and then at the head of the maison of the maisons, the prestigious Christian Dior, the

italien dramatically increases the luxuriant drive of his new creative course. The architect overflows with decorative elements, the fabrics hover, the clothes, from abstract-geometric, become charged, colored, pictorial.

Among the prominent figures of the Eighties, guilty forgotten by critics and the general public, Cinzia Ruggeri deserves a place of honor, which Elena Fava dissects in a close and complete analysis, from the beginning to her mature style, evolved from radical and conceptual solutions, then turned into the playful and ironic lines of postmodernism. In itself, the label of postmodern, meaningful and very useful, continues to maintain its strong ambiguity, but Fava limits its ambivalence with great caution, since she focuses it on the most representative manifestations of industrial design, Alchimia and Memphis, guided respectively by Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass; Ruggeri fully captures the stimuli and the styles of that atmosphere, bringing the same compositional irony of the two designers in the design of her clothes, adding color to the function, promoting a light, aerial quotation, moreover witnessed by the splendid drawings selected by Fava in the iconographic section.

The essay by Ines Tolic also maintains the same platform of references to the world of design, evocative in dealing with an issue apparently not directly connected with the Eighties, being Fiorucci, focus of the piece, designer rooted in the distant Sixties, in force to the team of Pop Fashion. But precisely, Tolic has the merit of rediscovering the coordinates pursued by Fiorucci in a sort of remastering phase of its historical themes, thus finding in the designer the warm and iconic values that have always fed his fashion, with the warning, well expressed in the essay, to orient it on the stores designed by Sottsass Associati. The result is a very exhaustive and original picture that from the «shops of communication» then outlines the inventiveness of Sottsass demonstrated in Esprit stores.

Finally, two essays cover other desired cardinal themes of the Call, the music videos and the world of Japanese *anime*, punctually collected by skilled scholars in a parable that not only recreates the atmospheres of the Eighties, but that at the same time casts the foundations of the today's aesthetics. How not to see, in fact, that the baby consumers of that time have become the creatives of nowadays? Growing at the rhythm of music and video, in the MTV of that time — in Italy cloned in the beautiful media experience of Videomusic — and to metabolize the splendid series of cartoons from the Rising Sun, is a process that has certainly left an indelible trace in the maturation path of those who at the time were children first and then teenagers, as an adult ready to pour that educational imagery into products that in fact recall the heroes of the stage and those of the small screen. Gianni Sibilla puts together with great fidelity the story, in fact, of music videos, touching legendary products like Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, then focusing attention on a stainless icon of the Eighties, Bruce Springsteen. It is instead by Vincenzo Maselli the task of mapping an acute interpretation of *majokko* («magician baby girls») and of the *spokon* stories («of sporting tenacity») originated from the inexhaustible fantasy mine of Japan; Maselli examines, together with the others, two unforgettable series to the heart of adults and children, *Holly e Benji, due fuoriclasse* and *Mila e Shiro due cuori nella pallavolo*.

Minimalism and Poor Fashion, two abusive movements

As you can see, the richness and quality of the interventions form a very accurate synopsis on the cross-section of the Eighties, without obviously claiming that such a decade will find an exhaustive place in a single issue of ZoneModa Journal; fortunately, the road is still long, meaning that it'll be a pleasure to dive again in the volcanic bedlam of the «postmodern weekend», to put it again with Tondelli, possibly by orienting the radar on the other thousand frequencies neglected for space economy by the present issue, and thinking of further looks into the past. Meanwhile, as a curator of the project it is time to provide a rapid integration on the subject, obviously not complete at all, aimed rather at suggesting possible, future researches.

