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Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

HUMANISM PERSPECTIVE OF INDONESIAN POP MUSIC ALBUM COVERS IN THE 1980S ERA

Inko Sakti Dewanto
Institut Teknologi Nasional Bandung, Indonesia
inkosakti@itenas.ac.id
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Abstract
This study investigates the visual representation of Indonesian pop musicians on album covers from the 1980s and examines how these visual artifacts reflect and reinforce deeper humanistic values. During this period, pop culture in Indonesia experienced a significant transformation, with musicians gaining popularity through their music and the symbolic construction of their public image, especially via album covers. These covers functioned as powerful cultural texts, shaping public perception, constructing idealized identities, and influencing the emotional and aspirational relationships between idols and their fans. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in the humanism perspective, the study used five ontological elements of humanism—the self-interpreting animal, purposeful agent, language animal, dialoguing animal, and embodied subject—as analytical tools to unpack the visual strategies employed in these album covers. These elements helped explain how musicians were portrayed as entertainers and as representations of human ideals and existential values. The analysis reveals that album covers fostered a form of idolization that aligned with humanistic desires for identity, purpose, and self-fulfillment. These visual narratives supported the cult of personality and embedded ideological meanings that continue to resonate in contemporary pop culture. This research contributes to the broader discourse on design, cultural identity, and humanist thought in contemporary Indonesian visual culture.

Keywords: 1980s era, album covers, humanism, Indonesian pop music

Introduction
Science has undergone rapid changes and developments from premodern to modern and postmodern times. In the modern era, a movement or understanding can be radical, thereby shifting the position of previous understandings in contemporary society. This understanding is known as "humanism," a sociocultural movement that changes the direction of culture from previously "theocentric" (centered on religious teachings) to "anthropocentric," which positions humans as the center and measure of everything (Sugiharto, 2023). The position of the human being is firmly regarded as fundamental within the structure of the universe, a perspective that was institutionalized through the development of the humanist

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intellectual tradition (Gumanay, 2023). This spirit has taken deep root since modern times (17th century) and is still felt today in many aspects of life and science. This doctrine uses empirical reasoning as its foundation, rejecting other cognitive approaches. Consequently, humanism dismisses metaphysics and emphasizes individual freedom as the core of human existence (Al-Awwadi, 2021). The essence of 'humanism' is oriented towards humanity, placing humans as the main focus, and encompasses various related aspects: an emphasis on the body, mind, scientific activities, art, and human morality, as well as human actions, both individually and in social contexts, and so on (Jaszczolt, 2024). Humanism also highlights intrinsic values, dignity, and rationality, focusing on the overall human experience and placing humans at the center of attention (Tavares et al., 2020).

Humanism in the modern world is a complex concept as it signifies the revival of classical values that once dominated human thought. It also encourages freedom in interpreting works of art and literature, liberating itself from the dominance of religion or faith alone. Moreover, humanism reflects a spiritual spirit prioritizing human desire and potential, shaping individuals into intellectual beings who continuously seek meaning in life (Dhivya et al., 2024). It does not require additional justification and considers itself a clear and natural attitude (Hanappi, 2018). As a result, the bearer of humanism is the individual human being. Therefore, humanism remains rooted in methodological individualism and is not linked to considerations of class and exploitation (Rohiman et al., 2022). It has always encouraged continuous reflection on the relationship between science, ethics, and society. This phenomenon creates the primary foundation for developing more responsible and human-centered science. The concept of humanity that underpins social critique must be understood in two key ways: first, as a normative foundation that enables questions about human development and dehumanization to arise; and second, as an aspiration that continuously advances toward achieving universal human emancipation (Ng, 2021).

Humanism, emerging from the classic Greek paideia, has made a remarkable contribution to the contemplation and critical understanding of human existence, now elaborated into various branches of knowledge, including literature, language, history, philosophy, arts, anthropology, and culture. These disciplines adhere to the humanistic curriculum *"artes liberales"*, commonly known as "humanities" (Sugiharto, 2013). The interpretation of human beings differed between classic Greek philosophers and the Middle Ages, giving rise to some important thoughts passed down for centuries to the people of today. Humanizing individuals empowers them to achieve self-actualization, deepen their self-awareness, and realize their full potential for optimal learning. This involves guiding them to uncover their innate abilities, embrace their personal and social values, and take deliberate steps toward fulfilling their life goals with purpose and intention (Aung, 2020). One of the most interesting thoughts in the broad landscape of humanism is the idea of humans as the subject of reality, which serves as a standard in life. This means humans themselves are the measure to determine right and wrong, becoming a priority scale in considering reason (Simpson, 2013).

