Adorned in Dreams

Fashion and Modernity

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Changing Times/ Altered States

It is a truism to say that when we change our clothes we change our selves. Nonetheless – as *Adorned in Dreams* sets out to demonstrate – the role of dress in the theatre of life is extraordinarily important. There is no culture in which this has not been so, yet today both the cultural role played by clothes and the ways in which we acquire them have changed enormously. 'Getting dressed' in the modern world is a matter of *bricolage*, of the coming together of garments and accessories that we have usually not made ourselves, combined to create a finished 'appearance'. Every individual is a walking collage, an artwork of 'found items' – or perhaps something closer to a contemporary installation, changing as it interacts with its audience.

The rise of the bourgeoisie and with it consumer society provided the motor for the expansion of fashion. Beverly Lemire and Negley B Harte[1] have demonstrated that a ready made clothing trade was already flourishing in the late seventeenth century. This development led in turn to the publication of the first magazines to interpret fashion to the novice. Fashion journalism grew in parallel with its subject. This was already the case in the nineteenth century, but fashion writing and images of fashion have expanded exponentially since then, so that today newspapers, fashion magazines, television programmes and the internet bombard us with information and advice on dress and appearance. We are saturated with *images* of fashion. 'Fashion' is racks of garments we can touch and feel in the department store or the high street boutique, but it is equally a virtual spectacle, a regime of images, celebrating a continual carnival of change.

Nor is it simply that styles change over time, or that these stylistic

changes are a matter of surface only. The way in which clothes are made of course also changes, as do the materials from which they are constructed; as a result, the value of clothing has changed; once a pair of silk stockings would be cherished, but now a pair of tights can cost less than a bus ticket. The social meanings of dress have likewise changed; dress marks social class, age and even gender less strictly than was formerly the case, but although the signs are subtler, they are still there to be read.

It is the *styles*, above all, that leap to mind when fashion change is discussed. When *Adorned in Dreams* was published in 1985, women 'dressed for success' in the boom – as did men. The City or Wall Street Yuppie was a figure of the times, in a brash, big-cut suit and bright tie, edging towards *Miami Vice*, with flowing mullet hairstyles above square jackets in light colours with the cuffs inexplicably rolled back. Black was seen everywhere on city streets: it had dominated for more than one hundred years,[2] but now we were more self-conscious about it. Punk had strangely mutated into a style fit for Thatcherism – hard lipstick, hard haircuts, high heels – and this era of power dressing with its big hair, shoulder pads and echoes of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* was associated with the rightwing politics of the Reagan/Thatcher governments. Yet tabloid newspapers warned 'Essex girls'[3] to avoid white stilettos and tarty miniskirts, for the affluent 1980s revelled in, yet disavowed vulgarity.

By 1990 the mood had changed. The decade began with white as the colour of the catwalks, interpreted as a gesture in the direction of ecology and reverence for the Planet, and this was swiftly followed by 'grunge', which equally signified thrifty recycling and the rejection of conspicuous consumption. A decade earlier there had been the 'recession style' of the revolutionary Japanese designers, such as Comme des Garçons, who used black cloth and complex shapes that shrouded instead of outlining the body. Now Grunge emerged as an appropriate response to the recession of the early nineties. Grunge had originated with Seattle West Coast bands such as Nirvana, but was soon taken up by a group of British fashion journalists operating in New York. Anna Cockburn, fashion editor of *Mademoiselle* in 1993, looked 'as though she sleeps rough', wrote Marion Hume in the London *Independent on Sunday*.[4] Cockburn was photographed in an army surplus greatcoat, her hair caught back with a rubber band. Hume reported that the fashion

avant garde was wearing jumble sale outfits, sneakers and shrunken sweaters – but significantly these were mixed with garments designed by the new Belgian 'deconstructionist' designers, Ann Demeulemeester and Martin Margiela, so that the poor look was notional rather than actual. Moreover, the impulse behind grunge – a partial return to hippie thrift, androgyny and bricolage – was different from that of deconstruction fashion (or '*mode destroy*' as it was sometimes called), a more intellectual approach, which literally unpicked fashion, exposing its operations, its relation to the body and at the same time to the structures and discourses of fashion.[5]

By the mid 1990s grunge had evolved – or declined – into 'boho chic'. This was promoted by, among others, the London shop, Voyage, who designed luxury garments often from recycled and exotic materials. The bohemian style of the *fin de siècle* reworked the hippy idiom at great expense to create a fey, disordered appearance, suitable for an artist's mood or a minor actress playing Peaseblossom in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*. At one party, the author noted a guest in a tight black and silver lace bodice and lace skirt with an uneven hem line, thigh high at the front and knee length at the back, worn over very tight black pedal pushers. Another woman wore green silk, embroidered in pink and silver and overlaid with ragged net. With these ensembles went deliberately mussed-up hairstyles and strange flowers. Overheard in the ladies' lavatory was a mournful conversation about being barred from Voyage: the shop had by this time become so grand that for a while they operated a membership policy. (Monica Lewinsky, also a guest at this party, had adopted an equally extreme but completely different style as, dressed in a strapless black tulle ballerina style cocktail dress and scarlet satin stole, she appeared to have stepped straight out of the 1950s.)

An alternative take on the 'bohemian' approach to fashion was to go for second-hand. For hundreds of years the second-hand clothing market thrived, but with the advent of mass production it faded. It was revived by the hippies of the late 1960s, and in the seventies the fashion correspondent of the *New Yorker*, Kennedy Fraser, had suggested that retro-dressing 'represents the desire to find style, but obliquely ... and to put an ironic distance between the wearers and the fashionableness of their clothes ... an air of saying something quite intense but only in a footnote'.[6] In other words retro was an act of sartorial disavowal, a way of simultaneously following fashion

and not following it. A decade later the feminist academic Kaja Silverman saw it as rather more radical than that, 'as a sartorial strategy that works to denaturalise its wearer's specular identity, and one which is fundamentally irreconcilable with fashion'.[7]

This was over-optimistic, for by the millennium it had been commercialised and ancient 'frocks' that would once have cost £1 now cost thousands. Julia Roberts wore a 'vintage' Valentino gown to the 2001 Oscar ceremony, but, reported the London *Evening Standard*, 'fashion types are one step ahead. They don't want Sixties or Seventies designer labels. Instead they pounce on Eighties high-street pieces – "high hand" as it's called by those in the know.'[8] Soon this trend too had migrated from obscure retro and charity shops to the contemporary high street with the very successful British Top Shop chain leading the way at its Oxford Circus branch by opening its own vintage department.

Grunge and Boho paved the way for the more casual styles of dress that were creeping in towards the end of the twentieth century. Writing in 1994 Naomi Tarrant noted that many young men did not even own a formal suit[9] (although this may have more to do with age than constituting a permanent change). The American custom of 'dress down Friday' expanded into generally more casual styles for the office. What to wear to work was still an issue, but by the late 1990s the solution, for women, was more likely to be an unstructured cardigan and drawstring skirt or trousers than the in-your-face suits of the eighties.

