

The Impetuous Englishness of Elaine Constantine's Fashion Photography (90s-2000s)¹

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Résumé

À partir de 1997 et après dix-huit ans de conservatisme, le Nouveau Parti Travailleiste s'est efforcé de remodeler l'image d'un Royaume Uni alors en bout de course, vers la perspective d'une nation jeune, créative et plurielle, autour de la promotion de la culture. Cette tentative, labellisée sous le terme de « Cool Britannia » par les medias, met en question le caractère construit ou intuitif du concept d'identité nationale et d'anglicité. Dans cette mouvance, la photographie de mode a subi des changements radicaux, entraînant le rejet des images moroses qui dominèrent les années 90. Elaine Constantine, née en 1965, fait partie de cette nouvelle génération de femmes photographes britanniques. Les choix photographiques effectués dans ses clichés soulignent le sentiment de britannicité qui s'en dégage, et son intérêt pour la façon dont la nation peut être représentée, comme lors de sa participation à l'exposition de la Tate Britain, « How We Are: Photographing Britain ». Cet article se concentre sur les images de Constantine qui suspendent le temps lorsque l'objectif capte la vitalité hyper-colorée de la jeunesse (féminine) britannique. Il s'intéresse au rôle de la photographie de mode qui façonne l'image d'une société par laquelle elle est elle-même produite. La dimension photodocumentaire des images de Constantine défie la manière dont nous les regardons en tant que photographies de mode, mélangeant les sphères économiques, artistiques et sociales au cœur du processus créatif pour les revitaliser en retour.

Abstract

In 1997, the New Labour government's first attempt at (re)presenting and (re)branding Britain as young, creative and diverse was dubbed "Cool Britannia" by the media, making one wonder how instinctive or constructed the concept of national identity or Britishness is. Promoting culture in the 90s was seen as a central part of the plan to modernize Britain after 18 years of a Conservative government. In that vein, fashion photography underwent rupturing changes, with a complete rejection of the ennui-ridden pictures that dominated in the 90s. Elaine Constantine, born in 1965, was part of a new generation of female British photographers. Many of her pictures of British women and the photographic choices that she makes are infused with Britishness as shown in the 2007 Tate Britain Exhibition "How

¹ I wish to thank Marco Santucci & Co for generously letting me use three of Elaine Constantine's pictures for this paper and for our frequent email exchanges. I particularly wish to express my most sincere gratitude to Marco Santucci, Director of Santucci & Co, for his enlightening comments on the artist he represents, and the elegance with which he put the spirit of Elaine Constantine's work into words.

We Are: Photographing Britain". This paper will focus on her time-suspended hyper-coloured images where the (female) youth is stilled in motion, and will underline fashion photography's role in shaping the image of the society that produced it. The photodocumentary dimension of her images challenges the way we look at them as fashion pictures, mocking boundaries between the economic, the artistic and the social, mixing these spheres within the creative process and revitalizing them all in turn.

Mots clés : Photographie de mode contemporaine, photographie documentaire, britannicité, (sub)culture, jeunesse, identité nationale, femmes photographes britanniques

Keywords : Contemporary fashion photography, documentary photography, Britishness, youth, (sub)culture, national identity, British women photographers

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Introduction

When looking through the lens of English woman fashion photographer Elaine Constantine, the familiarity of her pictures seems to make them self-evidently representative of a national mood. How do Constantine's pictures address us in the cultural stance and site of origination in space and time (the 90s-2000s) from which they were created? Based on the idea that art and popular culture play an important role in the construction of national communities and geographies (Anderson, 1991)², what role do they play in the construction of the English identity as a form of national expression? The use of the term "Britishness" sounds more inclusive than the idea of "Englishness" which might need to be redefined, establishing what Kate Fox called a "grammar of Englishness" in *Watching the English*, i.e. "commonalities" or 'unwritten rules' that make the English identity "continuous [...], as in a living creature" as George Orwell observed (Fox, 2004, 1-2). Is Englishness "an instinctive or a constructed concept? And if it is a construct, is it an imaginary, a cultural or an ideological one? Or is it a state of mind? Is there such a thing as a national temperament, a character or an identity which can be claimed to be specifically English?" (Reviron-Piégay, 2009, 1).

