THE FASHION APPARATUS AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF POSTMODERN SUBJECTIVITY

Julia Emberley

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 desperately 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/whole 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...¹

Fashion has a bad reputation and the consumer implicitly or explicitly knows that there exists a fashion that could be characterized as *homogenous* — 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 coordination 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

BODY INVADERS

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.²

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 post-modern, 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 umbilical 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.

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.³

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 one-dimensional persona of the paper real-image.

BODY INVADERS

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 eyes 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, western-subject. 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

BODY INVADERS

our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.⁴

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

SPRING LOOSE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDDY KOHL
HAIR BY MARTIN MORRIS
MAKEUP BY LESLEY CHILVES

RAVE NEW LONDON MAKES THE BIGGEST VIBES IN '85. MODERN PSYCHADELIA MOVES IN WITH A REVIVAL OF OP-ART PRINTS AND SKINNY RIBS. BRANDISH A BARE MIDRIF WITH CATSUIT LEGGINGS AS A SECOND SKIN. COLOURS RUN RIOT THROUGH BLUE, AQUAMARINE AND LIME TO PINK, ORANGE AND BURGUNDY. TAKE A HINT FROM THE HIPPI TRAIL AND ADD IT TO THE TECHNOLOGICAL EIGHTIES

PRINTED COTTON AND SUITING THREE-QUARTER LENGTH COAT, £450; striped waistcoat, £170; deep burgundy n voile overshirt, £122; sheepskin hat, £50; broken glasses, £5, all by John Galiano, from Browns, 23 South Molton Street

GALEIANO'S VISIONS OF AFGHANISTAN: LAYERS OF SUITING, SHIRTING AND DRIED-BLOOD TON

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-heterotopia* 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

BODY INVADERS

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 "vacant" (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 disfigurements 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.⁵

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

BODY INVADERS

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...⁶

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 address 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 graffiti 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.⁷

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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 Archeology 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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A TALE OF INSCRIPTION/FASHION STATEMENTS

Kim Sawchuk

"... so many political institutions of cryptography."

Jacques Derrida
Scribble (writing-power)

Still Life

Let me begin with two allegories, two dreams, for it is precisely the question of allegory and representation in relationship to the social sciences, particularly cultural studies and feminism, which is at issue in this paper. The first is taken from literature, the second from experience.

In Franz Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony", an explorer is invited to the colony to observe and report on its system and method of punishment. At the colony, the explorer is introduced to a machine, a fantastic machine upon which the condemned are placed and their punishment meted. However, prior to their placement on this machine the condemned have been told neither their sentence nor their punishment; knowledge of their transgression and the lesson they are to learn from it will be inscribed on their bodies by vibrating needles as the inviolable dictums of the community such as "Honour thy Superiors" or "Be just" are written into their flesh in a beautiful and decorative script.¹

Meanwhile, it is November in Toronto, and my mother visits me. We travel to Harbourfront which is packed with holiday shoppers. The crowds circulate throughout the complex amongst the glittering gold and silver decorations in a frenzy of buying and selling. Mannequins have

been strategically placed throughout the mall to draw attention to and create desire for the fashions that are for sale.

As we approach these dolls our sensibilities are startled. What we have taken to be plastic models are, in fact, flesh and blood women imitating replicas of real women; representations of representations, women who cannot move, cannot respond to the excited gestures of this mob of consumers. Having exchanged their mobility for a wage, they are compelled to stand in awkward poses for extremely long durations of time while curiosity seekers gaze at them, poke fingers in their direction to force a smile, a movement, and photograph this spectacle of female beauty.

The Object of Fashion

Fashion: what, or whom, are the objects of its discourse? It is a subject without the institutional support or legitimacy granted to other academic subjects, save a few obscure accounts of changes in dress and costume, fleeting references to fashion in the history of European commerce and trade, and the occasional semiotic analysis.² What is most conspicuous is the lack of material on the subject, a subject which raises both metaphysical and political questions.

Perhaps this is because, as a topic, we do not know how to frame it, how to address the questions it asks of us. Films, books, photographs, paintings, are all bound by a border that renders them analysable. However, the question of what constitutes the field of fashion is far more ambiguous. As I will argue, it is a phenomenon which threatens the very stability of segregated zones: man/woman, subject/object, the personal/political, reality/illusion. The body, lying in both the realm of the public and private, is a metaphor for the essential instability of objects in their relationship to each other. Like a fence, or the bar between signified and signifier, it is bound to both, but the property of neither.

As Kafka's allegory reminds us, when we are interested in fashion, we are concerned with relations of power and their articulation at the level of the body, a body intimately connected to society, but which is neither prior to it, nor totally determined by it. For example, in the 1950's Frantz Fanon commented on the French colonial government's attempt to destroy Algerian society by outlawing the veil under the guise of liberating Algerian women.

The way people clothe themselves, together with the traditions of dress and finery the custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say, the one that is most immediately perceptible.³

Whether naked or clothed, the body bears the scatological marks, the historical scars of power. Fashionable behaviour is never simply a question of creativity or self-expression; it is also a mark of colonization, the "anchoring" of our bodies, particularly the body of women, into specific positions, and parts of the body in the line of the gaze.

In this respect, it is ironic that the French Fashion conglomerate Christian Dior's summer make-up line was titled "Les Coloniales". "Les Coloniales" with an 'e' on the end to signify woman as the colonized subject at the same time as she is elevated to the level of the exotic. European woman, whose unveiled white skin, blue eyes exuding "the coolness of water and shade", peers from behind a cluster of bright red flowers. From a distance, these flowers seem to be a traditional headscarf. On closer inspection it is clear that they are anthuriums, whose phallic resemblance cannot be coincidental. The bloody history of French colonialism and the Algerian war is magically transformed, re-written eyebrow pencils and lipgloss. The white light of the camera attempts to erase the lines and creases of this history which might be sedimented on the face of this woman; "White mythology," a cool and distant look has displaced the face of the desert. "Les Coloniales" is an appropriate third metaphor in our triumverate of allegories.

Theoretically, it is tempting to interpret Kafka's allegory, Harbourfront, and "Les Coloniales", as relatively clear examples of how ideology

functions; patriarchal ideology to repress women, white mythology to distort the reality of colonialism. However, these images are more paradoxical than is obvious at first sight. "Fashion", like "woman" is not an undifferentiated object in-itself which suddenly appears on the stage of history; nor should it be easily reduced to a mere reflection of social and economic developments, to what Freud called a "master key" which seems to account for the manifestation of the object. Within both Marxism and feminism there is the tendency to treat the object as simply a reflection of social movements, or as an index of the horrific effects of capitalism. It is this analysis which currently dominates the feminist and Marxist interpretation of fashion and popular culture.

For example, Anne Oakley, in her section on fashion and cosmetics in *Subject Women*, says that certain styles of dress reflect specific ideologies. In periods of feminist rebellion, women have called for changes in dress towards "a plainer, more masculine style of dress."⁴ In the modern era, types of dress, such as work boots or spike heels indicate either the radical or conservative nature of female subjects in a relatively transparent manner.