Let's start with fashion, a subject that is centered by almost all the scholars who participated to the Eighties issue, the flagship offering the journal's main framework. With happy amazement, the abstracts selected with effort and professionalism by the editorial staff and the pieces evaluated with passion by the reviewers avoided the most indigestible mistake, typical of any ideas on the Eighties, that yes, it is

true, as postmodernism commands can admit everything and more, mixing and remixing everything and every *topos*, that yes, can embrace heterogeneous solutions, multiform, but that have nothing in common with the Japanese fashion literally exploded in the Parisian runway in the early Eighties. Here is the opprobrious misunderstanding. According to a short-sighted and widespread reading of the phenomenon, Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto represent one of the stylistic keys of the Eighties, precisely because they were celebrated right in the Ville Lumière between 1980 and 1981, with an aesthetic so radical and antipodal with compared to contemporary solutions of prêt-à-porter to induce journalists to talk about «Hiroshima chic», «look *boro*», or a fashion for ragged and marginalized homeless people, or more accurately to talk about «poor fashion», to explain the torn and apparently shabby monochrome of the two designers. This is not the place to evaluate the aesthetic density of the Japanese revolution, since the intention of these words lies rather in the note that the solutions of Yamamoto and Kawakubo represent an anomalous body in the carpet of styles of the Eighties, not only from the point of view of looks and cuts but above all for a banal issue, however crucial: it is possible that two practically unknown designers break into one of the most prestigious catwalks in the world, jumping out of the blue? Of course, the value of Japanese fashion was not at all unknown, Issey Miyake and Kenzo had been known for a long time, but two apparitions so radical, extreme, dazzling in their inventiveness, could not present themselves under the Eiffel Tower without an adequate guarantee of ability; in other words, Yamamoto and Kawakubo have performed in Paris after a journey that still lacks historical clarity but well tested in the land of origin, where they had been active for a decade and more; the two designers had already developed their aesthetic vision, at the time in full harmony with the advanced research of art, of *Art povera* («poor art») just to recall one of the adjectives used by the press to qualify Kawakubo's and Yamamoto's collections, in Japan equivalent to the *Monoha* group, without forgetting the spatial achievements of the Land Art and the extremisms of Body Art. A fashion, that of Yamamoto and Kawakubo, ready to seize the ferment of the *natura naturans*, to celebrate the primordial elements of Zen philosophy — earth, wind, water, fire — with a force translated into garments that seem to be charred, uprooted, arising from some nuclear or natural disaster, and capable of converting the apocalypse into a new aesthetics. Like all those born «around 1940», Yamamoto and Kawakubo were not absolute beginners, a long period of time of experience and convictions put them in a regime of ideology light years away from the hyper-colored and flamboyant world of the Eighties, although they became famous in that historical phase. Besides, who could follow them at the time? It is not in fact a coincidence that the true moments of glory of the two Japanese designers will be the Nineties, when, all those who were born «around 1960», that is Rick Owens, Ann Demeulemeester, Helmut Lang, Ennio Capasa, the former Dolce & Gabbana, just to name a few, will spread the Japanese revolution by promoting its style on global scale? Summing up, instead of continuing to position them in the history and historiography of the Eighties, Comme des Garçons and Yamamoto should be reallocated back to the right years, those between the end the Sixties and early Seventies, for philological and honesty, to then be retrieved from a line of research that leads them to the heads of today's great avant-garde designers, Boris Bidjan Saberi and Gareth Pugh at the forefront.

Bypassed and — perhaps — partially clarified one of the misunderstandings of the Eighties, it is the moment now to put hand also on another cumbersome stylistic phenomenon of the fashion world, and extraordinary, by impact and importance. We're referring to Armani's Minimalism, to which we can add Ferré's and Jil Sander's. Recognized as the undisputed father of form and rigor admirably grafted onto a treatment that is nevertheless casual and disengaged, Armani remains the number one in Minimalism, a term actually derived from the visual arts, when, around the middle of the Sixties, in reaction to the iconic artworks of Pop Art, artists like Robert Morris or Donald Judd used geometrical and monochrome forms. At the time, the official minimalists converged, in fashion, with an exceptional purist, André Courrèges, to which it is correct to add also the precise volumes of Mila Schön and to a certain extent the experiments of Paco Rabanne. Not only, since Minimalism must be backdated to the historical avant-gardes, when, in full harmony with the Cubism of Pablo Picasso and the «supreme forms» by Vladimir Malevič, Chanel designed clothes «with no slushes», as he declared, based on the