David Brooks wittily described the origins of the casual style in Silicon Valley and its spread to 'Latte Towns' all over the United States. Latte Towns, he explained, were communities, often associated with a university, where formerly bohemian modes of life had fused with bourgeois wealth, work ethic and aspirations, and the bourgeois-bohemian lifestyle extended to dress: 'the local businessmen gather for breakfast each morning, wearing timberlands, no socks, collarless shirts and jeans. An executive with flowing gray hair [in a pony tail] will be chatting amiably with another who sports a Jerry Garcia beard, their cell phones tucked into their black canvas briefcases. The Birkenstock sandal store around the corner will have a sign in the window pointing out that its wares make nice corporate gifts.'[10] The women's sartorial equivalent would be granny glasses and peasant garb.

According to this new set of rules and sumptuary codes, says

Brooks, 'it is acceptable to spend hundreds of dollars on top-of-the-line hiking boots, but it would be vulgar to buy top-of-the-line patent leather shoes to go with formal wear.' Whereas the 1980s yuppies liked 'smooth surfaces – matt black furniture, polished lacquer floors and sleek faux-marbleised walls' today the educated elites 'prefer to build environments full of natural irregularities ... roughness connotes authenticity and virtue'. This rule extends to clothes so that Bobos (short for 'bourgeois bohemians') must wear flannel shirts, not silk, relaxed, not starched collars, linen slacks with marled blouse, Peruvian folk knits, 'a hemp baseball cap ... and sisal underwear', thus 'keeping down with the Joneses'.[11]

'Stealth wealth' was another form of 'bourgeois bohemian' dressing, 'inconspicuous consumption' as Gilles Lipovetsky called it.[12] Vanessa Friedman in the short-lived British fashion magazine, ***Frank***, commented on the trend in September 1998. Describing a smart London City couple, she estimated that between them they were wearing over £6000.00 of clothes and jewellery, but at first glance no-one would have guessed it: 'Dick is wearing basic brown-leather brogues, a standard two-button blue suit, and a utilitarian steel watch; Jane is wearing a ratty old twinset, grey trousers, sandals and a green bead on a string around her neck.' The green bead, however, is a cabochon emerald on a gold wire and the watch is a TAG-Heuer 6000 Chronometer Chronograph, alone worth nearly £2,000. The twinset is Comme des Garçons, the suit bespoke, and so on: luxury materials have combined with minimalist design to create exclusivity. The designer Marc Jacobs summed it up when he said: 'I decided that status would be done my way, which is to say, invisibly.'[13]

In the year 2000 style sections of newspapers were full of articles on the new casual, with much advice for men on how to dress down successfully. The British prime minister, Tony Blair, declared his preference for jeans over formal suits, and underlined this in March 2002 by appearing at a barbecue for Commonwealth leaders in a casual Nicole Farhi sweater, but 'career casual' appeared to be full of pitfalls. In ditching the suit, Wall Street, it seemed, created confusion in employees and soon a new set of rules had to be devised. The new casual did *not* mean dirty trainers and unpressed khakis, and by 2001 the London *Observer* reported that 'dress-down Friday is all washed up'; a survey they quoted had revealed that casual dress not only meant more time spent wondering what to wear, but led

to unwork-like behaviour at the office. Flirting, gossip and general laziness were the result, and anyway, who wanted to be 'generation bland', clad in what was simply a new and less sexy uniform of khakis and t-shirts.

In 2002 'smart casual' or 'casual elegant' was defined by a menswear salesman in the London department store, Selfridges, as a good suit, but worn with a shirt open at the neck and without a tie (a style now favoured by some British television journalists on location, although anchor news presenters still wear ties[14]). So the suit has not been defeated. Anne Hollander, arguing that the classic suit is still essentially a man's garment, celebrated it for its classic modernity, its ability to clothe the male figure in exquisitely subdued authority: 'it suggests diplomacy, compromise, civility and physical self-control'. She also drew attention to an aspect of the suit less often noted: its projection of masculine eroticism.[15]

The suit, now widely worn by women as well as men, was one form taken by the increasing androgyny of clothes in the 1990s, but the casual look was equally androgynous. On a summer's day in the late 1990s as I waited for a bus in London's Oxford Street, I looked at the passing crowds and thought: this is already the twenty first century. I had just emerged from an exhibition at the London College of Fashion of the wardrobe from the 1950s and 1960s of Mrs Korner, the wife of a London banker. How different were her structured couture outfits from what I saw around me, for swirling by were young men and women out of *Neuromancer*.[16] Multi-ethnic, they wore a uniform of jeans or combat trousers, cotton t-shirts, casual fleeces or zipped cotton tops. Startling effects had been achieved at the periphery – crazy pink and purple hair-dos, baroque trainers, flamboyant make-up, tattoos – and sexual difference was still marked by lower t-shirt décolletage and glimpses of (often pierced) belly buttons for the women. With their mini-disc players, mobile phones and clumsy backpacks, which transformed wearers into single humped camels, these young men and women seemed like forerunners of a cyborg world, the cell-phone presaging the chip in the brain or the tooth, the backpack part of a mutating body that might soon develop its own pouches and pockets.

Another feature of contemporary fashion is the way in which the eclectic mixing up of styles has become endemic. As Anne Hollander has expressed it:

> A post-modern person, now one of either sex, has ... learned that not only may disparate wardrobes cohabit in one person's closet ... but they may now be [re]combined ... old denim and fresh spangles or pale chiffon and black combat boots are worn not just in quick succession but together. The new freedom of fashion in the last quarter-century has been taken up as a chance not to create new forms, but to play more or less outrageously with all the tough and solid old ones ... [with] a pulsating tide of mixed references.[17]

The problem with this is that when everything is allowed, nothing actually seems outrageous any more, and the 'free wheeling, overlapping' style remix on the high street can look quite bland, blending with androgyny to create a strangely uniform look.

Androgyny is still more or less confined to younger age groups. In any case, the discourse of fashion continues to neglect the dress of older men and women, but in thirty years time today's cyborgs may be wearing suits and pleated skirts like their parents. On the other hand, they may not be: 'casual' has already invaded old age. Men and women in their sixties and seventies are now as likely to wear jeans, trainers, track suits and fleeces as their grandchildren, but sports wear needs a young, fit body to show to advantage; track suits can infantilise the old, consigning them to a second childhood by dressing them in outsize 'baby-gro' outfits. On the other hand where women in their forties and fifties would once have put fashion behind them and (even if not widowed) shrouded themselves in black, now fashion is available to all age groups, and disapproval of 'mutton dressed as lamb' has evaporated.[18]

The spread of androgyny through the 1990s was an irony at a time when feminism was in retreat. There was a widespread, but superficial assumption that women had achieved feminism's goals. Rather as in the 1920s, young women behaved with greater freedom in their leisure time, yet inequalities at work and in the home hardly changed. Rates of domestic violence had remained static since the 1970s; women's pay was at all levels less than men's; and women still did most of the housework and childcare. For the better off, 'having it all' meant having all the work; while poorer women continued, as they had always done, to combine low paid work with household drudgery. The difference from the 1970s was the return of the servant class; the 'time poor' (rich women) now employed a new generation of female servants to clean their homes

and look after their children – even if the new domestics were as likely to be students from Eastern Europe as members of the indigenous working class.

