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# THE FASHION APPARATUS AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVITY

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The production of a not-self we could call a *displaced sense of* origin-ality. In an effort to retrieve a sense of an original self, the urban consumer creates the self-image of a personal aesthetic, or a style that signals originality, so as to distinguish itself from the uniform conformity deployed by the fashion apparatus that threatens and succeeds in denying self-knowledge and self-expression. Fashion — the production of seasonal products for mass consumption — is bracketed by style-consumers as mundane, ordinary and devoid of a creative drive desparately needed by the individual-subject searching for personal style. The fashion apparatus and its strategies for producing consumption depend on this "negative" reaction to the products it makes available; the fashion apparatus operates on the basis of its own denial, producing its own lack so as to (re)produce desire(s) for the image(s) that will fill the w/hole of the self and its experience of being. Fashion produces the not-being or the anti-fashion subject.

A British fashion magazine describes the anti-fashion tendency inherent in the fashion conscious subject as follows:

To be fashion conscious or 'fashionable' is still deemed to make you 'fickle', 'shallow', 'dumb', 'ephemeral', 'fascist', 'fashist' (and some people do aspire to this!!!) — But in the real inner reaches of your outer limits... anything is possible — even liking clothes...<sup>1</sup>

Fashion has a bad reputation and the consumer implicitly or explicitly knows that there exists a fashion that could be characterized as *bomogenous* — clothing rack after clothing rack of the same article of clothing with marginal variations in cut, colour and shape — and *expressionless*, precisely because of the repetition that neutralizes the effect of being unique or individual; and finally, *totalizing*, in that the fashion display insists on a coherent coordinated of the parts, whether they be colour-coordinated or shape-coordinated along similar or dissimilar lines, into a whole that gives rise to the "total look".

What fashion offers in order to escape the regime of fashion is diversity, and the freedom of choice to create an individually unique style that is specially marked with personal and artistic idiosyncracies.

Inscribed in the fashion ethic is the insistence that fashion does not want to restrict individual imagination or imperialize the body for its own interest. What the fashion apparatus offers, then, is not fashion, per se, but the opportunity for the individual to create a fashion, to liberate oneself from the fetters of a mundane daily existence that denies pleasure, joy, a sense of self and an experience of being. And yet, in order to produce the space of desire for that "liberation" the fashion apparatus must ensure that sufficient alienation, self-loathing, boredom and sterility exist. In the necessary production of its own contradictions, the fashion apparatus holds the subject within a spectrum of choices which close at the extreme ends of total freedom, on the one hand, and absolute control, on the other.

## The Body as Text and the Texture of the Body

In a passage from William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, Addie, the character whose bodily-consciousness is the "I" of the text, describes the process of sexual and spiritual celebration and alienation that occurs between herself and her lover, a local preacher, and between herself and her husband, Anse. In the following excerpt, clothing becomes the dominant metaphor for shaping the experience of Addie's body to various forms of her sexual being in the religion of her world, her family and her self:

...I would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world's face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I; the sin the more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created. While I waited for him in the woods, waiting for him before he saw me, I would think of him as dressed in sin. I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed

also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air...

Then it was over... I would never again see him coming swift and secret to me in the woods dressed in sin like a gallant garment already blowing aside with the speed of his secret coming.

But for me it was not over, I mean, over in the sense of beginning and ending, because to me there was no beginning nor ending to anything then.<sup>2</sup>

Modernist obsessions with the internal and intensive experience of disintegration surface in this passage as a description of the disintegration of Addie's subjectivity. The interface between her "self" and "the world's face" is the surface of her body - its flesh - a common boundary between two spaces of opposing identities that cause her body to implode and disintegrate under the pressure of their irreconcilability. This passage also has the appearance of being characteristically postmodern, in that the body has been turned inside out and exploded out to the surface where experience has become an outer garment, an extension that inscribes the body with meaning(s). Here, the body is an open space, an open text, with "no beginning nor ending"; a body inscribed by the vestimentary symbols of a dead and meaningless corpus of religious doctrine: dressed in sin, stripped of her soul, Addie is re-dressed with guilt, shame and sin. The texture of Addie's body has been re-contextualized as a religious text. Stripped naked and re-clothed, the heurmeneutic body uncovers its intimacy, secrecy and hidden meaning, in the same way the preacher discloses and interprets the original scripture in order to recreate, or rather reproduce, or better still refashion wo/man in the image of the model woman: the unidentified god, the god with no body, the nobody.