Thus, in the view of a social community, the concept of an ideal human, harmonious in body and soul, becomes an unavoidable convention. This ideal

human concept is manifested in the study of popular culture idols. The principle of humanism exalts humans to such an extent that everything will be meaningless if not positioned in the context of human interests. Whether consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, all opinions about humanism agree to "worship" humans (Sugiharto, 2013). This view often clashes and even triggers conflicts with religion, sometimes being accused of being anti-divine. However, when viewed from the perspective of popular culture, the concept of worship is more symbolic and venerates the idolized human figure. Idols are praised, so their position is above humans themselves. Idol worship can be interpreted as a form of deep admiration for individuals who are widely recognized and capture the attention of the public and media. This phenomenon involves adoring public figures who become the center of attention, influence trends and public opinion, and shape popular culture (Fitriana, 2019).

The human figure appears in various appearances in various media, including works of art (paintings, sculptures, reliefs, and photography). The economic interests of industries significantly influence society's patterns of needs, shaping how people understand and fulfill their desires and necessities. As a result, mass media plays a central role in modern human life, not only as a source of information but also as a tool for driving consumption (Russell, 2024). Society's dependence on mass media arises from its involvement in shaping perceptions, creating trends, and offering solutions to various needs that have become increasingly unavoidable (Budiawan et al., 2024). Mass media and popular music are part of the cultural industry producing mass-consumption products. They are applied with standardized formats, creating an illusion of variety even though the products follow the same patterns. These industries serve as entertainment tools that build social cohesion, uniting people in shared cultural experiences (Shen, 2021). Our eyes are fixed on the face first among human beings' many features, elements, and attributes. Yes, the face is a gateway, a door to a broad dimension of meaning with all the complexity of human beings. Through the face, a person can recognize and remember an individual's characteristics, attributes, peculiarities, and the cultural background accompanying them. Likewise, with idols whose faces and figures are constructed in various media, we can explore the aspects they represent because idols like pop singers are cultural representations (Tso, 2022).



Figure 1. Several samples of Indonesian pop music album covers from the 1980s (Source: Irama Nusantara)

This article observes an interesting phenomenon in the popular culture product of Indonesian pop music, the album covers of the 1980s. As pop culture artifacts, music album covers actively capture the spirit of their era while reflecting the shifting values of modernity (Evans, 2010). Like pop music, which embodies innovation, experimentation, and adaptation to global trends, album cover designs serve as visual platforms that express the artist's message and narrate contemporary cultural stories (Andrew et al., 2017). The visualization of album covers actively functions not only as a complement to the music but also as a reflection of society's shifting lifestyles and identities (Sgourev et al., 2023). Therefore, album covers are crucial in connecting musicians with their audience or fans (Resmadi & Hidayat, 2020).

This research argues that the 1980s was a pivotal decade in Indonesian popular culture history, marked by the proliferation of pop music idols whose images were widely circulated through album covers. The 1980s era is crucial because it reflects a significant cultural shift in which visual media increasingly shaped public perceptions of identity, success, and admiration. The visual prominence of idol figures on these covers indicates not only commercial strategies but also deeper ideological constructs that align with the principles of humanism—specifically in how individuals were portrayed as embodiments of personal meaning, aspiration, and emotional connection. The visual cultism reflects a symbolic form of "worship" grounded in the humanist elevation of the individual, suggesting that humanistic ideals were being subtly translated into visual languages. Thus, the research focuses on how these album covers functioned as cultural texts that cultivated idolism through humanist representations. By doing so, the study situates itself within the intersecting domains of humanism, humanities, and cultism in popular culture, using visual design as a critical entry point. The urgency of this investigation lies in its potential to understand the legacy of these visual ideologies and their continuing relevance amid the evolving dynamics of media and identity in the digital era.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach, which is recommended when there is a need to describe, interpret, verify, or evaluate a subject. It is particularly suitable for understanding the nature of specific situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems, or individuals. This approach can offer new insights into particular phenomena, develop new concepts or theoretical perspectives, or identify problems within specific areas of interest (Creswell, 2017). A qualitative approach allows researchers to thoroughly analyze textual elements within their natural context, prioritizing deep contextual understanding over numerical conversions (Sambeka & Ali, 2024). Additionally, it is valuable for investigating the validity of assumptions, claims, theories, or generalizations within real-world contexts.