Furthermore, women's relationship to fashion and the fashion industry is said to reflect the positioning of women within patriarchal capitalism. Women in European cultures have been socialised to be passive objects: they "appear," while men "act." Many feminists draw upon John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*,⁵ in which he argues that the history of European painting shows that the looks of women are merely displays for men to watch, while women watch themselves being looked at. This determines both relationships between men and women, women's relationship to other women, and women's relationship to themselves.⁶ Whenever women look at themselves, they are acting like men. Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", develops this concept of the gaze in its three manifestations, objectification, narcissism, and fetishism, as predominantly gender-determined and male, in relationship to film.⁷ Like the women at Harbourfront, whether through economic necessity or their internalization of patriarchal values, they turn themselves into objects for this gaze and further reinforce this phallic economy of desire.

Women's love of clothes, cosmetics, jewellery, their obsession with style and fashion, reinforces the myth that we are narcissistic and materialistic. In turn this reinforces capitalism, which depends upon this obsession with our bodies for the marketing of new products. Griselda Pollack's work expands on this thesis by showing how the solidification of the identity between a woman's body and the notion "for sale" is an extension of the tradition of European high art within popular culture.⁸

BODY INVADERS

There is an element of truth to these arguments, given the historical development of the advertising and clothing industry. But they tend to fall within the trap of decoding all social relations within patriarchy and capitalism as essentially repressive and homogeneous in its effects. As Teresa de Lauretis explains, the visual world is treated as a series of static representations. It is assumed that images are literally absorbed by the viewer, that each image is immediately readable and meaningful in and of itself, regardless of the context, the circumstances of its production, circulation and reception. The viewer, except of course for the educated critic who has learned to see beyond this level of deception, is assumed to be immediately susceptible to these images.⁹

However, fashion, like social being, is constituted through the effects of language, through the circulation and vagaries of discourses which affect the very nature of its images and its objects. Derrida writes:

Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element" — phoneme or grapheme — being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.¹⁰

It for this reason that I emphasize that these inscriptions of the social take place *at* the level of the body, not *upon* it. We must take care in our own theoretical discourse not to position the body or the social in a relationship of radical alterity to one another. Neither fashion nor woman can be seen as objects determined simply by two variables, such as sex and class, for they are constructed in this fabric of intertextual relations. At any specific historical juncture, fashion is located in a discourse on health (corsets, suntanning, fitness), beauty (ideal shapes of breasts, buttocks or lips), morality and sexuality (dress as sign of one's moral fibre), the nation and the economy (the question of the veil in Algeria), and location (climate, geography, seasonal variations), to name only a few possibilities. These discourses involve the body, produce the body as a textured object with multi-dimensional layers, touched by the rich weave of history and culture.

The intertextual constitution of subjectivity and objects has repercussions for what has been the standard Marxist and feminist interpretation of fashion; fashion as a reflection of the social onto the body, fashion as the repression of the natural body; fashion simply as a commodity to be resisted; fashion as substitute for the missing phallus. Derrida's description of intertextuality is, I believe, theoretically related to the concept of allegory developed by Walter Benjamin, and to Freud's critique of previous methods of dream analysis. Both writers challenge the relative

transparency of the object as simple sign, symbol or icon.¹¹

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud noted that the difference between his theory and past methods of dream analysis was that for him, "...memory is not present at once, but several times over, that is, laid down (*neiderlegt*) in various species of indications [*Zeichen*, lit. signs]..."¹² He emphasized that dream interpretation must begin its analysis "en detail," not "en masse," as dreams are of a composite character, and as such, are often confusing.¹³ He suggested that there were three understandings of this relationship, and three techniques of dream analysis: the symbolic, which "seems to be a relic and a mark of a former identity;"¹⁴ decoding, which "treats events as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning in accordance with a fixed key"¹⁵; and a third method which is one of interpretation, of deciphering.

My procedure is not so convenient as the popular decoding method which translates any given piece of a dream's content by a fixed key. I on the contrary am prepared to find that the piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in different people or in various contexts.¹⁶

The memory of events, and of history, is never completely transparent; it is constantly rewritten or overdetermined by present cultural practices. For this reason, language and culture should not be understood as symbolic, for this implies that they are fixed within the chain of signification or in relationship to the "signified." It is this critique of culture as symbolic (i.e., expressive) that is at play in Benjamin's cultural analysis.

Benjamin's study of baroque drama and its allegorical nature critiques the concept of the symbol from the perspective of its ahistoricity. "The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning in its hidden, and if one might say so, wooded interior."¹⁷ Instead, allegory treats each object as a cultural ruin in which the temporality of all life is encapsulated. Quoting Dante, Benjamin noted that the basic characteristic of allegory is its absolute fluidity, where "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else".¹⁸

The basic characteristic of allegory, however, is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning; allegory and the baroque, glory in richness and meaning. But the richness of this ambiguity is the richness of extravagance; nature, however, according to the old rule of metaphysics, and indeed, also of mechanics, is bound by the law of economy. Ambiguity is therefore always the opposite of clarity

BODY INVADERS

and unity of meaning.¹⁹

A shop window, a photograph, or the line of a song, these fragments or ruins are the most significant aspect of any dream or culture. It is this potential richness of objects, their infinite number of associations, and their possible reconstellation in another field which makes dream analysis, and all interpretation, tentative rather than subject to rational decoding.

The "meaning" of cultural phenomena is neither expressive of one or two primary social relations, nor is it "symbolic". One cannot assume that a crucifix worn by Madonna is an expression of her essentially Christian nature, or that the wearing of high heels reflects a woman's identification with a patriarchal sexual economy.²⁰ Part of the challenge of alternative fashion adherents has been to dislodge and re-appropriate the traditional significance of fetishised objects. Spike heels, fishnet stockings and crucifixes juxtaposed with black leathers and exaggeratedly teased hairdos were all adopted as costumes by punk women. Not only did this condense different and often disparate styles, but it pushed the most common indices of femininity to their extreme limits, in order to draw attention to its artificiality and construction. Of course, as in the case of Madonna, these trends were re-appropriated by capitalism and the fashion industry as quickly as they appeared, necessitating yet another transformation in style for those interested in establishing an alternative to the industry.

Feminist criticism must regard events, objects, images, as cultural signs or allegories which do not have one fixed or stable meaning, but which derive their significance both from their place in a chain of signifiers, a chain which is itself unstable because of the constant intervention of historical change. Allegories are like the fragments of a dream in which remembrances of the past leave their historical traces, at the same time overdetermining future interpretations of events by an individual subject.

This makes the question of political or aesthetic judgment more complex than the discourses of Marxism and feminism which have only allowed the dichotomization of the world into polarities; man/woman, capital/labour, bourgeoisie/proletariat. Judgments have to be made within the context of discursive situations making a fixed position on any one issue problematic. For example, as Fanon notes in the case of Algeria, the veil was assigned a significance by the colonist that it had not had. "To the colonist offense against the veil, the colonised opposes the cult of the veil."²¹ In other words, it was the highly charged atmosphere of the national liberation struggle, as well as the attempt by the French to "Westernise" Algerian women which lead to the polarization of positions.