Feminism declined through inertia and complacency, but it also came more explicitly (if still covertly) under attack from another, scientific quarter. Scientists and ideologues promoted sociobiology and evolutionary psychology to argue for the importance of genetic differences between the sexes, and these ideas were marshalled to suggest that women, not to mention their children and husbands, would be happier and better off if they abandoned the search for equality and learned to revel in difference. Evolutionary psychology undercuts the continued public lip service paid to female equality, thus expressing the unabated ambivalence in the west (let alone elsewhere) towards genuine female equality. The obvious question is seldom posed: that whether or not genetic and hormonal differences between men and women are as significant as some theorists insist, should a society seek to reinforce or minimise them?

Status and gender divisions and inequalities are still – if less fiercely than even thirty years ago – expressed through clothing rules. In 1999 a British schoolgirl took her mixed-sex school to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) because girls at the school were not allowed to wear trousers. The headmaster backed down, realising that the EOC would support the student, but covered his defeat by suggesting – absurdly – that boys at his school might in future find themselves wearing skirts. In January 2000 an employee of the British Professional Golf Association took and won a discrimination case against the Association after being sent home for wearing trousers. These bitterly contested disputes demonstrate the extent of resistance, even today, to female autonomy, the intensity with which dress 'speaks' women's demand for equality, and the resentment this arouses.

As if to compensate for the neutrality of androgynous day wear, fashion maintained its glamour by means of a hectic relationship with celebrity and its cult. Women might be boys by day, but catwalk shows, first nights and the Hollywood Oscar ceremonies provided opportunities for displays of the marriage of *haute couture* and fame. In 2002 the Oscar gowns were less revealing than in previous years, when some of Julien Macdonald's creations were so

skimpy that they more closely resembled body cosmetics than garments. In the year 2000 the fashion journalist Lisa Armstrong, asked to nominate a 'dress of the year' for the Bath Costume Museum, chose Donatella Versace's green bamboo-printed chiffon coat, worn by Geri Halliwell, the model Christy Turlingham, Jennifer Lopez and Amber Valetta. The see-through garment was open from neck to hem, caught together with a large brooch only at the crotch. Armstrong argued that it perfectly symbolised the symbiosis of celebrity and the fashion industry, which she describes as being 'obsessed with celebrity endorsement'.[19]

The Hollywood Oscar ceremonies marks the most intense moment of this relationship. The yearly event might be described as a 'tournament of value'. Arjun Appadurai used this anthropological term, which originally described prestigious ceremonies in Oceania, to refer to western events, such as art auctions. They are:

> Complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. The currency of such tournaments is also likely to be set apart through well understood cultural [conventions] ... at issue ... is not just status, rank, fame or reputation ... but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question.[20]

The annual Hollywood Oscars Ceremony is just such a 'tournament'. The display of fabulous *haute couture* garments worn by stars whose toned bodies have been epilated, exercised, surgically altered and cosmeticised into Barbie doll perfection, constitutes an expression of power and wealth in an aesthetic form, not only or even perhaps primarily of the stars, the designers and the directors of the award winning films, but even more significantly of the agents, producers and other money-men behind the scenes.

To some, the semi-nudity of the (female of course) actors[21] may seem vulgar and garish, and there has been a backlash against the way in which 'naked is the new black'. Journalist Sarah Vine pointed out that the near nakedness of the stars on display had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with showing off an impossibly slender body,[22] while on the same day and again in reaction to the 'gown' consisting of a bikini and some net worn by singer Caprice at a pop music award show, Zoë Williams deplored the vulgarity and added that the appearance of one star

guest actually fully dressed made the 'naked chicks' look like hookers.'[23]

The cult of 'scantily clad' celebrities gives substance to one of the main objections to western culture made by its Muslim critics: its immodesty and decadence. In no area have the rules of dress been more fiercely debated than in relation to Islam, and even more so since the destruction in 2001 of the World Trade Center in New York, a catastrophe that ushered in a heightened and contradictory awareness of Islam in western societies. Alexandra Shulman, editor of British *Vogue*, felt that: 'The [nineteenth century] debate about corsets is in many ways reminiscent of the modern controversy about the various extinguishing robes worn by Muslim women. Are they imposed, or adopted? Are they a sign of sexual exploitation and powerlessness, or do they, as many women have said, confer a sort of power, freeing the wearer from the more insidious obligations of western dress, and the sexual appraisal of strangers?'[24] As with the nineteenth century corset, while some women chafe against the oppression of a garment that must be worn in order to retain one's respectability, others would hate to appear without it.

When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu travelled to Turkey in 1717 she visited the women's hot baths in Sofia. There, she reported, not only did her riding habit appear 'very extraordinary' to the Turkish women, who were nonetheless too polite to comment upon it, but they were shocked when she showed them 'my stays, which satisfied 'em very well, for I saw they believ'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband.'[25] The Turkish women were horrified by what they perceived as some kind of chastity belt imposed by the tyranny of Europan husbands.

The veil antedates Islam by thousands of years, but has today become exclusively associated with Muslim practices – although there is no general agreement among Qur'anic scholars as to what form of dress is actually enjoined for women in the sacred texts. For example, 'some Muslim theologians and leaders, like Soheib Ben Cheikh, the Grand Mufti of Marseilles, have argued that the Qur'anic injunction on women to veil themselves should not be taken literally, and today should be understood as prescribing education for women'.[26]

The veil is not a 'fashion' in the western sense of being subject to

rapid stylistic change (although it can be, and often is, worn *over* western fashion garments). On the contrary, it might be seen as an anti-fashion, or as the 'other' of fashion, and as a traditional, static form of dress associated with non-western cultures. Yet, as Naseem Khan has shown in relation to various styles of South Asian dress, the shalwar kameez and the sari have been subject to change.[27] The traditional Japanese kimono or kosedo also changed over time.[28] Thus the western image of the dress of other cultures as static has always been inaccurate. The western style cycle is specific to Europe and the United States, but everywhere styles have evolved, albeit more slowly. Indeed, as we shall see, the veil itself has not been immune to consumerism with its commitment to stylistic change – and versions of 'traditional dress' have increasingly been worn by prominent western women in public. Princess Diana wore a shalwar kameez when visiting her friend Jemima Khan, wife of Imram Khan, the former cricketer and Pakistani politician. Jemima Khan wears traditional dress in Pakistan, and western dress in Europe and the United States. Cherie Blair has worn a saree when entertaining the prominent Indian businessmen, the Kinduja brothers. It remains to be seen whether such superficial gestures will develop into forms of fashion that combine western and non-western styles; as Naseem Khan pointed out, the shalwar kameez does have similarities with the fashionable woman's trouser suit in the west and has come to be similarly used as smart urban workwear in India.

Geography as well as ideology has determined the kinds of veil that have been worn in different societies – there are many varieties of veil and many words for these coverings. For example the term burqah, today associated with Afghanistan, is actually an Arabic word and Afghans would be more likely to use the word 'chaadaree',[29] to describe a garment that completely covers a woman, with only a lattice grill over the face to permit some vision. In Pakistan the veil may be a filmy scarf drawn over the hair; in Saudi Arabia a flap of cloth is attached to a tight veil, so that only the eyes are visible.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only western feminists, but many national liberationists in Muslim countries, Kemal Attatürk in Turkey, for example, assumed that the emancipation of Muslim women must include unveiling. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s mass unveilings in the distant Asian republics sometimes resulted, after the Soviet cadres had departed, in death for the

women who had thus dishonoured themselves and their families. In the 1960s and early 1970s, on the other hand, the then regime in Afghanistan encouraged women to unveil.