Case studies

According to Leedy and Ormrod (Muratovski, 2016), the following aspects are the foundational guidelines used as a framework for determining the case study

on the album covers of Indonesian pop music from the 1980s. These aspects were used as a framework to understand and analyze the phenomena related to the album covers. Using this framework, researchers could identify and understand the unique characteristics of Indonesian pop music album covers from the 1980s.

Research context

This aspect included information about the phenomenon being studied, details about the case study's contexts, the environment, and relevant historical, economic, cultural, and social factors. In the case study of Indonesian pop music album covers from the 1980s, the timeframe from 1980 to 1989 served as the scope of the study. The development of pop culture, often referred to as the golden era of that decade, is the focal point of this study, with the vibrantly colorful visualizations on the album covers. The researcher observed that the aesthetic arrangements of these pop music album covers indicate the social and cultural dynamics characteristic of the 1980s in Indonesia.

Research boundaries

As previously outlined, the study focused on the years 1980-1989. Additionally, the media format under investigation was limited to cassettes, which were the mass-produced and dominant music medium in the 1980s music industry. The selection of artists was based on purposive sampling, focusing on significant figures with a high level of musical productivity and a large fan base in the 1980s, such as Fariz RM, Obbie Messakh, Dian Pramana Poetra, Utha Likumahuwa, Dian Pisesha, Vina Panduwinata, Betharia Sonata, Rafika Duri, and others. From this starting point, the researcher could identify the key aspects of the case study and the approach chosen for analysis.

Research objectives

Without objectives, it would be challenging for a study to stay on track and achieve its goals. The selection of Indonesian pop music album covers from the 1980s as the subject of the case study was based on observations of the consistent and stable dominance in visual design. Nearly all record labels active during the 1980s (JK Records, Jackson Records, Lollypop Records, and others) applied remarkably similar design styles. From this observation, the researcher assumes that this topic warrants an in-depth study to contribute new theoretical perspectives to the field of graphic design and enrich the visual culture literature.

Analytical approach

The researcher analyzed the case study from the perspective of humanism. This analysis employed an approach that explores the cultural significance of human values and the ontology of humanity as reflected in the album cover designs. As described in the book "*Humanisme dan Humaniora*" (Sugiharto, 2013), the following are the theoretical concepts and analysis steps for interpreting the data of 1980s pop music album cover design.

Human cultism

"Human cultism" refers to the phenomenon where humans are excessively idolized or worshipped, elevating them beyond their actual status. In this context, individuals are treated as if they possess qualities that transcend human limitations, almost similar to divine or sacred attributes. Sugiharto's "human cultism" concept describes this phenomenon where people are excessively idolized, raising them above their inherent human condition. In this situation, individuals are perceived as possessing qualities beyond their humanity, nearly equating them with divine or sacred characteristics. In modern society, the phenomenon of human cultism can be observed in various forms, ranging from the idolization of political figures and religious leaders to celebrities. Sugiharto cautions readers to be aware of this tendency, as the cult of personality often overlooks the essence of humanity itself and leads to the abuse of power. This concept urges us to return to the essence of humanism, where each individual is valued for their humanity, not power, popularity, or status.

Ontological humanity

On the other hand, the ontological concept of humanity emphasizes the essence and existence of humans as beings with intrinsic value. This ontology seeks to answer fundamental questions such as "What is a human?" and "What makes a human being human?" There are five permanent ontological elements of human beings: self-interpreting animal, purposeful agent, language animal, dialogical animal, and embodied subject. These five elements are crucial in understanding and reaffirming what it means to be human in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. In the context of globalization and technological advancements, the greatest challenge is preserving human values amidst the symptoms of dehumanization.