1. I insisted on this interpretation in my *L'orizzonte degli eventi. Gli stili della moda dagli anni Sessanta a oggi / The event horizon. Fashion styles from the Sixties to today* (Bologna: Atlante, 2018).

worship of simple and dried morphologies.² In its various rebounds, Minimalism thus appears in the Eighties an almost abusive, present, incontrovertible category, yet atypical, despite its spread is justified by a very favorable historical situation. Beside the fury of quotationism, both in its French branch, Gaultier-like face, both in its Italian matrix, Versace-like look, so well-tuned on the exaggerated hedonism and on the superficial lightness of the decade, the rigidity of the so-called «managerial look» was imposed, very well suited to represent the army of yuppies and even more of career women, already supported by the fashion of Chanel, in the years Tens and the Twenties, in the Eighties beautifully expressed by the cold and morphological shapes of Armani and his the famous *greige* (grey + beige), unbeatable in normalizing the iron logic of geometry applied to natural anatomy. But let's be clear, minimalist purism is a fish out of water in the stylistic layout of the Eighties, a beautiful anomaly, much more at ease, like the Kawakubo-Yamamoto line, in the Nineties. And besides, Armani himself, almost in response to Ferré, is not at all immune to pictorial interferences, snorts of colors and decorations are well present in the collections of the designer from Piacenza, completely popped-up when the designer lends his inventiveness to Mario Valentino's eclecticism.³ Perhaps the only one faithful minimalist to the geometry + monochrome creed remains Jil Sander, fortunately also undergone an important reevaluation.⁴

As for the most genuine face — and artificial, hyperbolic, boisterous and theatrical — of the Eighties, be it gained from icons in vogue even today among the re-enactments on the subject of that precious historical parenthesis. It is not possible to recall the Eighties without humming the Duran Duran songs, or siding with the rival Spandau Ballet band, among the tackiness of the «wild boys» or the kitsch romanticisms of other neoromantic groups, the A-ha, possibly, in a remix of memories that automatically recalls the electronic pop of the Alphaville, the falsetto of the Bronski Beat, the trichological trash of the Kajagoogoo. It is equally impossible to avoid the vocal ignitions of Cindy Lauper and her girlfriends who so much «want to have fun», with her music videos overflowing with colors, from the riddles of Nick Kershaw, from the *Sultans of Swings* by the Dire Straits. But then, always about music videos, what more can you add to *Sledgehammer*, Peter Gabriel's masterpiece? In all these cases, the saturation of the colors and the pictorialism of the whole, in fashion is converted into the brands worn by the well-known Italian «paninari», above all Stone Island, Best Company, El Charro, Naj Oleari, American System, not to mention Invicta backpacks, Timberland strictly worn with Burlington socks or the embarrassing rudeness of the Durango boots. In this bubbly jumble of vestigial joy, the dark side of fashion was already at work, with the vampire blackness of the dark acolytes, well translated by the existential atmospheres of the Cure and the first Simple Minds.

As you can see, the road to the Eighties is still full of ideas and stimuli, but the ZoneModa Journal Call has at least thrown a first beam of light, waiting for the phenomenon to be dealt with the amused and scientific eyes of those who have never ceased to be in love with the turmoil of that decade.

2. For an interpretation of Minimalism in fashion and in particular of Chanel, see my *La moda contemporanea. Arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta*, vol. 1 (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

3. On the subject, see the excellent work by Ornella Cirillo, *Mario Valentino. Una storia tra moda, design e arte* (Milano: Skira, 2017).

4. Cf. Matthias Wagner, ed., *Jil Sander. Present Tense* (München: Prestel, 2017).