In 1979 the veil or *chador* gained a much higher global profile as a result of the Iranian revolution. It was willingly adopted by many young, militant women as a symbol of their rejection of the corrupt regime of the Shah. Under the Shah's rule, a minority of bourgeois women had been emancipated, but this freedom for a privileged few was virtually meaningless to the mass of poor, uneducated women in the country. Moreover the corruption of the Shah's government and his government's relationship to the west led to revulsion from what was perceived as the wholesale decadence of western culture itself. Many Iranian women actively participated in the revolution. They were promised by its leaders that they would gain new rights and considerably more freedom, and anticipated that this would lead to an expansion of opportunities. However, once the Islamic Republic was established:

> the leaders of the revolution changed their attitude towards women and their position in the [new] society. Within a very short time … new rules and regulations concerning all aspects of women's lives were announced. For example, there were restrictions on the type of jobs women could hold. Included in such restrictions was the imposition of compulsory *hijab* on women; it dictated how Muslim women should behave and set forth an ideal image for Muslim women represented by a particular style of *hijab* that is continuously promoted by the government.[30]

It should be noted that the *chador* or *hijab* in Iran is a modern, urban, not a traditional phenomenon, since peasant women could never have worked in the fields when fully covered in this way. Since 1979 the struggle in Iran to impose the veil and the system of morality it symbolises has been continuous. Yet there have still been stylistic differences and changes in style, since two types of public dress have evolved. The orthodox style, consisting of a floor length black covering with a separate headpiece, the *maghnae*, resembles the habit formerly worn by Roman Catholic and Anglican nuns. A second, more westernised style, incorporating European details such as gathers, slits, buttons and other decorations, is combined with a patterned headscarf. Women may use the modified form of

hijab, along with make-up, to signal their political distance from the regime, but still risk the intrusive interest of the chastity police.[31]

(One of the odder results of Iranian dress rules was the football match, during the qualifying rounds of the World Cup, between Iran and Ireland. Iranian women are forbidden to attend football matches, but a compromise for the Irish women supporters permitted them to attend the match, provided they covered themselves. They turned up in large numbers, clad in green veils, to brave the hostility of the indigenous fans.)

In Palestine and Turkey, by contrast, some women have *re-veiled* as an expression of anti-western sentiment. In Turkey at least, however, Islamists, no less than secularists have, since the 1980s, been catered to by the rapid expansion of businesses that specialise in clothing and other articles for believers. Yael Navaro-Yashin has shown that Islamist, no less than secularist women in Turkey, followed fashion in their own way. Young Islamist women sought fashionable, expensive coats[32] and, rejecting the dark colours favoured by the strictest believers, favoured 'light pink and lavender, all the shades of purple, pastel blue and green, shady yellow and grey. Students carefully matched the colour of their *türbans*[33] ... to that of their overcoats, in the fashion that they took on to the streets at that time' (the mid 1990s).[34] Yael Navaro-Yashin relates such trends to the commodisation of identities, both secular and Islamist, in contemporary Turkey, and demonstrates that while claiming to represent 'authenticity' and 'tradition' contemporary Islamist fashions are the product of the new Turkish capitalism. The avowed aim of one of Turkey's most successful Islamist clothing manufacturers (who has now expanded into Germany, the Netherlands and other European countries with large Turkish populations), was to provide Islamic clothing for women that would make them look pretty, so that they would prefer his models to western fashions. Thus the reappearance of the veil, in new forms, cannot be separated from capitalist development and urbanisation. The paradoxical result has been the incorporation of covered dress into the fashion system, rather than a distancing from it.

An Islamist movement also developed in Egypt in the 1970s, spearheaded by women students and radicals. There the government attempted to prevent women from veiling, but without success. In the 1970s the young female militants of the New Islam had

to make their own Islamic dress, since it did not exist commercially. It consisted of:

> an unfitted, long-sleeved, ankle-length gown in austere solid colours and thick opaque fabric ... and a headcover that covers the hair and extends low to the forehead, comes under the chin to conceal the neck and falls down over the chest and back. The common colours used by women during the first decade of the movement were beige, brown, navy, deep wine, white and black. This dress is worn while engaging fully in worldly affairs in public social space in which not only is her gender accepted, but also her sexuality. Austere dress form and behaviour are therefore not accompanied by withdrawal, seclusion or segregation.'[35]

For educated young Malay women in Singapore and Malaysia, where many different kinds of head covering are worn, and are often combined with western clothes such as jeans, the veil again has a radical significance.[36] The veil here sometimes has class connotations – to symbolise membership of an educated, middle class elite – and to signify for its wearers an identity that combines professional life and work with the modesty and reticence of Islamic beliefs. A student from this part of the world told me that for her the veil was a symbol of liberation rather than oppression. In a global world in which 'the media plays a harmful role in trying to dictate the person we should be through our dress, how we look, our lifestyle etc., Islam opposes this. A woman is not seen or judged by her beauty, wealth or privileges but by her personality, character and good deeds. Young Muslim women are reclaiming the veil – to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies.'

In metropolitan France the *hijab*, here referring simply to a headscarf, became a highly politicised object when worn by Muslim schoolgirls. State education in France is secular in a country in which church and state were completely separated at the time of the French Revolution. Here again, as everywhere, the headscarf has become much more than a garment, it has become a highly symbolic *statement*, an over-determined object, with entirely different and indeed conflicting meanings to different groups. Some saw it as an attack on secularism, some as a fundamentalist statement, many as *the* symbol of the oppression of women. Those who objected to it were seen as racist and xenophobic, or, conversely, as defending secular liberal values and female equality. For some Muslim women

in France the *hijab* appeared to become primarily a statement of ethno-religious identity rather than an expression of purely religious belief, since, for example, girls in the *hijab* were observed smoking, which is against Islamic principles. One woman was even photographed wearing a *hijab* with a bikini.[37]

The French debate exposes the difficulties for liberal westerners of achieving a coherent and adequate position on the issue of the veil. The researcher, Malcolm Brown believed that the *hijab*:

> should be permitted [in state schools] because a ban would have the effect of fulfilling, in part, the agenda of the extreme right in France. On the other hand, Muslim organisations should consider the Qur'anic ... context in more depth, and emphasise that Muslim women and girls should not be forced to wear the *hijab*, nor ... feel obliged to wear it. Freedom of conscience should be recognised.[38]

He concedes, however, that the emphasis on choice is itself an individualised western view.

Fadwa El Guindi, rather inconsistently, emphasises choice to defend the Egyptian veiling practices referred to above. Hers is a disingenuous argument, for choice is surely not the point for religiously committed individuals. Rather it is obedience to a higher law. Moreover, choice, the mantra of western consumer society, cannot be the highest moral principle at the end of the day, and testifies rather to an emptiness at the heart of capitalist culture.

It could be argued that there is no need for non Muslims to have any view at all on the various forms of veiling practiced throughout the world, that it is none of our business. Yet, when these traditions impinge on our own, different ones, we are bound to have a view of some kind; and since the practice of veiling is often defended as a critique of western 'decadence' it is relevant for us to discuss it. Muslims have rightly objected to the way in which the west has attacked Islamic customs, often in an ignorant and racist way. Western women have a corresponding right to expect that Muslims should not stereotype our forms of dress and behaviour as evidence merely of 'decadence' and promiscuity.