The corpus of pictures chosen here are fashion photography pictures including many pictures of women. There are few pictures of men by Constantine. One example was commissioned by

² Anderson's conception of the nation is one of a community that is socially-constructed, or "imagined" into being (Anderson, 1991, 6). Anderson's approach emphasizes the role of creative imagery, "invented traditions", representation, imagination, symbols, and traditions in nationalism, as a constructed narrative about the nation-state.

GQ US in November 2008, with a British actor hunted down by a bunch of hysterical young women. The traditional models of Englishness, i.e. the gentleman, seem remnants of an outdated nationalism, as if Constantine felt the necessity to deconstruct the ideal of Englishness as a fixed national identity. Young men marked with feminine sensitivity given by the softness of adolescence or music and dancing are also chosen as models by the photographer. Rather than seeing girls as a mere footnote to male subcultures³, Constantine focuses on young women's public life in outdoors settings. The pictures discussed in this paper were chosen for their ability to represent the English nation in an iconic, topographic, feminine or documentary way. Pictures for Italian or American brands like Diesel or American Eagle were not included as relevant but a series for *Italian Vogue* was selected as it seemed interesting to understand why the artist chose to give such English identity to her pictures while they were destined to an Italian audience.

This paper will focus on the way Constantine rejuvenates fashion photography through her aesthetic treatment of the English youth subcultures, creating a fresh version of Englishness, and it will also underline the somehow paradoxical documentary dimension of her fashion pictures, taking a special interest in the viewer's response to her photographs.

British youth culture, "Cool Britannia" and fresh Britishness

Constantine was born in 1965 in Lancashire in a Catholic family, and her pictures in the 90s were produced in a new political context after 18 years of a Conservative government. The New Labour government's first attempt at (re)presenting and (re)branding⁴ Britain as young, creative and diverse was labelled 'Cool Britannia' by the media. With hindsight, this makes one wonder how artificial the concept of national identity or Englishness is. The English identity suffused in Constantine's pictures is young and dynamic but too ruthless to be completely part of the "Cool Britannia" trend which largely became a mainstream political and cultural phenomenon. The notion of "coolness" may seem to be little more than a semiotic pirouette to depict a break with the past. The Blair government wasn't particularly "cool"⁵ (Limat, 2007) even if it was the time of Britpop, *Trainspotting*, post-grunge unpredictable fashion designs, or The Spice Girls, who were "active producers of culture" (Kearney, 2000, 286) and "a challenge to the dominance of lad culture" (Whitely, 2000, 215). "Cool Britannia" was a buzzing phrase in Britain during the late 1990s denoting a renaissance in British art, fashion, design and music. National rejuvenation had been a key theme in Blair's electioneering, the Labour leader promising that his government would "make this the young country of [his] generation's dreams" (Blair, 1995). He tried to get his party associated with the "vibrant aura of contemporary youth culture" (Addison & al., 141), taking photographic opportunities like Harold Wilson before him to be associated with musical or art movements.

³ For further reading on the subject, see MCROBBIE, Angela, in S. FRITH and A. GOODWIN, 1990.

⁴ "Nation branding is a process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience" (Fan, 2010, 101). On "nation branding", see Simon Anholt's prolific writings e.g. Anholt, 2007.

⁵ "Cool Britannia" is a pun on "Rule Britannia", a song written in the 18th c. to celebrate the Imperial British power, and which was ironically very popular among the Conservatives.

Constantine's youthful models are celebrated on broader patterns of social change, both as "exciting precursor[s] to a prosperous future" (Addison & al., 127-128) and as disruptive actors challenging society's balance. In the 1997 Brighton shot "Girls on Bikes" [picture 1], the young models are roaring with laughter so much so that their faces are slightly distorted, either because of excitement, fear, adrenaline, or a touch of madness, reminding the viewer of some sort of expressionist Munchian scream.



