What follows is an attempt to reconstruct a time and space that probably never existed, and that I cannot claim to have lived through in any case. Equal parts homage and hagiography, it concerns a certain type of displaced nostalgia, one that, like the diva in question, tends to rear its head in unexpected places. It is an experiment in fantasy and a fantasy of experimentation. It is about Grace Jones.

### Futures New and Old

Looking back on the strange career of this singer, actress, model, and decadent, I am repeatedly drawn to two particular moments. The first is Jones’s live cover of the Édith Piaf standard “La vie en rose” as captured in her “contemporary musical” *A One Man Show* (dir. Jean-Paul Goude, UK, 1982). Perched on a fake staircase, Jones stands immobile throughout the performance, legs askew in epic stilettos. Her flat-top haircut is razor sharp. One gloved hand holds a microphone, the other mimes playing an accordion. Neck crooked, eyes blazing, Jones glares at the audience, expelling the lyrics like a
snake spitting venom. Piaf’s ballad becomes a robotic dirge in which Parisian bistro culture and futuristic S-M aesthetics collide.

But a curious thing happens halfway through the routine. The semishouted vocals begin to slide toward diva ululations, and a single tear runs down Jones’s face. The semiotic mismatch between Jones’s vocal delivery, the schmaltzy instrumentation, the singer’s glacial body language, and what Andrew Ross has called her “outrageous adult presence” is devastating. Is she a disco diva, a performance artist, or a sci-fi fantasy? Is that a real tear or is it engine lubricant? Are we in 1940s Paris, 1980s London, or on another planet entirely?

The second moment is Jones’s cover of Roxy Music’s “Love Is the Drug,” a masterpiece of emotional economy from her Warm Leatherette album of 1980. Quickening the pace and darkening the tone of the original, Jones sucks out the track’s lothario sleaze and replaces it with cyborg soul. Throbbing bass and synthesizer arpeggios transform Bryan Ferry’s dandy daydream into something rather more menacing, evoking a world in which love is a side effect and the drug in question is the cold, hard currency of sexual power. For me, this track also has a powerful indexical quality—it conjures up all the most heady excesses of a debauched decade, all the sartorial style that was the currency of 1980s mainstream club culture but is nowhere to be found of late, having gone back underground or decamped to the more fertile pastures of hip-hop and R&B.

This is why Jones’s brand of premillennial decadence endures. She is a reminder of what could have been. A pipe dream of modernity. An Armani-clad ambassador from the (retro)future.

The Uses of Decadence

What is it about Jones that makes such a reading possible? How does her star text, so overdetermined in its excess, function to clear a space for the fan to import his or her own desire? Let’s begin with her synthetic star power, or what Lawrence Grossberg would call her “authentic inauthenticity.” Jones’s performances are ruthlessly stage managed, her albums consist largely of cover versions, and she has been backed by a series of superproducers, including Sly and Robbie, Nile Rodgers, and Trevor Horn. Her work exhibits all the hallmarks of modernism: appropriation, simulation, irony,
bricolage, pastiche. But the thing about Jones is that this ostensible artificiality, this disavowal of emotion, works to increase the power of her work. The abundance of style becomes the work’s substance. This is why I find Jones’s “La vie en rose” more moving than Piaf’s original: it speaks of desire through a vocabulary of detachment. It is posthuman Romanticism on a grand scale.

In Jones, a fantasy of experiential excess is embodied, is given flesh and voice. Her androgyny and polysexuality take tropes of gender-as-performance to whole new levels. Ditto her “fierce stage presence,” which effortlessly “destabilizes historical relations of power enacted through male/female, black/white” binaries.\(^3\) This is a tactic that Jones herself tends to articulate more powerfully than most academic writing on the subject.\(^4\) Consider the following quote from a 1983 *NME* interview: “I’ve always had this kind of image that’s allowed me to pass the colour barrier, and I have an idea for a film where I could play a white girl. . . . it would be similar to de Niro’s gaining weight for *Raging Bull*—I like the political implications of that.”\(^5\) Other publicly available information about Jones’s life also feeds into this fantasy of boundless decadence: her successive relationships with her husband/manager/Svengali Jean-Paul Goude, the producer John Carmen, the beefcake Dolph Lundgren, the Turkish bodyguard Atila Altaunbay, and most recently, with Viscount Ivor Mervyn Vigors Guest; her rumored sadomasochistic tryst with the fashion designer Kenzo; her Helmut Newton and Robert Mapplethorpe photo shoots; her Marlene Dietrich impersonations; her 1989 drug bust; her 1992 bankruptcy; and her countless outbursts and tantrums. We are left with the impression that Jones has done it all, that she has experienced the highest highs and the lowest lows, that she drinks only Cristal, eats only caviar, and has not slept since 1984.

The kind of decadence embodied by Jones has the potential to open up spaces of fantasy, both real and imagined, in which we are able to play with different ways of being in the world, to live (albeit temporarily) at the height of our senses. Just as the figure of Judy Garland was able to “articulate directly the desire to escape into the world of the movies,” so is Jones able to embody the impossible dream of terminal transgression.\(^6\) This is why she is so compelling, why her icy insouciance is so seductive, and why she still speaks to people today.
**Jonestown, circa 2007**

I would like to conclude with some speculations regarding the possible functions of the Jones star text in the first decade of the twenty-first century, for it seems that her brand of androgynous excess may be staging something of a comeback in today’s pop culture imaginary. Artists such as Scissor Sisters, Peaches, Cut Copy, Felix da Housecat, and Miss Kittin are all actively invoking the excesses of 1980s new wave. This follows the recuperation of disco witnessed in the late 1990s — 54 (dir. Mark Christopher, US, 1998), *Boogie Nights* (dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, US, 1997), *The Last Days of Disco* (dir. Whit Stillman, US, 1998), Daft Punk, Air, Bob Sinclar — and complements the ongoing popularity of house music with its attendant discourses of sexual hedonism and corporeal pleasure. In the past five or so years, certain musical subcultures have displayed a renewed interest in Jones’s music, particularly in her early 1980s albums, whose austere pop aesthetic — what Simon Reynolds and Joy Press call “the eroticisation of alienation” — is beginning to sound cutting edge again, in a back-to-the-future kind of way. In 2003, Jones was a special guest at London’s avant-garde Triptych Festival, and she went on to do several UK headline shows with Sly and Robbie. Her tracks have been covered by several electro artists, including the influential German techno/electro producer DJ Hell, and they frequently appear on compilations from taste-making dance labels like Strut, DMC, Nuphonic, and Yoshitoshi. Jones also continues to support her lavish lifestyle with DJ gigs at product launches and nightclub openings around the world.

What is interesting about this rediscovery of new-wave excess is that many of the artists contributing to this revival of sorts are, like myself, in their mid-twenties. For us, the 1980s is a half-remembered dream, which may be why it can be so readily mythologized. But as I have suggested, underlying this newfound interest in flamboyant new-wave stars is a vaguely envious fascination with the kind of decadence that a star like Jones has come to signify. But this fascination is bracketed as ironic, allowing us to distance ourselves somewhat from the objects of our fascination. Nonetheless, this rediscovery of Jones speaks of an enduring need for excessive star figures within popular culture, of a desire for media safe spaces in
which new identities may be tried on and discarded, and, ultimately, of new—and largely untheorized—modes of nostalgia.

**Notes**

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2. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 224.


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