Likewise, within the history of the dress reform movement, judgments about 'fashion' itself must be understood in the context of our predominantly Christian heritage. Contrary to the assumption of Anne Oakley, an anti-fashion discourse cannot be assumed to be inherently feminist, for it has often been tied to a discourse which is intent on repressing women's potentially subversive sexuality and returning them to the proper sphere of the home. In many writings from the early 19th and 20th century, fashion was anthropomorphized into a tyrant, who was said to deprive all, and women in particular, of their freedom and money, block them from more fulfilling pursuits, jeopardize their health, and drop them into the stagnant waters of immorality. As Pope Pius said in 1940, women who were bowing to the tyranny of fashion were "like insane persons who unwittingly threw themselves into fires and rivers."²² In fact the dress reform movements of the early 20th century were often less concerned with making women more comfortable than with returning them to the proper sphere of the home; they were part of the movement for social purity. Just as improper dress indicated a woman's lack of reason and her immorality, a proper form of dress was said to enhance her "natural" beauty, emphasizing her health and freshness, and promising her fecundity.²³

A woman's concern for the aestheticization of her body was seen as a sign of her unreasonableness, her potential weakness in contrast to the rationality of men. The argument for austerity in dress and the return to more neutral forms not only valorizes what is seen as characteristic of men (their rationality), but there is the possibility that an anti-fashion sentiment feeds into an already existing discourse of woman's superficiality, duplicity, and the threat that her sexuality poses to men.

Not only does this discourse falsely believe that there is a natural beauty, a core of being beyond socialization, but this position can be accused of a typically 'masculinist' belief that one can be transcendent to one's body; to one's culture, and immune to the seductions of the material world. Although one should not invest one's identity in crass consumer behaviour, it is nevertheless true that you are what you eat, wear, and consume; as Spinoza said, there is no separation between the formation of mind and its ability to recollect, to remember, and the impingement of the senses onto our subjectivities. To believe otherwise is to engage in a Cartesian opposition between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-itself'.

The problem in all of these cases is not that we respond in a sensual manner to the world, but the fixing or territorialization of desire into a restricted economy: the closure on erotic pleasure that the culture industry can create by reinforcing and fixing very specific notions of what is desirable in women, in men, in sexuality, in clothing, and its hegemonic

BODY INVADERS

control over the "imaginary" through its domination of cultural mediums. While promising Nirvana to all, the restricted economy limits the flow of goods and services to those with access to capital thus reproducing the forms of class domination; it creates desires while denying them and making them dependent on the flow of capital. In phrasing the necessary critique of capitalism, one must be careful not to lapse into a discourse of economy and restraint, which opposes the ethics of thrift, hard work, and self-discipline to the 'immorality' and 'decadence' of capitalism. As Nietzsche says in *The Will to Power*, "residues of Christian value judgments are found everywhere in socialistic and positivistic systems. A critique of Christian morality is still lacking."²⁴ Perhaps capitalism's only saving grace is the decadence that it produces, its excesses and surpluses, that allow the person who delights in its cast-offs to live a parasitical existence on its margins.

To assume that all clothing is reducible to the fashion industry in this restrictive sense, and that all looking, and aestheticization of the body is an objectifying form of commodification is simplistic. As Marx himself noted, objectification is part of the process that allows human beings to create themselves, their social relations, and their history.²⁵

As Laura Mulvey has argued the film industry has capitalised on scopophilic pleasure. However, one must be careful in transferring paradigms from film theory, which tends to concentrate solely on the notion of the look, and on the eye as the primary organ of experience. Clothing, the act of wearing fabric, is intimately linked to the skin, and the body, to our tactile senses. As author Jean Rhys reflects, women have been sensitized to the relationship between their personal and cultural history as it is inscribed in their clothing. "It is as though we could measure the degree of happiness of particular events in her life through the clothing she was wearing and the rooms she inhabited."²⁶ Fashion and clothing — being stylish — can also be a poetic experience, intimately connected to the history and remembrance of the lived body. Again it was Freud who suggested the importance of material objects, of memories of clothing, jewellery, in triggering memory and overdetermining thought and action in both the waking and dream states. Because the fashion industry is constantly resurrecting histories and cultures, placing us all in a perpetual schizophrenic present, the experience of fashion and clothing is contradictory for women. It is, perhaps, this longing for a world of fantasy, this desire for the return, and the smell and touch of the body which the fashion industry (in fact all of our sentimental culture) capitalizes on. The acts of shopping, of wearing an article of clothing, of receiving clothing as a gift, can be expressions of recognition and love between women, or between women and men, which should not be

ignored, though they may fail to transcend the dominant phallic economy of desire.

Simulation and Representation: the Object in Postmodern Culture

The foregoing analysis is not intended to suggest that we totally reject a Marxist analysis of the commodity or the feminist analysis of patriarchy; but the metaphysical assumptions in place within these discourses must be rethought, rearticulated, reinscribed, for they have produced a history of theoretical closure regarding fashion.

The latter, I believe, has come about for two reasons. First, it seems as if the idea of fashion has been articulated so closely with women, the body and the personal, and therefore with doxa, unreason, and the inessential, that it has been ignored by academic institutions dominated by a sort of antiseptic Platonism. Secondly, and concomitantly, the study of fashion has required a methodological shift in the social sciences: not just a shift from the idea of cultural phenomenon as symbolic or expressive of some fundamental social relation, but away from a metaphysics of presence which favours denotation over connotation, as in semiotics, and use-value over exchange value, as in Marxism. This critique of the metaphysics of presence links the work of Benjamin and Derrida to that of Baudrillard. Some aspects of feminist thought, which criticize fashion on the basis of its 'misrepresentation' of women, and advocate a return to the 'natural' body, and 'natural' beauty have also had to be abandoned. Moving beyond these polarizations makes possible a more in-depth reading and understanding of fashion.

A discourse of representation, which is connected to the concept of the symbol, is inappropriate for an analysis of fashion; yet as we have seen, this is the basis of the majority of writings on fashion. What the phenomenon of women imitating models brings into play is the question of the real, of the referent, as in any sense originary in (post-) modern culture. The live mannequins mentioned in my second allegory do not startle us simply because these women have been reified into a stationary position; they shock us precisely because we are living in an age which anticipates an image. The present era, the age of the postmodern, marks a collapsing of the space of these borders. Reality, the referent, is called into question at that juncture where artificial signs are intertextually mixed with 'real elements.'

In this sense, Kafka's allegory, "In the Penal Colony," does not signify a modern form of repressive, administrative power; what it seems to signal is the end of a mapping of a predetermined code of the social onto the body. The latter was a judicial form of power based on the notion of the pre-existing authority of the norm, or the rules of a cohesive community over the individual body. It is the system of justice and

BODY INVADERS

control of the explorer, rather than the keeper of the machine, who will triumph in the postmodern era, the age of late capitalism. Gone is the archaic writing machine which treats the body as a *tabula rasa* upon which a predetermined message is scrawled. In the present age, forms of self-discipline prevail the self colonization of the body and its enslavement in an intertextual web.