Addie's experience of sexual and spiritual alienation described and inscribed through the metaphorical agency of clothing, translates in the present world economy of fashion as fashion's complicity in the concrete manufacture of alienation. The fashion apparatus operates on the basis of a primary contradiction: it claims to fabricate within you your being, your individual sense of expression, while at the same time forcing you, through its freedom of choices, to conform to the market uniformity of seasonal products; what is produced here is alienation, alienation from self and one another because of the way fashion negates life, by becoming the dominant repository of what it means to live and to have a "life-style".

Being fashionable inverts life into the concrete manufacture of alienation *from* life, thereby inducing a process of mechanical reproduction. There is no umblical cord here to be severed but rather an electrical plug to be plugged into the wall to turn on the blow dryer, the iron, the washing machine, the electric toothbrush and other therapeutic commodities that will make you feel better about yourself and loved as only your benevolent mother could love you: the guise of the benevolent state that perpetually keeps you at a conveniently arrested stage of irresponsibility and juvenility, so as to answer your every need and in so doing produce a reality of the real through the image: to produce the real image.

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The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively. In the least industrialized places, its reign is already attested by a few star commodities and by the imperialist domination imposed by regions which are ahead in the development of productivity. In the advanced regions, social space is invaded by a continuous superimposition of geological layers of commodities. At this point in the 'second industrial revolution', alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production. It is all the sold labor of a society which globally becomes the total commodity for which the cycle must be continued. For this to done, the total commodity has to return as a fragment to the fragmented individual, absolutely separated from the productive forces operating as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

The globalizing tendency of fashion to dominate a world perspective moves both intensively and extensively — moving inward into "the real inner reaches" (the immediate, daily and local experience of the supermarket check-out counter or bank lineup that mitigate against an "ideal" existence) and moving outward into "the outer limits": space, the East, the exotic, and the Third World. Within a global framework the fashion apparatus circulates and recirculates the language of representation of the Other both on the level of the person and body (anonymously) and on the level of the nation, but with de-politicized neutrality or impersonality. The imaginary vehicles of a "first world" fashion apparatus can be seen to impersonate a Third World "reality". This process personifies the living experience of the Third World in the onedimensional persona of the paper real-image.

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Economic exploitation of the Third World in the fashion industry is well known at the level of clothing production where cheap labour and the comparatively low cost of raw materials, natural fibres and fabrics have been and continue to be easily appropriable commodities for purposes of augmenting the scale of western capital and profits. That these forms of economic exploitation have recently reterritorialized into the sphere of cultural imperialism, signifies an important and complex moment in the socio-economic relations of the West and the Third World, Consider briefly Christian Dior's latest make-up line, entitled Les Coloniales. The advertisement contains the framed face of a woman that has been un-naturally whited except for the exotic colours encircling the eves like the plumage on a wild parrot. It is also interesting to note the use of anthuriums with their drooping phalluses that surround her face. The image signifies a colonial elite or the imperialist class of phallocracy. While the geographical space represented is that of the Third World, the indigenous inhabitants have been displaced. This displacement follows from an initial displacement previously used by the fashion apparatus where the native black woman, for example, is eroticized on the basis of her exotic-otherness and exploited for her representational value as such. Having burned out the commercial value of this image, the fashion apparatus has returned to the western image-scape and a hyper-subjected representation of the western white-faced woman. The western woman, whose already white face has been layered with an artificial white mask, has been re-eroticized in this advertisement as an exotic-other, westernsubject. The result of this otherization of the western subject is the double displacement of the black Third World subject. And also, a reconfiguration of the Other has taken place where the Other becomes for the western subject an interior danger projected out to the surface, in this case in the form of a white mask, in order to exorcise the fear of difference and alienation by covering over its real presence, both to itself and within the Third World.

There are two co-extensive strategies of power at work in the fashion apparatus I would like to draw attention to: first, the continuing cultural imperialism of the Third World by the western fashion apparatus that transgresses national, political and social boundaries in order to discover new material for its creative exploits and in so doing produces an image — an aesthetics of poverty — of the Third World for first world audiences, consumers and producers that displaces other discursive and visual realities of the Third World; thereby masking the relations of exploitation, oppression and imperialism that exist on socio-economic and political levels between these two worlds; and secondly, to bring home the immediate concerns of the local urban space where a kind of aesthetic "gentrification" is taking place and pushing the ghetto, the site

of a violent creative energy, (punk, for example) further and further to the margins of the urban-scape, to the point on the horizon where the land mass disappears from view. Relations of exploitation and oppression are masked and made invisible by an aesthetics of poverty, sterility, waste and death produced by the fashion apparatus. These two strategies, the one reaching out globally, extensively and the other turning inward, intensively, form a complicit w/hole where the fashion apparatus fragments the identity of the consumer-subject along divided lines and boundaries of an (inter-)national and local being.