Picture 1. Sarf Coasting • Courtesy of the artist @ Santucci&Co

The low angle shot, slanted road and vanishing point give a sense of reckless speed to the racers. Laughter is not static but linked to life, movement and light, from overlit outdoors pictures, to the opaque and cottony white light of bedroom atmospheres. Englishness is made specific in "Pillow Fight" for Jack Wills's 2010 autumn campaign through the iconic use of the Union Jack. The flag is a "migrating symbol", a symbol with different significance in different spatial contexts, a "surviving symbol" (Eco & al., 2011, 91), which is submitted to a random montage and make other memories come to the surface. The flag is part of the "Cool Britannia" paraphernalia and it may be seen as closing the viewer's gaze because it is a cliché, just as the lists or catalogues that are often used to define Englishness are. As one BBC journalist remarked in a 2012 article entitled "Define Britishness? It's Like Painting the Wind":

foibles and idiosyncrasies become endangered and beloved species. As the planet shrinks and cultural cross-currents threaten to wash national identity away, everyone is searching for anything they can call their own. The question, though, is whether holding up [...] the bits and bobs of our past that have somehow survived through the ages, tells us anything about our identity. Are we vainly searching for meaning among the dusty relics forgotten in a trunk in the attic? (Easton, 2012)

What's the narrative behind the object? How do these objects mysteriously survive? Is it through confabulation, a confusion of imagination and memory? Is it through heritage and tradition, and the construction of a "false" identity based on common symbols – e.g. a depoliticized flag that is turned into fashion iconography, a pure pop art statement often misinterpreted as patriotism?

Instead of closing the viewer's gaze, the iconic symbols that can be found in Constantine's work seem to open it as she reinvents these symbols with pints of foaming lager or stout beer in the "En Plein Air" series for *Italian Vogue* (1999). The girls are shot in action with a large aperture which makes the beer drops trickling down their chins and arms acutely visible. The picture was taken at dusk in a mountainous décor following the curve of the girls' heads and the movement of their arms, recalling the viewer of Pevsner's sinuous line as a characteristic of English art (Reviron-Piégay, 2009, 11). English manors in "To the Manor Born" series (*Italian Vogue*, 1998) are "*lieux de mémoire*" (McLeod, 2004, 6) often used as icons of Englishness and its bygone aristocratic aura. "To the Manor Born" is the title of a British sitcom from the 80s in which the indomitable Audrey Forbes-Hamilton, the dispossessed Lady of the Manor, finally gets round to marrying Richard Devere, her usurper and Czechoslovakian tycoon. The cloudy skies do not seem to bother the group of young ladies whose attention is distracted by something or someone off-frame, beyond what is seen, an image that was alive before the shot was taken and that goes on living out of the frame of the image, what Eco calls an "*etcetera de l'image*" (Eco & al., 44). Within the narrative thread unravelled by Constantine in her series, new images come to mind, echoing other fashion pictures which took manors as settings like fashion photographer Tim Walker's work in Northumberland, recalling the remnants of the British estate novel. There are no scones, pillar boxes, bowler hats, old cars, Marmite, fish'n'chips, Brylcreamed hair or Belisha beacons in Constantine's work, but something more suffusing and subtle in the light and colours that she uses and which makes her pictures truly English. It is something more like a state of mind, which allows her work not to reduce national identity to clichés belonging to the past, some kind of sign created by the direct writing of light, an "*impression*", a trace, an "*indice*" (Krauss, 1990), the luminous imprint of *a* reality, of *a* representation of the English identity.

The English are often defined as "marching backwards into the future" (Paxman, 1999, 151), but it is quite a different trend that Karen Elson, an iconic British model, seems to set as she is shot by Constantine determinedly walking forward with a crowd of kids in a typical English urban setting [picture 2], wearing a daring pair of red stockings ("Elson Street" series, 2005).



Picture 2. Elson Street • Courtesy of the artist @ Santucci&Co

Of course, as can be seen in other pictures, there is always a tinge of nostalgia that is part of the “national mood” (Ackroyd, 2004, 442), whether those nostalgic impulses tend to petrify the English heritage or whether they can be embraced in terms of “historical flux” (McLeod, 2004, 9)⁶, both looking backwards and forward. This emphasis on the artificiality of Englishness as a deliberate construct is in contrast with the equally valid assertion that national identity is “less a matter of reason than of emotion” (Reviron-Pégay, 2009, 5)⁷. Englishness is “protean and multiple”, and English art is characterized by an alternation of opposite tendencies or polarities⁸, leading to the “emergence of a composite image of Englishness” (Reviron-Pégay, 2009, 7). In Constantine’s work, it ranges from reckless youngsters laughing out loud or dancing for dear life, to the “Tea Dance’ series” set in old-fashioned British interiors or ballrooms in the North West of England, paying tribute to memory and a melancholy ritual indifferent to cultural and social changes.