Baudrillard's writings explore the demise of any transcendental posture that one may be tempted to adopt in cultural critique. He states:

The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs), the second inaugurates an age of simulacra... in which there is no longer any God to recognize His own, nor any judgement to separate the true from the false, the Real from Artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.²⁷

The power of late capitalism is in the imaginary, where subjects are maintained in a circuit of desire and anxiety. Baudrillard's work echoes Kafka's sentiments, and is seminal for further discussions of the implications of the fashion industry within the present economy. "Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or sub-stance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; hyperreality."²⁸

Fashion, with its lack of commitment to this world, with its attempt to create clothes, figures, looks that are irreverent, towards any form of natural beauty, is emblematic of this "precession of simulacra", and the dis-simulation of the logic of the symbol and representation. Baudrillard terms this collapse and instability of border an implosion — "an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination with its positive and negative electricity — an implosion of meaning. This is where simulation begins."²⁹ Where simulation begins, the notion of representation ends. The failure of the distinction between poles marks the age of the politics of simulation, embodying both the potentially liberating collapse of old borders, while at the same time making possible hegemonic manipulation through control of capital flow and the production of new technologies.

However, the history of this implosion, this circuitry, is not simply a modern phenomenon. Baudrillard's radical deconstruction of these poles is both epistemological and historical. In fact, the archeology of this tendency for the implosion of the space between the imaginary and the real can be seen in the relationship between the naked body and the development of clothing styles. As Anne Hollander shows in her book, *Seeing Through Clothes*, styles of the female body have changed; indeed,

the figures admired and hence idealized within the tradition of nude art are themselves shaped by current clothing styles. For example, in Europe, the upper body, i.e. the breasts, was strictly corsetted to emphasize the sweeping outward curve of the belly. Nude paintings which were thought to reflect the natural shape of the body, in fact retain the shape of these clothes; what is depicted by the artist as a "natural body", a representation of a woman's figure, is itself overdetermined by these fashions.³⁰ Thus, a neat causal relationship between an object and its transcription in some form of "writing" is problematic. It implies that there is an objective reality outside of the critic or artist — a natural body as the originary site — depicted or distorted by mass culture; but images are not mimetic of a natural world prior to representation. As Barthes says, "your body, the thing that seems the most real to you is doubtless the most phantasmic."³¹ Not only does a feminist politics based on a notion of representation, on a return to the natural body, or neutral forms of dress, ignore the pleasures involved in the possession of an article of clothing, but the impossibility of this return to the represented.

This process is exacerbated in the era of postmodernism, where technologies make possible the doubling of life, giving a new force to the powers of the imaginary and the memory trace to dominate and completely substitute the real. Baudrillard's social theory, like Derrida's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis, signals the continual collapsing of the scene and "the mirror," the prerequisite for any notion of representation as reflection or imitation:

... instead there is the scene and the network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a smooth, non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold — the smooth operational surface of communication.³²

This smooth operational surface which ruptures the depth model implicit in classical Marxist humanism inaugurate a different notion of causality: neither 'expressive,' nor simple structural, it questions the possibility of isolating all determinations of a given phenomenon, object, or event.

All of the social sciences have been predicated on a notion of system, either as a relatively stable set of signifiers, as in semiotics, or upon the isolation of a community, as in Marxism, in which human activity is localizable in space and time, generalizable because common meanings are shared amongst its members. Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernity, or late capitalism, throws these assumptions into question. As Philip Hayward notes in "Implosive Critiques," Baudrillard problematizes the notion of a cohesive social upon which the disciplines are based.³³ In a world of fluidity and fragmentation in which the stable boundaries of traditional communities such as the family, the church and the nation are

BODY INVADERS

in constant disruption, relocation, and solidification into exaggerated forms, we need a new methodology to complement these transformations.

One way to approach the fragmentation of the social is to study cultural signs as allegorical objects which have a multiplicity of possible meanings rather than any one fixed interpretation. This is not simply an idle, idealistic or nihilistic pursuit. As Elizabeth Cowie explains, meaning is never absolutely arbitrary in any text.

Rather, the endless possible signification of the image is always, and only a theoretical possibility. In practice, the image is always held, constrained in its production of meaning or else becomes meaningless, unreadable. At this point the concept of anchorage is important; there are developed in every society decisive technologies intended to fix the floating chains of signifieds so as to control the terror of uncertain signs.³⁴

The contradiction within any analysis is that in order to communicate, one is faced with having to "modify" a text; that is, to classify and identify the regime of codes which govern its production, while being vigilant to their inevitable mutation. Benjamin's concept of allegory, like Derrida's notion of intertextuality, is a strategy of reading which opens up the possibility of deciphering, rather than decoding, the fashion object and other cultural texts. Decoding, as Freud explicated, implies that there is a master system to which all signs can be returned; deciphering, on the other hand, implies that we are cognizant of the instability of all meaning.

This method, or anti-method — *allegoresis* — takes cultural sign objects as emblematic. As Benjamin said "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."³⁵ Like all forms of cultural production, fashion cannot be considered a mere expression of the current *Zeitgeist*, for it is a constituent relational element in the fabric of the social.

Conclusion

Capitalism and the Colonization of the Imaginary

I began this excursion into a discussion of fashion with two dreams, supplemented by a third; a dream of inscription of the social, the mapping of a typically modern form of power onto the body, and its eclipse in the era of postmodernism with its dependence on an abstract disembodied form of self-discipline; secondly a dream of a woman caught, trapped, embedded within a circuitry of power, of competing discourses which not only position her, affect her, but name her "Woman" as distinct in nature and temperament from "Man", thus

creating as both subject and object; thirdly, a dream of a resurrected past, capitalism's cannibalization of the other, its treatment of them as already dead museum pieces, and its resurrection of them as fashion — the colonialism of advanced capitalism powered by the energy of seduction and desires.

The use of allegory in relationship to fashion and postmodernism is appropriate, given postmodernism's use of allegory as a form of artistic practice and criticism, and given the breakdown of stable communities upon which the social sciences base their use of representation as a concept for giving meaning to behaviours. In the place of 'real communities' and the 'social', a simulated community is born; tribes of consumers who buy Tide, T.V. families on shows such as Family Feud, the world in Harmony as in the Coke commercials, a world that we may not feel compelled to conform to but which offers itself to us as a type of hyper reality. Capitalism operates in full knowledge of the power of the imaginary, of our desire to join into these masquerades, and re-creates the social as a series of dream-works, much like the landscapes analysed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The imaginary, as Freud, Lacan, and Althusser knew, must be taken seriously because it has very real effects; any rigid separation between the two realms is impossible. In fact, both zones, if indeed there are only two, are always overdetermining, collapsing in on each other. It is the imaginary which informs what is to be our experience of both past and future. Hence, the colonization that capitalism achieves is also an imperialism of the imagination — not just domination over such physical spaces as the third world.

Indeed, as postmodernist forms of architecture such as the Eaton's Centre in Toronto, the new Air Canada Building in Winnipeg, and the West Edmonton Mall indicate, this resurrection of defunct fictions can either be a pleasurable fantasy or a nightmare. In these architectural dreamscapes one can experience life in a Paris cafe, on a beach in Miami or in a submarine, without ever having to leave one's province or suburb. On the other hand, many other pieces of postmodern architecture are a direct reaction to the monumentalism of modernist style, which reduced every city to the megalopolis, and flattened every indigenous horizon to "the Same".

Postmodernism fluctuates between the poles of kitsch and a return to the local. It is both a form of populism, and a totally artificial rendering of history and space. Pee Wee Herman's America is the best example of this hyper-reality: it results in more livable spaces at the same time that it degenerates into a celebration of consumer culture.