## A Fashion Text: John Galliano's "Visions of Afghanistan: Layers of Suiting, Shirting and Dried-Blood Tones"

For purposes of theorizing the productive and non-productive effects of the fashion apparatus, I have chosen a fashion text from the popular British fashion magazine, *Harper's and Queen*. The March 1985 publication of *Harper's and Queen* presents a spring collection, entitled "SPRINGLOOSE", with an opening portrait that exemplifies, both in its discursive and visual text, the strategies and techniques involved in producing an aesthetics of poverty, waste and death that displace the internal and external problems of exploitation, imperialism and alienation manufactured by the demands of western late capitalism.

## The discursive text:

Foucault's distinction between the utopia and the heterotopia, quoted in the following passage, provides a useful model for discussing the discursive effects of Galliano's fashion text:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold: they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve

#### our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.<sup>4</sup>

Fashion promises the utopic experience, an untroubled region designated the "free-world" where the individual liberates her self from the burden of a regulated and mundane existence and transforms daily life into an ideal of endless and fantastic possibilities of being in the world. And yet, its strategy for producing the desire(s) for this utopic experience can only be described, I think, as heterotopic: a multiple and diverse field of discontinuous and incongruous spectacles lacking in syntactical continuity. In the specific case of Harper's and Queen, we have John Galliano's "Visions of Afghanistan: Layers of Suiting, Shirting and Dried-Blood Tones", a title and image that is both thematically and syntactically heterotopic; in the incongruous catalogue of words 'suiting, shirting and dried-blood tones', "and" signifies the production of a coherent list of three related elements that is not born out by this particular chain of signifiers; words differ from themselves - the unconventional conversion of articles of clothing, suits and shirts, into activities of ways of dressing and the peculiar mixture of the concrete dried-blood as a modifier for the impressionistic 'tones' - and words differ from one another - though the sequence begins with an alliterative homology between 'suiting' and 'shirting' the sequence is disrupted and stops dead in its tracks by the modifier 'dried-blood' used to designate the dominant colour motif. An unusual choice for a colour preference because of its disturbingly human, or rather, inhuman referent: the reification of the body as commodity where blood, in this case, is valued for its colour potential in the circuit of exchange between production and consumption and, in the process, loses its connection to human life and the living body — a deadly transformation of the real into the imaginary.

In the syntax of Galliano's title we find the heterotopia, a heterogeneous splitting and fracturing which is translated in the "world of fashion" as a multiple and spectacular field of types and tropes that circulate on the surface of visual and textual representations. The fashion-effect of his title dismantles narrative continuity of presentation because syntax is broken, dismembered, shattered and replaced by a "layered effect" — horizontal syntax, discontinuous and fragmented, gives way to a vertical effect of imaginary and semantic layers. In fashion, images cut across traditional barriers of limits of representation and efface, along the way, differences and historical specificities, thus producing, instead, a unitary effect of congenial pluralities that apparently 'hold-together' without contradictions.

What is also interesting in the title of Galliano's text is the site of Afghanistan as the mythical image-scape from which he draws creative





insight. But this mythical landscape is not properly a site of utopian possibilities and the dream world of a benevolent otherworldliness; more accurately, it is a distopic vision which embodies a spatial and mythical coherence that is characteristically nightmarish — the nightmare of Third World poverty with its threat of extinction because of famine, disease and war that make it difficult and even impossible to stabilize minimal living conditions for the large groups of indigenous people.

Galliano's incongruous visionary criteria demonstrates more than a heterotopic shattering of a relationship between life and language. Afghanistan, the site of creative exploitation, represents a distopic heterotopia: a *dis-beterotopia* where the borders of obliteration, evaporation and extinction converge in the single image of dried-blood. In a similar way the first world experiences the possibility of its own evaporation and extinction through the threat of nuclear war: to bring home the distopia to the mythical homeland of the West. If this image-scape has any spatial roots in the imaginary, it is in the mythological dream-scape of the nightmare where the fear of dying, resonances of death, and dried-blood tones predominate.