From one opposite to the other, Constantine’s fashion photography has a documentary tinge to it which makes her a chronicler of modest everyday features of the English society. Her pictures offer documented evidence of a particular situation, whether shocking, nearly violent in the dance series, vivid and intense, arousing the viewer’s emotions in a way that fashion photography not always does. Her pictures bear intericonic echoes (in the Genettian way) with other chroniclers of a youth that embodied other forms of Britishness, such as Daniel Meadows, in his “Living Like This” series on board a bus touring Britain (1975). Anita Corbin, in her study of girls in subcultures entitled “Visible Girls” series (1980-1981) depicts several notorious groups or tribes such as mod, rockabilly, skinheads and less defined groups like new romantic, punk, futurist, soul and rasta mostly shot at the Blitz Club or at home, embodying various avatars of Anglomania, a craze for all things English, and later the name of Vivienne Westwood’s collection in the 90s which brought modern punk and new wave into the mainstream.

Documentary and fashion photography: the nation at generic crossroads

In what sense/to what extent can Constantine’s fashion pictures be seen as documentary images, challenging the way we look at them as fashion pictures, “mocking boundaries between the economic, the artistic and the social”, “mixing these spheres within the creative process” and “revitalizing” them all in turn⁹?

⁶ This idea is also developed in Mark Leonard’s 1997 book *Britain TM. Renewing our identity* and tackled by Charlotte Werther in a 2011 article.

⁷ Benedict Anderson also argues that nationalism today commands “profound emotional legitimacy” (Anderson, 1991, 4).

⁸ “The history of styles [...] can only be successful—that is approach truth— if it is conducted in terms of polarities, that is in pairs of apparently contradictory qualities. English art is Constable and Turner, it is the formal house and the informal, picturesque garden surrounding it” (Pevsner, 1956, 24).

⁹ “Ce dont la photographie de mode est le manifeste, c’est certes d’un art qui s’inscrit dans, et participe à, la réalité économique et commerciale, qui agit avec elle et est agi par elle. [...] La photographie de mode se définit alors comme un art qui se moque des cloisonnements établis entre l’économique, l’artistique, le social, les mélange et les transforme dans un processus de création qui les dynamise tous” (Monneyron, 2010, 211).

The fact that Constantine was part of the 2007 Tate Britain Exhibition “How We Are: Photographing Britain” shows the relevance of her images in terms of representation of the English identity from an institutional standpoint. This artistic event aimed at “reveal[ing] a nation mediated through the photographer’s vision and the camera’s lens” (Tate exhibition website). Three pictures from the “Mosh” series that will be discussed a bit later on in this paper were selected to be shown in a room called “Reflections on a Strange Country”. What was the role of Constantine’s fashion pictures in shaping the style and spirit of the new generation and its sense of belonging to the English nation, while at the same time reflecting it? “Look at Me: Fashion and Photography in Britain 1960 to present”, a British Council touring exhibition in the 90s, shows how Constantine played with the “look at me” / clothes and “look at me” / model duo, questioning where the model or I as a viewer and possible wearer of the clothes advertised stand in my surroundings and society as a whole. The exhibit “Mannequin : le corps de la mode” hosted by Les Docks–Cité de la Mode et du Design in Paris (Musée Galliera “*hors les murs*”) innovatively questions the commercial, aesthetic and human value of the model and the power of the image in the fashion world.

Documenting the youth and girls’ fashion in the 90s-2000s, Constantine wasn’t part of the scandalous conceptual art trend of the Young British Artists in the 90s, which doesn’t mean that the liveliness of her photographs was inconsequential or uncommitted. One has to take a closer look at the way her work may be perceived in reaction to the general fashion photography current of the 90s. Fashion photography was brought to public attention by the media turmoil created around Corinne Day’s 1993 *Vogue* shoot of waifish Kate Moss in the “heroin chic” genre, what Val Williams called a “photography of disaffection” (Williams, 2002) of the inert youth. Unconventional looking and imperfectly beautiful model Georgina Cooper was photographed by Corinne Day in 1994 in the anti-glamour and empty décor of a gloomy apartment (1994) and one can see the contrast with Constantine’s 1996 cover for *The Face* where Cooper’s youthfulness carelessly comes to life. Constantine exploded in this vacuum, challenging the ongoing visual idiom of models staring vacantly at the world around them and giving them a new authenticity and liveliness.