Likewise, postmodern thought does not merely extoll naively what Frederic Jameson describes as the superficial and artificial surface. It is

BODY INVADERS

pragmatic in its realization that the modernist valorization of the real and of authenticity was insensitive to the superficial. Modernism tended to be a romantic discourse, it longed for a return to some prehistoric origin, and positioned itself, as educated critic outside and above the culture it criticised — in the place of God. While modernism valued what it took to be the essential, the real, the substantial over the ephemeral, the imaginary, the formal, postmodernism has been engaged in questioning these divisions, and this transcendental position. As I have argued, this was a most dangerous abdication of power. Postmodern thought realises the full ability of capital to capitalize on every alternative discourse, every act of charity, every emotion and sentiment. Therefore it forces one to adopt the strategy of guerilla warfare, of insurgency, interference and destabilization, rather than the archaic model of revolution that is a part of the language of classical Marxism.

Most importantly, postmodernism enjoins us in the necessity for engaging in a cultural politics, politics that exploits the media, that is based on a language of celebration and ecstasy, as in the most recent efforts of the Toronto Arts Community in bringing attention to the need for sanctions against South Africa. It is not surprising that the most interesting theoretical works and reflections on the state of contemporary culture and politics have come out of art and literary magazines such as *ZG*, *October*, *Impulse*, *Borderlines*, and the French "fashion magazine" *Pole Position*; and that significant interventions in photography and art have come from women such as Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler, Lynne Fernie, and Christine Davis, who have attempted to grapple with these issues, particularly the issue of the representation of women. They do not necessarily offer positive images of women, but they do question the notion of "Woman" as a natural construct. They do not offer solutions, but instead force the readers of their works to develop skills in interpreting and reading. It is important to transmit skills that will allow consumers of capitalism to understand the power of images in general and to question the notion of the immutability of that which we take to be real. It is at this juncture that aesthetic judgment and politics meet.

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Notes

1. Franz Kafka, "In The Penal Colony", *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 191-230.
2. The most interesting recent work on fashion is by Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), is another seminal piece, although it is rife with difficulties for the reader because of its extremely technical semiotic approach to

the topic. Barthes' own critique of this work can be found in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hillard and Wang, 1985). As well, I recommend Kathy Meyers, "Fashion N' Passion", *Screen*, vol. 23 # 3 (October, 1983), pp. 89-97., and Rosetta Brooks, "Fashion: Double Page Spread," *Camera-works*, # 17 (Jan./Feb., 1980), pp. 1-20.

3. Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled", *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haaken Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p.35. Read Fanon's piece in conjunction with the essay by Jacques Derrida, "White Mythologies", *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). This "white mythology" contained in the most trivial of objects, the fashion photo for a cosmetic company, is integrally connected to another "white mythology", the history of metaphysics. It is the metaphysical position which privileges the notion of Reason over the emotional and the sensual which I will argue has relegated the topic of fashion to the inessential. Derrida, p. 213.
4. Anne Oakley, *Subject Women* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 82.
5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972).
6. Oakley, pp. 45-47. See also, E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983). She says: "The construction of woman as spectacle, internalized, leads women to offer their bodies in professions like modelling and advertising, and film acting, and to be generally susceptible to demands to be made a spectacle." (p. 73).
7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Percy (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 412-428.
8. Griselda Pollack, "What's Wrong With Images of Women?" *Screen Education*, 3 24 (Autumn, 1977).
9. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 38. De Lauretis' work provides a clear and cogent summary of many of the theoretical debates within both Marxist, feminist and semiotic analysis as they pertain to the question of the representation of women in film images.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.
11. Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977). Given Benjamin's very clear sympathy to the concept of allegory over and against the classical notion of the symbol, it is unfathomable how Lukacs could so misread Benjamin's work. Lukacs, pp. 40-44. Paul de Man's work on allegory and symbol should be read in conjunction with Benjamin. As de Man notes in relation to European literature "... in the latter half of the eighteenth century... the word symbol tends to supplant other denominations for figural language including that of allegory." Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", *op. cit.*, p. 188. For examples of how deeply the concept of the symbol permeates Marxism's understanding of culture as symbolic, see William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally's excellent study, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Well-Being* (Toronto: Methuen, 1986), pp. 55, 66.
12. As quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 206.
13. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), p. 178.

BODY INVADERS

14. *Ibid*, p. 468.
15. *Ibid*, p. 171.
16. *Ibid*, p. 179. This distinction originally was brought to my attention in a footnote in a friend's Masters Thesis. Forest Barnett Pyle, "Walter Benjamin: The Constellation of A Cultural Criticism", University of Texas at Austin 1983, p. 51. Pyle attributes this distinction to Gayatri Spivak, but does not reference a source. I have traced the distinction to Freud.
17. Benjamin, p. 165.
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19. *Ibid*, p. 177.
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21. Fanon, pp. 47-48.
22. Jeanette C. Lauer and Robert Lauer, *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981), pp. 73-101.
23. *Ibid*, p. 80.
24. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 17.
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27. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 12-13.
28. *Ibid*; p. 2.
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30. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: The Viking press, 1978), pp. 97-104.
31. Barthes, *Grain of the Voice*, p. 365.
32. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed. (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 127.
33. Philip Hayward, "Implosive Critiques", *Screen*, vol. 28, 3-4-5- (July-Oct., 1984), p. 128.
34. Elizabeth Cowie, "Women, Representation and the Image", *Screen Education*, # 2-3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 15-23.
35. Benjamin, p. 178.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Christian Dior for allowing the reproduction of their advertisement.

FASHION AND THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF POSTMODERNITY

Gail Faurschou

The Politics of Style¹

Until recently, the decoration of the body has been a subject confined mostly to the disciplines of sociology² and anthropology although literary references to what we might call a 'fashion consciousness' are numerous. I am thinking here specifically of Proust, although Baudelaire and Balsac, among others, were fascinated by the ambiguity surrounding desire, sexuality and style.

If anything can be said about fashion at a general level it is that its history testifies to the fact that the adornment of the body has rarely been a question of strict material or functional necessity. Indeed, as in precapitalist societies, it has constituted a privileged point of departure for inscribing the socius in and through the body and its vestments, the process of recording a memory of alliance, a system of symbolic in-vestment and exchange. Moreover, as with those cultural practices that have persisted throughout all social formations, albeit occupying radically different positions, adorning the body as a form of consuming the social surplus means that here is etched out not only an aesthetic and symbolic but a *political* terrain, an economy that marks and inscribes the most intimate surfaces of our skins. In these designs where the lines of power and desire are drawn, one can trace the fundamental contradictions intrinsic to the history of all societies. Thus bodily decoration becomes a form of cultural production that can simultaneously both limit

BODY INVADERS

and enrich symbolic communication, constitute a site of freedom or restriction, submission or rebellion, eroticism or domination, identity or difference. Its intimate relation to the body means it weaves upon it both pleasure and pain, sacrifice and selfindulgence.

As cultural theorists sensitive not only to the subtleties of power in the apparently most insignificant of cultural texts, but also aware of the possibility of complicity with it through moralizing and universalizing judgements, we cannot but approach the subject of fashion with ambivalence. This is not only the ambivalence we face when interpreting past cultural practices of which we are not a part, but the ambivalence that strikes us particularly in evaluating practices in which we participate and, in many cases enjoy. Like many of the exploratory contributions feminist theory has made to contemporary cultural studies, including the recent debates on sexuality, pornography, and images of women in general, an analysis of fashion must be aware of the intricately entwined relations not only of power and domination, but also of desire and play, however complex and abstract these relations have become in the ever expanding boundaries of the mass society of late capitalism.