#### The visual text:

When looking at the picture of the woman in the introductory fashion portrait I am struck by the unconventionality of the fashion model, model woman; s/he is not beautiful, perfect, smoothed and glossed over in ways that conventionally exemplify the fashion magazine object(ive). S/he has the face of one sandworn, rough, lined and marked by imperfections - the impression contrived is one of being make-up-less, though the effect of no make-up is one that has clearly been produced theatrically. Her hair shoots out in all directions, scattered, unruly, Medusa-like — the appearance of one who cares little for appearance; but again it is a calculated disarray. Her spectacles sit precariously on her face, dislodged from direct contact with her eyes, they appear broken and worn, a prop for the histrionics of an "adventure narrative." In the list of clothes and prices provided by the fashion magazine in the upper right hand corner, I am surprised to find a reference to the glasses; the description reads "broken glasses £5". A joke? The fashion consumer can pay for the appearance of a broken commodity, a brand new pair of glasses dressed up with medical tape applied in band aid fashion to the bridge and the arm joint: the production of a purchasable broken commodity and one that "works" in that it produces the desirable fiction-effect.

The multiple points of view on fashion — aesthetic, socio-economic, political — converge and separate, bind together and blurr apart; vision extends outside the immediate photographic spectacle and returns to the

spectacle at hand: broken spectacles, broken vision, short-sighted or far-sighted, the wide gaze and the limited point of view. Galliano's "visions" of Afghanistan telescope that vast geographical and cultural spatial distance between the West and the Third World, hold the bridge between these worlds together with little more than a band-aid, in order, perhaps, to keep the (in)stability of those "visions" both imaginary and intact. But his visions explore and exploit, occluding utopian hallucinations or dreams with a distopic series of representations, like the old text she protects under her arm, bound together by a pretty ribbon, so as to keep it from falling apart, intact but inaccessible. And what does the very old and worn text contain? Traditional knowledge, historical understanding? A different currency in the exchange of "seeing" where to "see" is to know, to acquire knowledge. In her other hand she holds open another worn text but the invasion of the western gaze disrupts her activity. She has the look of one caught in the act, guilty, paranoid and party to clandestine activity.

If I were to put a narrative to this visual text, it would be in the genre of the adventure story, a story of intrigue and danger, the crossing of unwelcome and hostile boundaries, the near possibility of being caught, trapped in an underworld of surreptitious cultural exchange where her flight dramatizes the bringing of knowledge to the Third World or an illicit activity, such as reading texts that are traditionally restricted to "men's eyes only" - a James Bond scenario, except that the central character is a woman, and one whose aesthetic practice loosens the bonds of a conventional feminine identity. Her role mimics that of the male hero, but her heroism is one that appears to take larger risks. The unwelcome and hostile boundaries that s/he must cross-over are ideological, sexual, psychological and social as well as spatial and temporal. Her symbolic existence plays out a dangerous and terrifying composition. To read this scene allegorically would be to see the risk wo/men take in moving out of conventional identity-burdened spaces into new and exciting spaces that are liberating but at the same time frightening; once the mask has been chosen s/he must wear it in perpetuity lest the cover becomes discovered and rendered unconvincing and improbable. Her constant mobility, paramount to the illusion of her "self," threatens to become undone by the close of the camera shutter that catches the image, fixing her irrevocably.

The nihilistic experience of post-modernism we could attribute to its erasure of history, to the destruction of the cycle of life and death by levelling experience onto a continuous plane of "change", that is constituted by the eternal reproduction of the "same," albeit, in an apparently new set of clothes; the cycle is no longer a cycle but an unbroken chain of death and mechanical reproduction, a "vacunt" (Sex

Pistols) reproduction of the image that glosses over and smooths out the sur-face of the w/hole body effacing under the conditions of its transformations into the idealism of "being", imperfections, anomalies, differences, mortalities even, all of which have been pushed under, buried under the weight of a systematic and mechanical "womb-to-tomb" post-modern life-style — the parody of which is to be found in the death-like appearance of punks whose ghastly shades of white and black and skeleton disfigurations of the body remind us of another meaning embedded in the phrase "late capitalism".

The relationship between Fashion and Death is an old one. In Giacomo Leopardi's "The Dialogue of Fashion and Death" (1824), Fashion persuades her sister Death that she is a worthy and important accomplice to Death's desires and aims and, significantly, that her success depends on the desire for immortality (where immortality is the refusal and denial of death's finality and inevitability). In the first passage quoted, Fashion makes clear her capacity and talent for bringing the body closer to its destruction. In the second passage, Fashion explains her distinctive relationship to the desire for immortality on the part of her subjects, that eventually becomes their demise. In dialogue with Death, Fashion explains:

...you from the very start went for people and blood, while I content myself for the most part with beards, hairstyles, clothes, furniture, fine houses and the like. But in fact I have not failed... to play a few tricks that could compared with yours, as for instance to pierce ears, lips and noses, and to rip them with the knicknacks I hang in the holes; to scorch the flesh of men with the red-hot irons I make them brand themselves with for beauty's sake; to deform the heads of infants with bandages and other contraptions, making it a rule that everyone in a certain country has to have the same shape of head... to cripple people with narrow boots; to choke their breath and make their eyeballs pop with the use of tight corsets... I persuade and force all civilized people to put up every day with a thousand difficulties and a thousand discomforts, and often with pain and agony, and some even to die gloriously, for the love they bear me.<sup>5</sup>

Little by little, but mostly in recent times, I have assisted you by consigning to disuse and oblivion those labours and exercises that do good to the body, and have introduced or brought into esteem innumerable others that damage the body in a thousand ways, and shorten life. Apart from this I have put into the world such regulations and customs that life itself, as regards both the body and the soul, is more dead than alive... And whereas in ancient

times you had no other farmlands but graves and caverns, where in the darkness you sowed bones and dust, seeds that bear no fruit; now you have estates in the sunlight; and people who move and go about on their own feet are, so to speak, your property and at your disposal from the moment they are born, although you have not yet harvested them... Finally, as I saw that many people had preened themselves with the wish to be immortal, that is, not to die completely, since a fair part of themselves would not fall into your hands, however much I know that this was nonsense, and that when they or others lived in the memories of men, they lived, so to speak, a mockery, and enjoyed their fame no more than they suffered from the dampness of their graves... The result is that nowadays, if anyone dies, you may be sure that there is not a crumb of him that isn't dead...<sup>6</sup>

The fashion apparatus presents the style of immortality, a brand new life-style where nothing decays or gets old, masking death, waste, poverty and absence. Punk, on the other hand, localizes the style war on the urban-scape, producing an anti-aesthetic style that engages the violence, waste and poverty of the urban-other. The cynicism of punk effectively amplifies the "hate-system," reinscribing violence onto the body in an exaggerated fashion by piercing the flesh with safety-pins and perpetrating violence in the "punk-boot" that kicks back the waste of the bourgeoisie picked out of their garbage cans and retrieved from foot to hand to foot again in a violent gesture designed to scare the shit out of "them."

The final cooptation and colonization of punk-style by the fashion apparatus as a style that has come to signify a subversive and sub-cultural way of life on the urban front, and the definition of its cultural parameters produced by this process of signification, raises questions as to whether it is possible to ad-dress fashion as a potentially subversive activity. While anti-fashion may have sporadic and intermittent success at exposing the dominant and repressive fashion discourse or "life-style," the reproductive tendencies of post-modern late capitalism effectively neutralize and dissolve its potential through an inevitable re-creation of its process. The fashionability of "style-wars," characteristic of the emergence of other transgressive urban forms such as grafitti and break-dancing during the late 70s, as well as punk, has become the dominant critical mode of the post-modernist trend.

What is generally understood as a clash of identifiable styles can also be read as a style war against the very notion of identity and the final closures that are placed on the urban subject. In an effort to break away from the ultimate closures that are placed on bodily-consciousness by the

fashion apparatus, a certain stylistic madness is emerging where all possible and imaginable styles converge on the fashion subject; covered in layers of historical differences, the subject bears the weight of a heterogeneous and multiple explosion of styles. The result, one could imagine, would be the final collapse and implosion of the body, burnt-out from the pressures of the post-modern pace.

The desire for closure emerges as a desire for death where death, itself, embodied in the confrontation of punk, on the one hand, and in the aesthetics of poverty produced by the dominant style apparatus on the other, has come to be our *life-style*. To be fixed within the confines of one, single identity, and to desire immortality through the perpetuation of an image, is, in the final instance, to be condemned to a living death. In the words of Buffo the clown, from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*:

It is given to few to shape themselves, as I have done, as we have, as you have done, young man, and, in that moment of choice lingering deliciously among the crayons; what eyes shall I have, what mouth... exists a perfect freedom. But, once the choice is made, I am condemned, therefore, to be "Buffo" in perpetuity. Buffo for ever; long live Buffo the Great! Who will live on as long as some child somewhere remembers him as a wonder, a marvel, a monster, a thing that, had he not been invented, should have been, to teach little children that *truth* about the filthy ways of the filthy world.<sup>7</sup>

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#### Notes

- 1. From *i-D* magazine, No. 32, December/January, 1985-6.
- 2. William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying (New York: Vintage Books, 1930, 1957), pp. 166-7.
- 3. Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), #42.
- 4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeaology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. xxiii.
- 5. Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays, Operette Morali* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 51.
- 6. Giacomo Leopardi, The Moral Essays, p. 53.
- 7. Angela Carter, Nights at the Circus (London: Picador, 1984), p. 122.

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