In the 1999 Jigsaw campaign Constantine continued to shoot euphoric images of healthy looking girls. In this campaign, one cannot ignore the English country’s physical reality or “sense of space” (Ackroyd, 2004, 448-449) and the art of Constantine as “a maker of moments, a stopper of time” (Williams, 2002). The world is photographed as a décor, a stage set up through association of ideas. The signified concept of autumn is represented by various substances like wool or cloudy skies, all connoted in the viewer’s spirit as Barthes puts it in *Système de la mode* (Barthes, 1983). The camera lens (“*l’objectif de la camera*” in French) is not turned towards its subject objectively. The designed clothes are art objects submitted to the art of the camera lens (“*l’art de l’objectif*”) and the photographer’s self-identity and national identity come into play. The clothes are used as a pretext in the composition of the image, they seem to adapt to the picture in Constantine’s work, and not the opposite. The commissioned photographer promotes the clothes and vice & versa, in a constant dialogue between the photographer’s and the stylist’s imaginary universes with more or less constraints, representing a type of women and a type of society.

Showing how Constantine's pictures are what they are can only be done by getting to know more about the way the pictures were taken. "Picture research and the creation of a scrapbook of inspiring references" is essential in Constantine's creative process, along with "Discussions with the stylist. On set arranging bodies in frame before a basic arrangement / composition is decided upon and lighting brought in if necessary"¹⁰. Differing the moment when the picture is taken, waiting till the model gets uncomfortable allows the artist to capture the one decisive instant among the millions of other non-decisive ones. About her famous 1997 Brighton "Seagull" picture, Constantine said:

I probably did about 100 shots or more on this setup, and I still didn't know whether I was going to get it. There was no retouching afterwards, so it's the real deal: the seagull was there at that moment. [...] I took it in the summer of 1997 as part of a 10-page fashion editorial for *The Face* about girls enjoying a day out in Brighton. [...] (Feeding chips to seagulls is a bit out of the ordinary, but I just wanted to put a bit of magic in it.) [...] [The seagulls at the Palace Pier] were friendly. The worst they can do is shit on you, really. [...] I've done other pictures since that have got a bit more meaning in them, but I still like this one because the colour is so clear and clean. And it came at a point when people had seen grunge fashion for a few years and needed something else to look at. (Interview with Constantine, Benedictus, 2007)

Soon after, there was an exhibition of her work in Paris. She overheard someone who was giving a little critique of the picture to some of his friends, saying, "Look at ze courage in iz eyes, as he dives for iz meal'. Me and all my mates were just standing by, pissing ourselves. Coming from Manchester, we don't analyse a picture quite like a French person would" (interview with Constantine, Benedictus, 2007). The image is created by the artist but reworked by our culturally biased interpretations. There's an encounter between the image and our images—or "pre-visions" as Didi-Huberman would put it (Didi-Huberman in Eco & al., 2011, 81). Along with Jauss's statement on literature, it could be said that Constantine's pictures contribute to model the image of society which originated them ("façonner en retour l'image de la société qui est à [leur] origine", Monneyron, 2010, 67). This happens when looking at a work of art changes the way we look at the construction of the English identity, which is also linked to the various modes of circulation of her pictures and the paths they use to get to their viewers (fashion magazines like *The Face*, *i-D* or *Vogue*, newspaper articles, photo albums, art exhibits, artist's website, the cinema screen).

Commenting on her 'Seagull' picture, Constantine shows how when we look at a picture, we look at it with words. Either one walks by a picture and shuts it out, or one stares at it in the openness ("ouverture") of an experience that is expressed by words found *in spite of* ("trouve[r] les mots *malgré tout* pour cette expérience", "approcher avec des mots ce territoire de l'image qui échappe au discours", Didi-Huberman in Eco & al., 2011, 87). Looking at a picture takes time ("*temps de regard*", Didi-Huberman in Eco & al., 2011, 91) and one has to learn how to look when one *takes* a picture¹¹. The "Seagull" image strikes the mind by its improbably combined technical and compositional perfection and spontaneity. Yet, one cannot say that easily what the image *is*. One can only say: this image *works* this or that way to represent the English identity in a typically Brightonite setting. It takes time to let the model grow into the picture, waiting for something interesting to happen. It is as if the lens of

¹⁰ Personal electronic correspondance with Marco Santucci, Santucci & Co, March 2013 (original punctuation used by Marco Santucci).