There is much work to be done here. Even the initially most simple questions soon prove elusive. What makes up a style, a look? How do shapes and folds of clothing appear aesthetically pleasing or ridiculously old fashioned? How does the play of difference in fashion create a meaningful code and in what sense can we speak of symbolic or expressive communication between subjects — if at all?

While there are many theoretical avenues that one could pursue in relation to fashion, for example, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, I am primarily concerned in what follows with how, on a more general level, we can view fashion and its promotional industries as a point of departure for exploring some of the contradictory tendencies of our present period.

If fashion today appears as the most ephemeral and trivial of leisure pursuits, infinitely distanced from its ritual, mystical, religious, ceremonial, or simply symbolic capacity for communication, surely this makes it all the more an interesting and important area to explore. The fashion-object appears as the most chaotic, fragmented, and elusive of commodities, yet it circulates a pervasive and enveloping logic. I would argue that, for this reason, it constitutes an exemplary site for examining the cultural dislocations and contradictions of the transition from modernity to the late capitalist, new wave, postmodern era. In particular, I will attempt to show that the widely noted tendency toward the abstraction, disembodiment, and even disappearance of the subject is implicit in the very principles of an expanding fashion culture — that if the subject is on the way out, it is going out in style.

II

Modernity: Fashion as a Commodity

Before discussing fashion as a late-capitalist, postmodern phenomenon, a few words need to be said about its development from that initially crucial stage of its origin in modernity. It is, of course, only with the rise of industrial capitalism and the market economy that fashion becomes a commodity produced for the realization of economic exchange value in the division of labour and the separation of production and consumption. In this regard, it is interesting to note that clothing was the first industrialized sector of capitalism and that Marx began his analysis of value equivalence in *Capital* with the example: 10 yards of linen equals one coat³. Indeed, the whole rationalization process of capital originated with what would seem to have become the most irrational of commodities. But in the 19th and early 20th century, dress was still a commodity produced according to the existing structure or 'ideology of needs'. As William Leiss, et al. point out in their recent study of advertising⁴, this production-oriented phase of capitalism marketed its products primarily on the basis of improving, but not changing, one's existing mode of life. The early capitalists emphasized the craftsmanship, traditional values and tastes that were important to the social economy of prestige and class distinction. One can observe this attitude to fashion apparel in the way clothes were marketed in early magazine advertisements and catalogues. Here we find long descriptions of the quality of the material, its impeccable construction, durability, etc. Every effort was made to place these new products in the familiar context of established cultural significations.

It is also interesting to note, in this regard, that it was not until the rise of the market and the bourgeois class that fashion became a notably gendered phenomena. As Elizabeth Wilson points out in her study of modern dress⁵, fashion became a way of distinguishing the bourgeois class and its values from the aristocracy and its excessive lifestyle and extravagance. The bourgeois woman was now to become a sign of the conservative family unit: feminine but modest, attractive but frugal.

Similarly, Wilson notes, early feminists' critiques of dress focused on the value of clothing to the body, movement, health, and activity. The Rational Dress Society was only one of the dress reform movements of the 1900's that debated the corset, the introduction of trousers for women, and the return to what they saw as a freer more 'natural' look that was influenced by the art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Even many socialist movements took up the issue. But it would be wrong to assume these debates on the use value of clothing excluded the issue of beauty and femininity which was still a foremost concern. In the modern period,

BODY INVADERS

beauty as a cultural ideal retained much of its classical importance and allure. That is to say, beauty in early modernity was still thought of as an aesthetic category that bore on some ideal of the ultimate expressiveness of the human soul, specifically one that linked it to its embodied form. Clothing was supposed to assist and accentuate this embodied beauty. Ambiguity and vulnerability, unrefined hints of subjectivity, remained vital aspects of its aesthetic appeal. This is a point to be kept in mind when we turn to our discussion of postmodernity.

In the early 20th century, modernist objects still retained some capacity for symbolic investment, whether that of use value, prestige, or the expression of identity. According to Frederic Jameson, this was possible because commodities still bore traces of the human labour objectified within them. They were not yet the disembodied, free-floating, abstract commodities of the mass consumer market. Jameson argues that surrealism was emblematic of the status of objects in the high modernist period.

the human origins of the products... their relationship to the work from which they issued — had not yet been fully concealed... what prepares these products to receive the investment of psychic energy characteristic of their use by Surrealism is precisely the halfsketched, uneffaced mark of human labour, of the human gesture, not yet completely separated from subjectivity, which remain therefore potentially as mysterious and as expressive as the human body itself.

... We need only juxtapose (the object of surrealism), as a symbol with the photographic objects of pop art, (Andy Warhol's) Campbell soup can, pictures of Marilyn Monroe, ... the gasoline stations along American superhighways, the glossy photographs in the magazines, or the cellophane paradise of an American drugstore, in order to realize that the objects of Surrealism are gone without a trace.

Henceforth, in what we may call postindustrial capitalism, the products which we are furnished with are utterly without depth; their plastic content is totally incapable of serving as a conductor of psychic energy... All the libidinal investment in such objects is precluded from the outset, and we may well ask ourselves, if it is true that our object universe is henceforth unable to yield any 'symbol apt at stirring human sensibility,' whether we are not here in the presence of a cultural transformation of signal proportions, a historical break of an unexpectedly absolute kind?⁶

The meaning of this break is also clear for Jean Baudrillard: "The era of function and the signified has revolved, the era of the signifier and the

code is beginning.”⁷ The object of postmodernity has finally become the true object of consumption, Baudrillard argues, when “...released from its psychic determinations as *symbol*; from its functional determinations as *instrument*; from its commercial determinations as *product*; (it) is thus *liberated as a sign* to be recaptured by (the logic of differentiation) the formal logic of fashion.”⁸

III

The Postmodern Fashionscape

In contrast to the productivist ethic of industrial modernism, late capitalism is the society of consumption, the society of the mass market and multinational capital, the age of media, information, and electronic reproduction.⁹ It is no longer an economy seeking to fulfill the needs of a modernizing society but a society driven to create a perpetual *desire for* need, a need for novelty, for endless difference and instant satisfaction.

In postmodernity, fashion has become the commodity ‘par excellence’. It is fed by all of capitalism’s incessant, frantic, reproductive passion and power. Fashion is the logic of planned obsolescence — not just the necessity for market survival, but the cycle of desire itself, the endless process through which the body is decoded and recoded, in order to define and inhabit the newest territorialized spaces of capital’s expansion.¹⁰ A line of escape at one moment, fashion is recaptured in the network of images the next; frozen in the mirror of the media scape, we gaze forever at our suspended moment of flight. As Guy Debord says of the “society of the spectacle”: “the image has become the final form of commodity reification.”¹¹ This is Baudrillard’s world of the hyperreal, and the infinite simulacrum, the abstract, compulsive innovation of signs: arbitrary but perpetual, empty but brilliant. It is Jameson’s aesthetic of the euphoric hysterical sublime, the frantic schizophrenic explosion of multiple glossy surfaces without depth, the gleaming hallucinatory splendor of style without substance. Fashion has become our contemporary mode of being in the world — and our contemporary ‘mode’ of death. Style-speed-seduction-death. We need only think of Hollywood’s glamorized version of itself in Warner Brothers “To Live and Die in L.A.,” or its television spin off, “Miami Vice,” or even the increasing popularity of the novels of J.G. Ballard, to realise its imagistic appeal.