Many western feminists would endorse the Islamic criticism of western women's dress as frequently vulgarly titillating. In the past two years there has been much journalistic criticism of the exiguous attire adopted by various female stars and celebrities, as I suggested earlier, and of the 'ladette' culture in general. Is it really so emancipated for women to get drunk, smoke, swear and fornicate in imitation of football hooligans? Feminists can also only agree with Muslim women who point to the lack of equality for women in the west, the high rates of domestic violence, the sexual and economic exploitation.

Yet there remain valid arguments against the belief that veiling, in whatever form, constitutes an answer either to these decadent aspects of capitalist society, or to the domination of men worldwide. Firstly, in covering herself a woman endorses the view that it is *her* responsibility to guard men from temptation. The view that it is women's role to guard morality and to 'save men from themselves' is not unknown in the west either. Yet this infantilises men. Adults of both sexes should take responsibility for their own behaviour and men as well as women should exercise self control (which indeed Islam does enjoin). As one Muslim schoolgirl in France asked a visiting Imam, who had explained that the *hijab* guarded men from sexual temptation, why since she found boys attractive, didn't men have to be veiled as well in order to protect *her* from temptation?[39] This difference in the treatment of men and women within Islam reflects a view (not confined to Islam[40]) that men and women are essentially *different* from each other and that sexual roles should and must reflect this difference. This contrasts with at least some forms of western feminism, which insist that women have an active and spontaneous sexual desire – it is not simply a response to men's desire.

Secondly, it is not necessarily the case that if the body is seen as precious and if human beauty is to be cherished, it follows that it should be hidden in public. In ancient Greece the naked human body was glorified. Their tradition of celebrating the skill of the human body in sports and dancing is with us today, and women's full participation, which is to be welcomed, would be impossible were they veiled.

Thirdly, one might further argue that the danger of hiding the body is that it then becomes 'obscene' (ie that which should not be seen): dirty and dangerous. The obtrusive gaze, instead of being deflected, may become more prurient in the face of what was intended to deter.

Finally, the use only of dull materials in drab colours, enjoined by the more puritanical forms of Islam, seems a depressing approach to the public sphere. Again, however, the puritanical suspicion of

beauty has been equally characteristic of Christian Puritanism, notably in the seventeenth century.

American feminist Kate Millett was clearly foolish when in 1979 she noisily lectured Iranian women and told them not to adopt the *chador*. In 2001, learning nothing from history, Laura Bush and Cherie Blair rushed into the fray during the war in Afghanistan, denouncing the burqah and its enforcement. Undoubtedly the burqah, traditionally worn by some groups, but not others, in Afghanistan, was imposed on many Afghan women and undoubtedly there were appalling human rights abuses against women (and men) in Afghanistan both during the Taliban regime and before – and, it is feared, after as well. Yet, the issues are far more complex than that, and as I hope I have demonstrated, there is no way in which 'the veil' can straightforwardly equate with women's oppression. Rather than attacking the practices of veiling, it would be more constructive for western secularists to achieve more consistency in their own social practices in regard to women, yet also to defend women's right to wear what they like, not in terms of individual 'choice', but as a mark of female autonomy and emancipation from patriarchal control. A large part of the confusion over the veil is, as many Muslims have pointed out, that religious regulations have become fatally entwined in many Islamic communities with authoritarian and patriarchalist practices that have nothing to do with religion.

On the other hand, the Afghan leader (male) who dismissed western concerns by saying the veil is a trivial and unimportant issue when compared with the need for water, education and the rebuilding of his country, overlooked the huge symbolic importance of dress. Dress is tremendously important, both in the micro-politics of the office and the street, and – as in Afghanistan – on the world political stage, because it ventriloquises urgent and sometimes insoluble political problems. Thus to argue about or seek to legislate or criticise the veil is a displacement, and at the same time an expression, of the pressing issue of how different belief systems are to coexist in the contemporary world and of the unresolved disagreements as to the status of women.

This is paradoxical when dress and fashion *are* widely dismissed as so trivial and superficial – the dismissal itself a form of disavowal. It is not as if the fashion industry were unimportant economically. The mass production of clothing was part of what kick-started the industrial revolution. Beverley Lemire has traced its growth from 1660 to 1800, arguing that the trade 'was transformed through the impetus of military expansion'. Clothing in industrial quantities was needed for the expanding military and naval forces prosecuting the wars of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century. The trade was further boosted by colonialism. In addition, institutions such as charity school, workhouses and foundling hospitals and orphanages always needed cheap garments for their charges, as, later, did prisons. So alongside the artisanal aristocracy of bespoke tailors, dressmakers and milliners making fashionable clothing for an exclusive clientele there coexisted an 'invisible' trade, in large part composed of women: 'the largely female urban workforce furnished the productive impetus for the growth and continuing expansion of the industry; the products of their labour brought new commodities before the ... consumer'.[41] Fashion was at the forefront: 'popular consumerism swept through England during the early modern period, centring first on appropriate apparel. Clothing in a wider breadth of fabrics and fashions was increasingly the article of choice among ... classes well below the social median.'[42] Then, and ever since, the sweated labour of poorly paid women has underpinned the trade. Ever since, too, the clothing industry has continued to develop in several distinct and separate ways, with a fragmented labour force and backward technology in some areas. Ellen Leopold suggests that there has been no major technical innovation since the arrival of the sewing machine, and the Fordist assembly line was never fully established.[43] Today these conditions have been globalised, with 'free market' capitalism continuing to seek the most favourable conditions for profit expansion, that is, the cheap vulnerable labour, often of women and children, worldwide, so, as Jo Entwistle says, 'the industry is a shameful one' in this respect.[44]

There is another side to fashion: that it is also a culture industry. Today 'many cultural intermediaries play a crucial part in defining fashion – fashion designers, journalists and magazine editors, fashion buyers and retailers ... In a world saturated with images, the image of a fashion house or label has to be carefully manufactured across a number of economic and cultural sites – advertising, marketing, magazines, shop design' in complex interaction.[45]

Haute couture and fashion designers play a central role in creating images of fashion, and even in the short time since the 1980s *haute couture* has continued to evolve. Today, ownership of the

famous names of Parisian fashion design is in the hands of a few huge conglomerates: LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy) owns Dior (where John Galliano reigns), Givenchy, Christian Lacroix, Fendi, and a 20% stake in Gucci; Pinault Printemps Redoute owns the rest of Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent ready to wear. The two groups and their respective chief executives, Bernard Arnault and François Pinault, have long been bitter rivals and in 2000 the rivalry came to a head when Alexander McQueen, who was the Givenchy designer, defected to Gucci.