¹¹ French photographer Sarah Moon says that she takes pictures to "see" ("J'appuie pour voir", Moon, 1993).

a camera captured what Benjamin called the “optical unconscious”: the camera may make visible what a person cannot see, “the tiny spark of accident, the here and now” (Benjamin, 1931, 202-203)¹². Digital cameras’ continuous shooting modes and huge memory cards have completely changed photography, and long ago replaced the “lower sensitivity to light of the early plates [...] [which] caused the models to live, not *out of* the instant, but *into* it” (Walter Benjamin, 1931, 204). And yet this is what seems to be happening in the “Seagull shot”. The dark shadow of the other seagull in the distance directs the viewer’s gaze to where it is coming from, an unexpected element that is there not only because of the photographer’s talent but because the photographer was there at the right moment and took all the time needed to get the right shot. For that matter, Constantine’s technique draws from the works of British photodocumentarists like Martin Parr’s garish colours in “The Last Resort” or Tom Wood’s “Looking for Love” pictures of social and industrial decline in the dilapidated seaside resort of New Brighton near Liverpool. Parr’s coincidental picture entitled “West Bay (seagulls eating chips)” foregrounds the Union Jack and was also shot in 1997. It documents modern consumerist British culture under the impish gaze of a greedy seagull. The sky is as blue as in Constantine’s picture although probably not shot at the same time of day, and the vivid red colour of the flag quite barbarically announces what would happen to anyone daring to approach the box of fries. Such exaggeratedly bright red also calls to mind the colour of ketchup, in a pulp way. Until the 70s, the European art world was quite dismissive of colour photography often regarded as used for commercial purposes. Serious photography had to be done in black and white – and even more so documentary photography. Parr’s daring use of colour starting in the 80s was influential to other photographers’ contemporary practices including Constantine.

Although Elaine Constantine has become well known for her inspirational photo shoots of energised young women as in the Brighton series, “her major impetus in photography and the interests which informed the earlier photo stories which made her name on the London style scene was the energy of vernacular dance culture: [...] ‘I think that in photography, I am trying to articulate my own experience on the dance floor’ [says the artist]” (Williams, 2002).

When looking at her dance pictures, sound suddenly comes crashing down, be it hardcore punk, heavy metal, rock (or more recent music styles like Drum & Base), or Northern Soul, an American music style that had a huge role in the development of a generation in North of England clubs in Constantine’s youth, and which she has recently revived in a 2013 movie soon to be released entitled *Northern Soul*¹³ [picture 3].

¹² In some pictures, ‘that spark has, as it were, burned through the person in the image with reality, finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute where the future is nesting, even today, so eloquently that we looking back can discover it’ (Benjamin, 1931, 203).

¹³ To follow updates on the movie soon to be released, see <http://www.northernsoulthefilm.com/>, last visited 11th November, 2013.



Picture 3. Northern Soul • Courtesy of the artist @ Santucci&Co

Marco Santucci, Director of Santucci & Co, added in our recent correspondence: “Elaine has always been intrigued by the dance floor as the locus for culturally coded, more or less immediate forms of self expression”. Her images often try to capture her subjects “in moments of abandon, un-self-consciously responding to the moment”, and her move to film was because the medium of photography “did begin to feel limiting” to capture those moments. Constantine transitioned into film when she realized that “in freezing her ‘convincing’ or ‘truthful’ gestures they were cut short and rendered lifeless at the same moment that a successful or beautiful image was achieved”¹⁴. Her move to film was in part a response to this, which doesn’t mean that she has abandoned photography at all, as shown by her beautiful stills from the movie.

In her 1997 “Mosh” series, a groundbreaking fashion spread for *The Face* magazine, a crowd of young people was photographed slamdancing and drinking. A new kind of fashion photography emerged onto a style scene which had become melancholy and somewhat stifled. Full of energy and violence, “Mosh” symbolised a break with the past with the English youth ostentatiously *performing* Englishness or their reinvented underground version of it in opposition to a norm¹⁵. This is illustrated in the “Fuck Art, Let’s Dance” series, for *Let Them Eat Cake* magazine. The famous slogan was printed on a post-punk T-shirt expressing a rebellious musical spirit but soon became mainstream in all art colleges. On one of the shots of the series, “Harry”, the character’s sweaty face and inscriptions on his Perfecto leather

¹⁴ Personal electronic correspondence with Marco Santucci, Santucci & Co, March 2013.