Postmodernity then is no longer an age in which bodies produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sports cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, for Coke, and of course, bodies for fashion, — total bodies, a total look. The colonization and appropriation of the body as its own production/

BODY INVADERS

consumption machine in late capitalism is a fundamental theme of contemporary socialization.

...monopoly capitalism...not content to exploit the body as labor power, manages to fragment it, to divide the very expressiveness of the body in labor, in exchange, and in play, recuperating all this as individual needs, hence as productive consummative forces under its control...¹²

... the body, beauty, and sexuality are imposed as new universals ... emancipated by abundance and cybernetic revolution. The deprivation, manipulation, and controlled recycling of the subjective and collective values by the unlimited rival speculation over sign values renders necessary the sanctification of a glorious agency called the body that will become for each individual an ideological sanctuary, the sanctuary of its own alienation.¹³

For Baudrillard, fashion is the epitome of the cynical survival of capitalism. It is the celebration of a perverse, fetishized passion for the abstract code, at the expense of any collective investment in symbolic exchange. The logic of the commodity multiplies indefinitely in the fascination for objects eviscerated of their substance and history, reduced to the pure state of marking a difference. As Baudrillard writes, "A thousand contradictory definitions of beauty and style are possible [but] one thing is certain: they are never a calculus of signs."¹⁴ Indeed, Baudrillard argues, the very category of beauty is liquidated when the semiological order succeeds the symbolic order.

The disappearance of the beautiful as a sustaining category of pre-capitalist culture marks an important phase in the eclipse of subjectivity. According to Baudrillard, the forms of beauty were a symbolic play on the ambiguity of the subject. Beauty could be: "an effect of the soul (the spiritualist vision), the natural grace of movement, or countenance with the transparency of truth (the idealist vision), or the inspired genius of the body which can be communicated as effectively by expressive ugliness (the romantic vision)?"¹⁵

In this juxtaposition of an erstwhile subjective beauty with the postmodern sublime, Baudrillard is not concerned to recall an 'essence', but to draw out the historical supercession of ambivalence and to distinguish this from the substitutive logic of the fashion cycle. In symbolic exchange, the social relations between individuals or groups, as mediated through the gift, the ritual, and writing on the body, are all virtual relations of desire and as such, relations of risk, of unresolved ambivalence, danger, and vulnerability. In this sense, the sign-object of fashion and the symbolic object exist in mutually exclusive cultural forms:

The sign object is neither given nor exchanged: it is appropriated, withheld, and manipulated by individual subjects as a sign, that is as coded difference. Here lies the object of consumption. And it is always of and from a reified, abolished social relationship that is "signified" in a code.¹⁶

Opposed to the forever unresolved order of the symbolic stands fashion, an abstract, arbitrary exchange of signs, a system that manifests in its appearance of play and difference the "total constraint of the code." Replacing the traditional, socially ambiguous forms of beauty, fashion becomes a data base of aesthetic categories. Baudrillard refers to it as a "semio-aesthetic order," one which consists of "an interplay of referrals, of equivalence, of controlled dissonances."¹⁷ This reinscription of the polyvalence of beauty within a homogenous, system of endlessly but equally differentiated signs has, Baudrillard, argues, as its ultimate goal, closure and perfection, a logical mirage suturing all social contradictions and divisions on the level of the abstract. This is the glamour of fashion, the glamourized body of disembodied perfection. This is *Vogue's* 'total look'; *Cosmopolitan's* 'perfect match'; *Mademoiselle's* 'elegant coordination'. This is the look of envy John Berger speaks of in *Ways of Seeing*. The look of solitary assurance, of impersonal power, a look absent and unfocused precisely because it looks out over the look of envy which sustains it.¹⁸

These are the images we find as we flip through page after page in fashion magazines. Despotic and total, each confronts us, but only to be overturned in an instant, replaced indefinitely in the continuous oscillation of absolute authority and immediate irrelevance.

Emblematic of this momentary, monthly, seasonal marking of time on the eternally reincarnated youthful body, oblivious to historical recording or wrinkling is *Vogue's* editorial, titled, interestingly enough, "The Last Word", summing up the new look for each issue. Here are a few 'last words' that would seem to exemplify the aesthetic ordering, of a semiological culture:

What works? Lets start with a conclusion. When you're dressing in a small shaped suit or precise dress (and those clothes are some of the stars of this season... and this issue), you're wearing highly finished sorts of clothes. You've a total look; there's not much need to interfere...

In terms of accessories, the modern key to this 'finished' way of dressing may be a certain elimination of things...¹⁹

Designers have solved the problem of dressing fast, with wonderfully thought out looks. You'll like these looks best if you enter in, more than somewhat to the equation... In almost any

BODY INVADERS

clothes that sense of pureness is one sign of modernity...²⁰

For Baudrillard, contemporary fashion is "the generalization of sign exchange value to facial and bodily effects. It is the final disqualification of the body, its subjection to a discipline... The signs are there to make the body into a perfect object."²¹ Like Jameson's description of the images of postmodernity, this perfection of the body into an object of glamour "is a feat accomplished through a long and specific labor of sophistication... in which none of its real work (the work of the unconscious or psychic and social labor can show through. The fascination of this fetishized beauty is the result of this extended process of abstraction, and derives from what it negates and censors through its own character as a system."²²

Like Berger's "look of envy", this fetishized beauty exercises what Baudrillard calls a "cold seduction." It has nothing to do with pleasure or play or "the illegible ambivalence of desire"²³ In these frozen figures, flawless skins, blank stares, there is no pain, no fear, nothing moves, and nothing could move these invulnerable figures bereft of affect and expression.

But Baudrillard goes even further. He calls this fetishized beauty 'anti-nature incarnate' and argues that the fascination we hold for this model of reification is the very essence of what desire has become in the postmodern era: the desire for closure and logical perfection, the desire of desire to be ultimately and resolutely sufficient unto itself.²⁴

this kind of beauty is fascinating precisely because it is trapped in models, because it is closed, systematic, ritualized in the ephemeral, without symbolic value. It is the sign in this beauty, the mark (makeup, symmetry, or calculated asymmetry, etc.) Which fascinates; it is the artifact that is the object of desire.²⁵

Here the aesthetic effect plays on our initial misrecognition of the model for the mannequin and the mannequin for the model. We have to look twice. Yet this 'works,' as the language of *Vogue* would have it — and why shouldn't it? For isn't the reversibility of life and still life, nature and 'nature morte', a kind of epitome of the commodity system itself, a triumph of the principle of substitutibility?

In these inanimate figures, the idea of glamour goes beyond the perfection of the body, its making-up, dressing up, and even cutting up in plastic surgery — toward death itself.