The ownership by such vast international conglomerates of design houses that used to create clothes for a private clientele, but whose influence now spreads mainly through ready to wear diffusion collections and through the dissemination of images of outré designs during the collections – a kind of double strategy in itself – has revolutionised the role of *haute couture*. In one sense its role is diminished, diluted by the influence of mass culture – music, film, the counter culture – so that styles develop from the fusion of diverse sources rather than from the 'creative genius', the designer at the top. Innovation, it is argued, is as likely to come from the 'street' as from Paris. The successful popular fashion chains, such as in Britain, Top Shop, drink from the same source and at the same time as the top designers. Nadia Jones, director of design for the chain Oasis, says, 'I'll go down to Portobello Market [in London's Notting Hill] on a Friday and there's the Gucci design team, John Galliano, the French Connection Designers.'[46] All alike seek inspiration from the same fabric fairs, colour and fashion forecasters and, of course, see the same films, listen to the same music and travel to the same destinations.[47]

At the same time there are other aspiring avant garde designers who still work in almost artisanal conditions, sometimes from their own kitchen or living room. Angela McRobbie has described the difficulties faced by recent graduates from the prestigious Central St Martins school of fashion (alma mater of Galliano, Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan and Antonio Berardi). Struggling to make ends meet with little support from the British government, they were likely to be forced to work abroad, design less cutting-edge clothes for a big mass market firm, or go out of business altogether.[48] Caroline Evans described the work of one such designer, Shelley Fox, who has managed to continue to produce avant garde designs and to consolidate her business. This is a

detailed case study of one woman's success in managing the convergence of artisanal methods, art and the exigencies of finance.[49]

That such individualised practices still exist illustrates the diversity of the fashion industry. Fashion is produced, marketed and consumed today in patterns that defy the traditional image of the industry as a pyramid with *haute couture* at the apex and new styles 'trickling down' towards the wide base of mass production. This model, influentially theorised by Georg Simmel,[50] was always an over-simplification. New patterns of consumption were already developing in the seventeenth century and fashion innovators were not necessarily the royal courts and the aristocracy. 'Fashion,' writes Beverly Lemire, 'was never a uni-polar phenomenon arising from the court and the West End salons and sweeping in dilute forms through the lower ranks. Its effects were always dynamic, moving in both directions across social boundaries.' She cites the simplification of the dress of young aristocrats in England in the 1730s. Critics were dismayed by this adaptation of what they saw as labourers' costume, yet by the end of the century it had become the norm.[51]

So today, *haute couture* is in some ways less dominant than it used to be. The collection shows themselves run at a loss, as elaborate advertisements for ready to wear and all the franchises of cosmetics, scent and accessories. The shows are a twice yearly spectacle, another 'tournament of value', and appear closer to performance art than to mere displays of the latest designs.

Yet alongside these changes, *haute couture* has moved closer to the art world as its fashion leadership has waned. In the 1980s Diana Vreeland, former editor of American *Vogue* and American *Harper's Bazaar*, found a new role in creating and curating a series of fashion exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The first, in 1980, was an exhibition of traditional Chinese dress, and later shows included one devoted to the work of Yves Saint Laurent and another to Ralph Lauren. Some were critical of this development, seeing the exhibitions as an expression of the worst aspects of conspicuous consumption in the Reagan era. The initial, Chinese exhibition, for example, showed little deep understanding of ancient Chinese culture. The galleries were drenched in 'Opium' scent and an aura of orientalism. The fact that the precious robes had originally been intended not for public display but for

private worship was ignored. Diana Vreeland 'had mixed and matched Chinese raiment indiscriminately. Never would a Chinese wife or courtesan of the Emperor have worn an "outfit" like those created by Diana Vreeland ... the mannequins displayed the "layered look" of 1970s fashion designers rather than the style of any Chinese historical period.'[52]

Yet whatever their shortcomings, these exhibitions made a claim for fashion as an art, as a serious aesthetic medium worthy of display in the museum, and for contemporary as well as historical dress as worthy of critical attention. Since the 1980s museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Guggenheim in New York have staged a number of successful shows, but there have always been critics who refuse to accept that fashion should invade the museum and the art gallery. The reaction of one critic to the – admittedly uninspiring – Guggenheim Giorgio Armani exhibition in 2000 was of unrestrained horror: 'the main galleries at the Guggenheim, once home to 20th century painting, are the latest franchise in the Giorgio Armani chain,' wrote Michael Ellison, in the London *Guardian*, and quoted Hilton Kramer, art critic of the *New York Times*. 'The Guggenheim,' thundered Kramer, 'has no aesthetic standards and no aesthetic agenda. It has completely sold out to a mass-market mentality that regards the museum's own art collection as an asset to be exploited for commercial purposes.' For Ellison, however, it seemed to be not only the fact that Armani had allegedly donated $15 million to the gallery that upset him, but the simplicity of the clothes themselves, and the fact that they had all belonged to film stars and been worn in films. 'When you've seen one suit, you've seen them all,' he complained and objected to the admittedly pretentious prose used to describe an outfit worn by Richard Gere in *American Gigolo*: '"the seductive elegance of the anti-hero's clothing became legend," are the words chosen to explain the significance of a crumpled jacket.'[53]

Architecture critic Deyan Sudjic was equally scornful of fashion's pretensions on the occasion of the 2001 'Radical Fashion' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum: 'Fashion is parasitic. It depends on other art forms for its imagery and its identity. And it's been so successful at it that it has begun to replace them... fashion is the perfect cultural form for the severely limited attention spans of our times and it is expanding to fill a vacuum left by the shrivelling of interest in older art forms. Fashion suits our restricted

tastes.'[54] He further deplored the move whereby Prada had commissioned architects Rem Koolhaas and Jacques Herzog to design new stores in New York and Japan, while Frank Gehry designed a boutique for Issey Miyake in New York's Tribeca.

Taking a very different view of *haute couture*, Caroline Evans has analysed the radical experiments of some of the designers whose work featured at the Victoria and Albert show, and has more generally investigated the long-standing relationship between fashion and art. She has described how in the 1930s Elsa Schiaparelli, whose designs engaged seriously with Surrealism, used fashion to question the place of women in the society of the time and, with her use of mirrors, masquerade and *trompe l'oeil*, the relationship of garment to body and feminine identity to performance.[55] In a second article she defended Alexander McQueen's controversial fashion spectacles, in which the models appeared bloodstained, staggering, covered in mud, pinioned by cruel jewellery and headgear. In March 1995, for example, his fifth show, entitled *Highland Rape*, 'mixed military jackets with McQueen tartan and moss wool, contrasting tailored jackets with torn and brutally ravaged lace dresses and ripped skirts. On a runway strewn with heather and bracken McQueen's staggering and blood-spattered models appeared wild and distraught, their breasts and bottoms exposed by tattered laces and torn suedes, jackets with missing sleeves, and skin-tight rubber trousers and skirts cut so low at the hip they seemed to defy gravity.'[56] McQueen was often accused of misogyny, but Evans accepts his explanation that *Highland Rape* was about the eighteenth century genocide of the Scots by the English, and resonated with the genocide in Rwanda and atrocities in Bosnia at this period. Far from exploiting violence towards women, his shows raised the issue. 'The cruelty inherent in McQueen's representations of women was part of the designer's wider vision of the cruelty of the world, and although his view was undoubtedly a bleak one it was not, I would argue ... misogynist.'[57]

Evans explored the way in which in his March 1996 *Dante* collection McQueen referenced the nineteenth century femme fatale, using a 'mourning palette' and models made up with blood red lips and vampiric white faces. 'The nineteenth-century femme fatale was ... a fearful representation ... [of] female sexuality as perverse, even deathly.' The *fin de siècle* produced images of women whose sexuality was toxic, a theme that returned in the 1980s when sex and

death were again linked through HIV and AIDs. McQueen's designs worn by glamorous but alarming models produced 'an image tinged equally with desire and dread'. These were women whose appearance was so threatening that it constituted a shield. Rather than appearing vulnerable they produced an image of sexuality as terror.[58]