¹⁵ This notion of performance or performing one’s own national identity is also central in Mike Skinner’s work, a famous figure of the UK Garage group *The Streets*: the new sense of English loss is not associated with the past but is ‘a loss of the immediate and experienced present. Costambeys-Kempczynski’s analysis of *A Grand Don’t Come for Free*, Mike Skinner’s 2004 concept album, explores the Englishness of the story’s twenty-year-old Everyman protagonist through the notions of loss, crisis, gender, class and belonging and stresses the notion of spatial rivalry. [...] Skinner is able to perform Englishness rather than define it’ (Costambeys-Kempczynski, in Reviron-Piégay, 2009, 12-13).

jacket (“Punk till you Puke” or “The Exploited”) make him the modern warrior of what Dick Hebdige called a “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (Hebdige, 1979, 105). In an influential analysis, he suggested that youth who developed subcultures did so as a challenge to social power structures. For many critics, however, “Hebdige’s account over-romanticized youth subcultures” (Addison & al., 2005, 136), a bit like Constantine does, in a way. The light beam behind Harry (and in the snapshot from *Northern Soul*) comes from the possible use of a snoot to create directional highlight just below Harry’s left arm, creating a washed out effect that decenters the viewer’s gaze and sets the subject of the picture at the heart of glamorous night life.

Constantine was instrumental in shaping the link between photography and the subcultural dance scenes. Musical and intericonic interactions and transactions abound between the pictures of Constantine’s work and Terence Spencer’s who shot the Mods in the 60s, Derek Ridgers, a documentarian of contemporaneous British pop and street culture (subculture of the skinheads, Punk and New Romantics), or Nick Knight’s Skinhead series in the 80s. One could talk of the photographic material or texture of Constantine’s world, woven with echoing images: “[C’est] l’histoire ‘d’une immense masse d’images qui peut se structurer par les rapports qu’elles ont entre elles, bien plus qu’avec ce qu’elles représentent” (Lemagny in Monneyron, 2010, 50).

Conclusion

The call for a renewal of British identity was voiced out by historian Linda Colley’s 1999 Millennium lecture at no. 10 Downing Street when she asked whether “it is possible [...] to re-design and re-float a concept of Britishness for the 21st century” (Colley, 1999). Constantine, as part of a new generation of female British photographers, made daring photographic choices as she decided to anchor her own version of Englishness in “smiley-happy-feely tableaux” (Craik, 1999), the pleasure of the moment and a sense of upcoming loss, far from the ennui-ridden work of the 90s. Although the methodological or historical significance of a fashion photographer’s work regarding the issue of national identity may be questioned, Constantine’s documentary practice shows that

she never started out with a love of pretty girls and faces. It was more a love of real people and their cultural interactions which then got translated into a vision¹⁶ of fashion. [...] [W]hat Elaine sought to do was to break out of the conventional tropes and conventions of fashion photography—the studied poses [...], the stock seductive expressions or gestures.¹⁷

In this way, Elaine Constantine succeeds in creating a unique blend between fashion and documentary photography creating a world conscious of itself and of Englishness made visible.

¹⁶ A similar idea is developed by Françoise Denoyelle in ‘Vanités - Photographies de mode des XIX^e et XX^e siècles’ (1993).

¹⁷ Personal electronic correspondance with Marco Santucci, March 2013.

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Biographical information

Julie Morère is an associate professor of English at the University of Nantes and a member of the CRINI team (Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l’Interculturalité). Her doctorate has focused on Evelyn Waugh’s intertextual and intericonic writing techniques in relation with his aesthetic and spiritual universe. Her work has extended to 21st century British Literature. She is now taking interest in contemporary British fashion photographers’ works, focusing on the way the images they create rely on and reinvent traditional elements of the British culture and identity to express their own aesthetic concerns.

Notice biographique

Julie Morère est maître de conférences à l’Université de Nantes, et membre du CRINI (Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l’Interculturalité). Après avoir travaillé sur les techniques d’écritures d’Evelyn Waugh et la dimension intertextuelle et intericonographique de son œuvre, elle s’est intéressée au roman britannique contemporain. Elle travaille actuellement sur la façon dont les éléments traditionnels de la culture britannique et de son identité sont réinventés dans les images photographiques contemporaines, pour refléter les préoccupations esthétiques des artistes et des photographes de mode en particulier.