Findings and Discussion

Cultist concepts on 1980s Indonesian pop music album covers

The perspectives of humanism are vast and diverse; they have shifted from time to time. These perspectives can change according to the conditions or events that affect each era. From the many opinions on humanism, an agreement has emerged that leads to the concept of the cult of man. The cultic concept of humans is a philosophical value deeply rooted in humanism as a logical consequence of the human desire to achieve happiness through the worship of idols. Thus, in the context of popular culture, the cult of man is flourishing, with the influence of mass media featuring idol figures constructed to make humans (fans) become fascinated and adore them.

Indonesian society has been exposed to pop culture and has fallen into idol worship in each era for decades. The visual presentation on music album covers also forms an ideal standard for fans through the figures of the musicians on the cover. In other words, pop musicians are transformed into cultural agents who control their fans, not only through music but also through the visuals that appear on each album cover. The 1980s in Indonesia is known as the point that started the golden era of pop culture (Sakrie, 2015). This era was the peak of the fusion of

Western pop culture with local pop culture, the growth of which had started in the 1950s. The glittering nightlife was very thick and familiar to young people this decade. Pop music had become a fertile commodity for daily consumption. Fans highly praised the musicians, evident in the typical 1980s glamorized lifestyle, and they appeared on the visuals of pop music album covers in this era.

How did these album covers come to contain cultic concepts about human beings? First, the development program in the 1980s, which was actively promoted by the New Order regime, demanded productivity in all sectors, including the young generation. In the economic sector, people's purchasing power increased, especially with the rapid flow of globalization. It can be said that the slogan *"Piye, enak jamanku toh?"* indoctrinated by the nostalgists of the New Order era under Soeharto's leadership, had a point too. Because for the people who existed at that time, it was very easy to enjoy and do various things (Adwitya, 2019). In short, the cult of human perspective was unstoppable in the 1980s; they (humans) had reached the point of happiness to which they aspired.

Human happiness became the main goal of the cultic concept of humanism, which is how to center all interests for the sake of humans. The phenomenon of pop idol cults was one of the many methods of achieving happiness practiced in the 1980s. The cult of pop idols in the 80s inevitably involved fans who appreciated the musicality and stage performance and connected with their idols' persona and charm. The charms displayed seemed to be standardized: the majority of ¾ poses, where the face tends to turn slightly to the right/left, with a look up or down. Then, the musicians' style of dress and hairdo also suggests that they are always ready to party, all glamorous and identical to the glittering nightlife. This ideal standard is what makes pop idols so coveted by their fans, perhaps even to the point of fanaticism. However, have they (fans) achieved natural happiness?

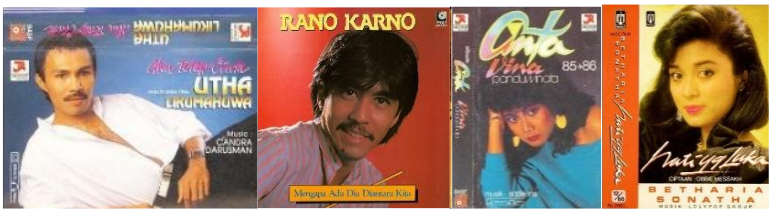


Figure 2. Glamor and ideality visualized on several samples of Indonesian pop music albums in the 1980s, with 3/4 face poses appearing dominant on many album covers. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

The fan's version of happiness is not entirely true. Because the lyrics and rhythms of 1980s pop songs tend to be sad, miserable, and often melancholy (until the term "whiny pop" emerged in this era), can sadness lead to happiness? Some names, such as Obbie Messakh, Rinto Harahap, Nia Daniaty, and Betharia Sonata, were successful in the pop industry. However, in the late 1980s, there was a repressive response from the New Order regime to the popularity of the pop genre. According to the then Minister of Information, Harmoko, the whiny rhythms and lyrics could "paralyze" the productive spirit of the younger generation (both in work and life). For example, in the song *"Hati Yang Luka"* (1988), popularized by

Betharia Sonata (composed by Obbie Messakh), the lyrics were labeled as "unnecessary and excessive," which he considered contradictory to reality (Basuki et al., 2006).