Evans pondered on the paradox that radical ideas she traced back to de Sade, Jean Genet and Georges Bataille should at the end of the twentieth century find expression in fashion design. For her, McQueen's work made a serious political point at a moment of cultural trauma. Rather than capitulating to the facile assumption that a preoccupation with fashion necessarily equates with triviality, she makes the deeper point that in a period obsessed with image, style and the superficial, these means can be subverted to express radical political views and to mount a critique of the ephemera they simultaneously create.[59]

An exhibition by Martin Margiela in 1997 brought fashion even closer to art. Margiela is known for using recycled clothing in many of his designs. For this exhibition he took a series of garments from his previous collections and had them treated with fungus, mould and/or bacteria. During the course of the exhibition these grew and thereby changed the appearance of the garments. For example, for one design he had originally taken two 1940s tea gowns apart and created a single 'new' dress from one half of each of the old garments. Now they reappeared, 'their already dissonant patterns of rose prints juxtaposed with gauze and net overlaid by a pattern of yellow bacteria, a false patina of age grown in a few days on fifty-year-old dresses.'[60] In so treating them, Margiela referred, Evans argued, to the whole history of secondhand clothes markets, the nineteenth century ragpickers and the way in which clothes are imbricated with memory, redolent of the past but inhabited by bodies – identities even – that change over time.[61]

This blurring of the boundary between art and fashion provides a convenient point at which to turn to a discussion of some of the developments in fashion theory and fashion studies since the 1980s.[62] The disdainful comments of Sudjic and his fellow critics reflect a traditional view: that fashion is defined by it being *not*-art, and that because it deals with surfaces and with self adornment it is a direct manifestation of superficiality and vanity. *Adorned in Dreams* and all serious books about fashion seem invariably to need to return to first principles and argue anew for the importance of dress, yet whereas anthropologists always recognised that the dress – both the actual garments and the sartorial rules – of other societies provided an indispensable key to a culture, it has been and still is difficult for serious minded men and women in the west (although less so in some countries than in others) to acknowledge that clothes are 'unspeakably meaningful'.

Lou Taylor has argued that because dress and fashion are themselves despised, costume history has also always been marginalised. A strong tradition of empirical costume history grew up in Britain, initially as an offshoot of art history. This was an approach that placed actual garments and textiles at its centre, and was as likely to be based in the museum as in the university. Yet historically museums were run largely by men who adopted a hostile attitude to the collection and display of European fashionable dress. In the Anglophone world this began slowly to change only in the 1950s when professional women curators began to be appointed. The prejudice against fashionable dress is therefore highly gendered:

> Object based research focuses necessarily and unapologetically on examination of the details of clothing and fabric. This process depends upon a series of patiently acquired, specialised skills ... skills that have been underrated by many economic, social and cultural historians. Curators and conservators become expert at professional specialist care over cleaning, repairing, washing, pressing, storing and displaying clothing. These are skills that society at large still considers very feminine domestic occupations – almost ... like doing the laundry.[63]

As she notes, over the past fifteen years the field has been transformed through the intervention of academics from fields such as cultural studies, social and economic history and cultural theory, *Adorned in Dreams* being an early example. The 'garment as object' approach, starting from close examination of textiles, cut, provenance and so on, may to some appear limited by its descriptive protocols, but its attention to detail provides the possibility of drawing important conclusions concerning the reasons, for example, for changes in fashion. Lou Taylor gave a vivid account of this process in an article in which she showed that the careful examination of textiles and archival material could not only demonstrate that

change took place, but could explain it in socio-cultural terms that challenged previously accepted explanations:

> a process of feminisation of male wool cloth took place over the 1865-1885 period as a result of consumer demand by well-off women for more practical tailored dress. This indicates that the dress reform movement, which reached a peak of activity in Britain in the 1883–1900 period, built upon, rather than [creating, as previously assumed] the success of already established tailored styles. The sartorial radicalism within the movement lay therefore not in the use of heavier weight wool cloth [because the cloth had already been modified] but rather in its campaigns for ever more rationalism in tailored styles.'[64]

At a conference in Manchester in 1998 at which methodological issues were thrashed out, Lou Taylor argued that the initial impact of cultural studies approaches to dress in the 1980s was 'divisive', but that in recent years a new, creative interdisciplinary approach has developed. In 1985 I ended my theoretical Chapter 3 of *Adorned in Dreams* by pointing out that cultural theorists, paradoxically, were almost exclusively interested in *masculine* subcultural styles and that feminism had had little to say about fashion – and still less that was positive. Much has changed since then, with the development of a strong feminist presence in cultural studies and a much enhanced recognition of the importance of mass culture. In parallel, the myth of the 'great masculine renunciation' of fashion has been demolished by a new generation of researchers,[65] and exposed simply as a massive form of 'masculine disavowal.[66]

Chris Breward, also speaking at Manchester, agreed with Lou Taylor that cultural studies and dress history had much to offer each other, and eloquently defended what has come to be seen as the 'cultural studies approach'. However, he reminded his audience that the cultural studies field is itself not unified, although 'the deconstruction of image or product as text lies at the heart of any totalising definition of a cultural studies methodology'.[67]

The study of fashion by cultural theorists has indeed tended to dwell on fashion images and their symbolic and communicative power. An example is the work of Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, literary theorists who, in *Fashioning the Frame*, were concerned with dress as it demarcates body boundaries. For them, 'dress foregrounds the difficulty of establishing the body's

boundaries' and 'constitutes an uncertain frame. Its ambivalence is further emphasised by the coexistence, within its discourse, of disciplinary, regulatory strategies and subversive potentialities ... Dress *represents* the body as a fundamentally liminal phenomenon by stressing its precarious location on the threshold between the physical and the abstract, the literal and the metaphorical.'[68] They used the theories of Michel Foucault and the psycho-analysts Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva to explore the ambivalence they have identified, convinced that psychoanalysis can explain the 'arbitrariness' of the fashion system. Rejecting earlier, rather crude explanations of fashion as functional for capitalism and patriarchy, and followers of fashion as brainwashed victims of an exploitative system, psychoanalysis: 'suggests ways in which capitalism or patriarchy can actually co-opt the psyche in their operations, and why the seductions of fashion are so difficult to resist'. To follow fashion is to participate 'in a complex process of self-determination. Items of clothing are objects of desire that hold the promise of completion, the last piece necessary to close the gap; but because they are inherently condemned to failure, the subject's desire turns to another piece, a new object to fulfil that desire.'[69]

Julia Kristeva contrasted the 'symbolic' – in which there is a clear demarcation between self and other – with the 'semiotic' – which 'is inimical to inviolable boundaries'. In poetic discourse the semiotic becomes '"a new language ... defined in opposition to traditional language"'.[70] This is an instinctive language, dependent on rhythm rather than logic. For Warwick and Cavallaro the language of dress is like Kristeva's poetic language. Their literary and philosophic arguments illuminate some of the many ambiguities of dress and grant an insight into the melancholy dissatisfaction that so often accompanies the desire to achieve a desirable, a fashionable 'appearance' (in itself an evocative and suggestive word).