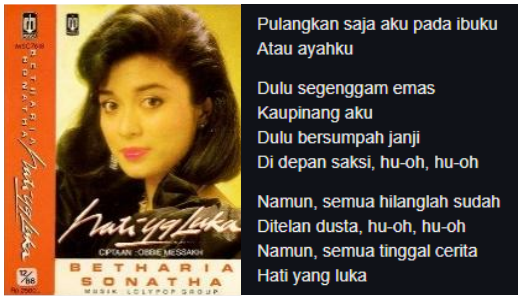


Figure 3. Album cover & lyrics of *"Hati Yang Luka"* (1988) popularized by Betharia Sonata. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

Therefore, was the happiness envisioned by the cultist concept achieved in the 1980s? Probably not, because the happiness seems to be pseudo, superficial, and even, in the extreme, fake (pseudo happiness). There was an apparent contradiction between the reality of the New Order's development and the glamorous and beautiful–but actually "whiny"–pop music. The idol images displayed on the album covers were merely "masks" created by the industry (record labels) to "bewitch" entertainment-hungry humans. Good looks, beauty, luxurious clothing, glitter, and glamor highlighted through album covers are just the gateway. There are still broader dimensions to formulate the values and ideologies of the 1980s. Through the view of humanism, the faces of pop musicians are not just physical features but also representations of the depth of humanity, with all its complexity, diversity, and uniqueness. Pop idols may still be a cult, but their meaning is not absolute because the happiness they aspire to does not yet exist according to their essence.

Ontology of humanity in 1980s Indonesian pop music album covers and designs

Humanity refers to the condition in which humans treat themselves and are treated as humans, the version of their true selves. The essence of human life is filled with dynamism; nothing is static. In this dynamic journey, humans need morality to face and view everything they encounter and go through (Sugiharto, 2013). Morality is essential for humans to achieve true happiness, not the false and quickly withered. Life's dynamics align with the nature of design, which is never absolute. Design always develops, changes, and adapts according to the times. In its growth, design has always tried to realize the idea of humanity through the concept now known as "user-centered design." Humans as users and absolute actors become fundamental considerations in the design process for research and creating works.

There are five permanent human ontological elements: self-interpreting animal, purposeful agent, language animal, dialogical animal, and embodied subject. They serve as a framework for analyzing the album cover designs and uncovering the underlying humanism values that shape their visual representation.

The following describes their respective understanding and role in influencing this research's objects.

Self-interpreting animal

This ontological element refers to the inherent nature of humans as beings who continuously interpret and are interpreted. This principle underpins the core of the humanities and directly relates to design as a humanistic practice. In the context of Indonesian pop album covers from the 1980s, this interpretive nature becomes evident in the varied meanings that emerge from the portrayal of idol figures. Album covers become a site of meaning-making, where fans interpret the visual representation of pop stars—through facial expressions, fashion, posture, and setting—as reflections of idealized identities. These interpretations are not monolithic; the designer's intentions may differ from the audience's perceptions, reflecting the subjectivity of human understanding. As such, the self-interpreting nature of humans is embedded in the consumption of these visual artifacts, where fans project their desires and identities onto the image of the idol.



Figure 4. The visual elements of facial expressions, fashion items, posture, and setting as reflections of idealized identities. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

Language animal

Ontologically, humans are also "language animals," whose understanding of the world is deeply rooted in linguistic and symbolic interpretation. In the case of album covers, language manifests not only in the form of typography, such as the album title or artist name, but also in the broader semiotic system, including color, composition, costume, and iconography. These elements form a visual language that communicates cultural and social values. For instance, the glamorous styling of pop idols in the 1980s, with dramatic lighting and fashionable attire, conveyed messages of modernity, success, and desirability. The use of visual language on these covers is not merely decorative but is a structured system through which meaning is transmitted and received, reinforcing the cultural narrative of the pop idol as a symbol of aspiration.



Figure 5. The glamorous look shaped by the dramatic lighting, communicating cultural and social values. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

Dialogical animal

Humans are dialogical beings who exist in a constant state of interaction with others. This dialogic nature is not limited to verbal exchange but extends to symbolic and visual communication. Album covers from the 1980s functioned as visual dialogues between the artist and their audience, mediated by the design. These covers invited viewers into a relationship with the idol, creating a sense of intimacy and familiarity. Through the poses, gazes, and facial expressions, the idols appear to "speak" to their fans, establishing a relational dynamic. Moreover, fans responded by embracing these visual cues in their own expressions—fashion, behavior, and fandom. The album cover thus becomes a dialogic interface, where humanistic values—such as recognition, identity, and emotional connection—are negotiated and reaffirmed.