In *The Study of Dress History*, Lou Taylor vividly communicated the thrill of discovering lost objects of desire: 'Every dress curator/collector has their own story of triumph and disaster connected to finding special items of dress, such as a rare length of 1920s Lyons art deco fashion fabric, possibly by *Maison Ducharne*, found by the author in the 50p scarf bin at an *Age Concern* [thrift] shop in Midhurst, East Sussex.'[71] She went on to describe a number of major 'finds' of collections of clothing, and also the careless way in which many priceless garments have been lost, simply because they

were not considered worth saving – another example of the under-valuation of dress.

Yet complementary though the 'garment as object' and the 'cultural studies' approaches are, their goals are not necessarily identical. The preoccupation of Warwick and Cavallaro with image and sign is with the excavation of meaning, usually contemporary, whereas the object-based approach is more usually concerned with the excavation of the past. This is in itself an important difference and may have exacerbated some of the misunderstandings that have dogged the field.

One of the strengths of an approach such as Taylor's is in its aim to reconstruct past usages: how consumers acquired, made, modified and generally *used* their clothes, yet she is perhaps too critical of *any* work that does not include at least some discussion of garments as objects. For example, she assumes that Malcolm Barnard in his useful survey, *Fashion as Communication*,[72] omits any such discussion out of 'hostility' to the approach, yet there is no evidence that Barnard disliked or dismissed work on garments as objects; rather it may have seemed to him that it was not relevant to his specific aim. It is true that research that is not object-based may lead authors to generalisation or even to the introduction of 'errors about the actual clothing'.[73] As Naomi Tarrant tartly put it, 'Clothing studies are contorted to fit some theory without a basic understanding of the properties of cloth and the structure of clothes. A little knowledge of weaving and dressmaking might have made some of these works more relevant to clothing studies.'[74] On the other hand, it is difficult to see how the discussion of any specific garment and its making would radically modify the ideas of Warwick and Cavallaro, since they are not really concerned with how clothes feel on our bodies, but rather with mental and psychological appropriations. Certainly Mrs Korner's ensembles, mentioned earlier, constructed a different body from today's track suit – or today's suit, for that matter – and the making of those garments is crucial to the experience of wearing them, but Warwick and Cavallaro explore a more obscure realm of unconscious desires.

It is important, therefore, that the new interdisciplinary dress history should recognise that differences in approach represent in part differences in the questions being asked and should observe a mutual respect for these differences within a fruitfully cross-fertilising field. One difference may have seemed to be that costume

historians have felt that cultural theorists have '"invested very heavily in words", so that "the sensory aspect of the past is not always recognised as worthy of attention"'.[75] This misrepresents cultural studies, but since researchers in this field focus on the contemporary rather than the past, it is hardly surprising if they focus on the sensuousness of image rather than object because the contemporary world is so saturated with images.

The field of interest that brings costume historians and cultural critics together is not, actually, a single field; or rather, it consists of overlapping areas of study.[76] The production and consumption of clothes has changed vastly over time and that change accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. Individual items of clothing have become less and less costly, relatively speaking, although the mass production of clothing is not new, as we saw. Therefore, the costume historian who researches, say, eighteenth-century European court dress, is engaging with objects of great value both at the time – as major items of economic outlay burdened also with a significant weight of aesthetic and socio-cultural value – and also as irreplaceable antique objects that have survived and, in so doing, lived an important 'social biography'.[77] Today, by contrast, a trip to any 'nearly new' boutique will demonstrate that even designer outfits get discarded by their original consumers after a rather short period of time, while the fashion commentator or cultural theorist primarily interested in contemporary items of dress such as those that litter the floor of my daughter's bedroom – camisole vests, high street jeans, H & M skirts and leather jackets bought at street markets – is engaging with garments whose life is so brief that they will scarcely achieve any kind of 'social biography' at all. Like butterflies that live but for a single day, their brief journey through life from garment rail to jumble sale hardly allows for the detailed analysis appropriate for valuable historical items.

The two approaches, however, are not mutually exclusive and Lou Taylor's optimism for the future bears repeating: 'dress history/dress studies is being propelled into its new future by the high levels of interdisciplinary good practice emerging from both sides of the great dress history divide.'[78]

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and I admit to being blissfully unaware of this 'great divide' when I wrote *Adorned in Dreams*. In a period of rapid change, academically and intellectu-

ally, with emerging new disciplines and increasing interdisciplinarity, boundary disputes and territorial claims are bound to occur. What is more important, since prejudice against new subjects as opposed to traditional ones still exists, is the defence of dress studies *per se*.

The conclusion to a book on fashion presents a problem, because the question most likely to be asked is: what next? or what now? There are few things more irritating than being rung up by some rookie journalist and asked for an instant analysis of the 'meaning' of the latest passing fashion, as though one could read off a portentous social message from every tweak to trouser width or hem length. For this very reason it is hard to bring a fashion book to an end: the next style is always hovering in the wings, while the very arbitrariness of the next latest thing – inviting yet refusing a plausible explanation – defeats the sense of an ending.

A distinguished costume historian recently complained of the fashion among dress scholars for citations from the work of Walter Benjamin, but I cannot resist a reference to his work. Only recently translated in English, and therefore now available to a much wider audience, his *Arcades Project* consists of thousands of notes and aphoristic comments. Aphorisms, as everyone knows, positively invite quotation, since their brevity produces a certain ambiguity and – sometimes – a verbal flourish standing in for a developed thought. Their very ambiguity, moreover, invites endless critical deconstruction.

The aphorism seems especially well suited to the discussion of fashion, indeed, each passing fashion is itself an aphorism in material form (so perhaps after all the journalists are right in their search for instant meaning). The 'Fashion' section in the *Arcades Project* is rich in ambiguous – and ambivalent – ideas and quotations, and Benjamin is ever mindful of the importance of the material object: 'the eternal is … far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea,'[79] he wrote, which would please Naomi Tarrant, notwithstanding that Benjamin has long been the darling of cultural theorists.

In his fascination with objects, especially forgotten and disregarded ones, Benjamin found a kindred spirit in the Surrealists, who perceived 'the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded", in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago …'[80] Contemplation of the just *démodé*, he believed, potentially uproots us from the immediate present and has the potential to induce the Surrealists' 'profane illumination'.[81] It disturbs a linear history, and is capable of revealing the relevance of the past for the present. In recycling styles, fashion rewrites history aesthetically, but not only that, since it opens the way to, and visually illuminates the possibility of a 'dialectical philosophy of history, in which ideas and concepts are pursued, rather than a chronological following of events'.[82]

Thus fashion, most marginalised of all arts, lives at the heart of history. As mute and humble material object it transforms itself into the embodiment of the most shocking, the most subversive ideas. Those, moreover, who despise it might as well denounce Freud for his scrupulous attention to 'the refuse of the phenomenal world' – dreams, jokes and slips of the tongue. For garments, like the detritus of the everyday, far from hiding, or distracting us from, life's important matters, expose the eternal in the ephemeral, and a society's most treasured beliefs. Victorian mourning dress expressed the relationship of that society to death; the Versace 'trash aesthetic' our relationship to consumption and celebrity. To despise fashion as frivolous is therefore the most frivolous posture of all.