Figure 6. Through their pose, gaze, and facial expression, the idols appear to "speak" to their fans. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

Purposeful agent

This element emphasizes that humans act with intention and are driven by purpose. In the design of 1980s album covers, this is evident in the deliberate curation of images that not only promote the music but also serve strategic roles in shaping public perception. The visual construction of idols was meticulously orchestrated to align with the values and aspirations of the era, such as

cosmopolitanism, modernity, and romanticism. These covers were not accidental; they were purpose-driven tools of visual communication designed to fulfill both commercial and emotional functions, by the complete control of their music labels, such as Musica Studio, JK Records, Akurama Records, etc. They reflect how design responds to human purposes—whether to entertain, to inspire, or to shape identity—and how the visual becomes a vehicle for human agents within a commercial cultural landscape (1980s pop music industry).



Figure 7. The major labels dominating 1980s pop music in Indonesia: Musica Studio, Akurama Records, and JK Records. (Source: Irama Nusantara).

Embodied subject

Finally, human experience is rooted in embodiment. The physical presence of the idol, particularly the face and body, is central to the effectiveness of album cover designs. In many Indonesian pop albums of the 1980s, the human figure was prominently displayed, often in close-up, stylized portraits (see Figures 4, 5, and 6). This embodied presence invites identification, empathy, and even desire. The idol's body becomes the locus of meaning: their fashion, posture, and expression materialize abstract ideals of beauty, charisma, and emotional expression. For the audience, engagement with these images involves a bodily response—emotional arousal, inspiration, or imitation—demonstrating how the body is both the medium and the recipient of design. Design succeeds when it resonates with the embodied experience of its audience, and these album covers exemplify that principle by leveraging the idol's physicality to connect with viewers on a human level.

These five ontological elements of humanity are intricately embedded in the visual structure of Indonesian pop music album covers from the 1980s. The covers did not merely depict musical content but functioned as platforms through which idols became cultural texts—read, interpreted, and emotionally experienced by their audiences. The human face, as the primary site of visual communication, served as a linguistic symbol (language animal) that anchored the idol's presence and narrative. These visual texts initiated a symbolic dialogue (dialogical animal) between artist and audience, establishing an affective and ideational connection that transcended the material form of the album itself. In this dialogue, fans engaged in acts of interpretation (self-interpreting animal), projecting personal and collective meanings onto the idol's imagery, thereby constructing emotional affiliations that were deeply individual yet socially shared. This visual engagement was not passive; it aligned with fans' aspirational drives and their search for identity, purpose, and emotional fulfillment (purposeful agent). Through repeated visual exposure and emotional resonance, the idol's presence became embodied within the audience's lifestyle—shaping fashion choices, gestures, and even attitudes (embodied subject).

In this process, the figure of the idol was elevated into a symbolic construct that surpassed mere entertainment, revealing a form of cultist humanism. Here, the idols are worshipped in a symbolic-cultural mode that privileges the human figure as the ultimate referent of meaning, desire, and aspiration. Thus, the ontological dimensions of humanity do not merely inform the design but are also performed and reproduced through it, reinforcing the intertwined relationship between subject (audience)—object (design) and positioning the album cover as a site where visual culture, identity, and humanistic values converge.

Conclusion

The essence of humanism, which began to take root in medieval times, remains undeniable. Its presence is still deeply felt today, even as it has undergone fluctuations and transformations throughout history. Humanism has played a significant role in fostering profound contemplation and critical reflection on humanity's intricate nature. This philosophy has solidified its place within the humanities by emphasizing the ontological elements that define the human experience. The principles and values of humanism continue to influence both practical and academic design, ensuring that these endeavors remain centered on fulfilling human needs and achieving genuine happiness. Similarly, on the covers of 1980s pop music albums, humanism manifests through a visual narrative that positions human figures as central, encapsulating values shaped by myths and ideologies, such as the cult of the pop idol, that still resonate today. What remains an ongoing challenge is the endurance of these humanistic values amidst the rapid advancement of technology. With the massive rise of artificial intelligence (AI) globally, pressing questions emerge: Can humanistic ideals persist, or will the essence of humanity be entirely overtaken by technology in the future?

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