In the latest issue of *Vogue*, Calvin Klein has eliminated the last distinction between the body and its adornment.²⁶ The body has imploded into the pure play of surfaces, its outline delineates the imaginary otherness of the simulacrum, the substance that never was. Beyond the subject as object, made-up model, idol, mannequin, artifact. Beyond the pure positivity of desire perfected in the object, we now have the equivalent of the photographic negative. In place of the subject, a shadow, a ghostly absent presence clothed in angelic white silk. A shadow illuminated in its outline like the radiated figures of Hiroshima: it haunts us. But, it also seduces us. The empty abstract black hole of desire... beckons. Sleepwear. Deathwear. Shrouded in fashion — the ideal logic of late capitalism.

BODY INVADERS

IV

Obsession*

A Scents of Style: Some Thoughts on Calvin Klein's Obsession (four 15 second commercials on Video)

"There are many loves but only Obsession"

"In the kingdom of passion the ruler is Obsession"

"Love is child's play once you've learned Obsession"

"Between love and madness lies Obsession"*

* This section was written in collaboration with Charles Levin

Between love and madness lies Obsession. Desire and power spiral interiorized in this zero space of shadows and staircases leading nowhere, mocking all lines of escape. Obsession. All are positioned around it. Everything falls before it. All are reduced "to ashes, all ashes," "abandoned to the wreckage of themselves."

Why Obsession? Why name a perfume after the structure of neurotic inhibition? It appears that in a world so affectless, so sterile, only aggression sustains enough intensity to attract. What is initially most memorable for the viewer of this series of commercials is that in each the sign of the perfume is inserted into an obsessional collection of fetishes, the tokens of destroyed love, of loss, aphanisis, depression. In the first, it is the stolen chess piece, the king; in the second, scattered flower petals, yellow like the Narcissus; in the third, the pathetic child's diary of frustrated Oedipal passion; and in the fourth, the grieving mother's black scarf. In this fourfold cycle, like a Frygian mythos, laughter and love are followed by castration and perversion. The denouement is always an affective metonymy, in which the fragment of a broken bond is liberated as an ironic sign. Each segment transfixes a symbolic relation at its moment of destruction and adds it to the cumulative economy of Obsession. The perfume thus becomes a kind of liquid intensity, a condensation of failed or faded libido.

The phallic, pre-Raphealite woman is the simulacrum of incarnation, an angel, a fever — "all heat and hunger" — "taunting, exquisite creature" — like a wayward Ariel. She begs to be saved, but always escapes. In this sense, Obsession is alchemical, a distillation of the product at the conclusion of each episode, seated in the collection of fetish objects, marks the dynamic mutation of leaden desire into the signifier of charged memory. Each gesture, each touch, each utterance revolves around an absence. "To breathe her innocence was life itself" — a trace.

As in Klein's sleepwear ads, the simulation of 'obsession' produces an absence in order to forestall the death implicit in completion, or semiotic perfection. The 'system' cannot function without its Imaginary other, but this otherness only exists in a relational form, as the abstraction of a sign-object which refers back to a lost body. In the 'Oedipal' sequence featuring the little boy, his diary, and his idealization of the female model, there is a reference to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*: "the whispers at my bedside, her arms, her mouth..." This maternal projection is "the only woman I'll ever love" — but she steals his fantasies away. "Did I invent her?" the little boy asks.

The sign of obsession is the cynical sign of a purely relational, abstract power, a power which thrives on its own self-hatred. It could be argued that the Obsession commercials interpellate a representation of the social world of late capitalism by recoding desire in Oedipal form, as a despotic

BODY INVADERS

signifier which territorializes fantasy as family theatre.²⁷ But this 'signifier', together with the family organized around it, are no longer credibly interpreted as Oedipal or patriarchal or even phallic. The paternal simulacrum (the narrator in the first episode) is a defeated Prospero, not only stripped of his secular power, but forlorn, unmagical, without spiritual authority. His gold has already turned into lead, his Miranda is a mannequin; and the purloined chesspiece is not a symbol of the procreative possibilities of kingship, but merely a mnemonic ingredient in the nostalgic simulation of coenesthetic seduction, a psychic ruin of bodily attraction.

The Lacanian father no longer has any of his symbolic authority, not even as an ideological constraint on "desire", not even as the progenitor of words. Everywhere and nowhere, language becomes cynical and hollow, evoking a pervasive structure of deauthorization and panic.²⁸ There is, to be sure, an Oedipal theatre, but it is empty, and the lines of memory echo in its phantom acoustic space like rehearsals for a play the actors know will not be performed.

The grieving mother of the fourth and final sequence surveys a scene in which neither conflict nor repression have any meaning. Sublimation turns out to have been a cruel, patriarchal joke. Like the helpless child, this dark, Trojan woman represents an emotional testimony; but she has witnessed neither struggle, nor death — only the schizoid terror of undifferentiation, the futile will to total consumptive passivity. Obsessional destruction is not final, merely recurrent: it is a repetition compulsion which infects each figure who participates in the concept of the family, and forces him or her to play out destiny in a pattern whose meaning all must pretend not to know, in order to create the illusion of meaning. The signs of absence multiply like the snakes on the Medusa's head, but not because something like the missing phallus is feared and repressed. It is not the phallus which is missing, but the *absence* of the phallus — or in other words, the issue is not absence, but the absence of absence. Not the anxiety of sexual difference, but the depressing apperception of endless sameness. The obsessional meaning-effect overdetermines itself, swallows its own tail in a circle of disembodied power. Every time we grasp a signification, it is substituted by another, which only adds to the collection of objects, but takes us nowhere in time or space. The death instinct, an overpowering odour, beckons.

Department of Sociology
York University

APPENDIX

[Contract]

CALVIN KLEIN'S
OBSESSION

From the contract between Calvin Klein and model Jose Borain, the "Calvin Klein Girl." Borain appears in advertisements for the designer's fragrance Obsession.

AGREEMENT made as of the 25th day of September 1984 between CALVIN KLEIN INDUSTRIES, INC., a New York corporation (hereinafter called "CK"), and BORAIN ENTERPRISES, LTD., a New York corporation (hereinafter called "Consultant").

In consideration of the mutual covenants contained herein, the parties hereby agree as follows:

I.A. CK hereby retains Consultant and Consultant hereby agrees to be retained by CK and to provide to and for CK the "Services" of its employee, Jose Borain ("Borain"), as a model in all respects which services shall be deemed to include, without limitation, all broadcast advertising, promotion and exploitation (e.g., network, local, cable and closed circuit television, AM & FM radio and cinema), print advertising, promotion and exploitation (e.g., printed hang-tags, labels, containers, packaging, display materials, sales brochures, covers, pictorial, editorial, corporate reports and all other types of promotional print material contained in the media including magazines, newspapers, periodicals and other publications of all kinds), including but not by way of limitation, fashion shows, run-way modeling, retail store trunk shows, individual modeling and other areas of product promotion and exploitation which are or may be considered to be embraced within the concept... of fashion modeling.

4. Consultant shall, and where applicable shall cause Borain to:

A. Keep CK informed of Borain's schedule in the event she travels outside the metropolitan New York area for periods of more than two (2) days consecutively;

B. Maintain Borain's weight, hair style and color and all other features of Borain's physiognomy and physical appearance as they are now or in such other form as CK may, from time to time, reasonably request. Consultant and Borain represent that Borain's current weight level is between 120 and 125 lbs. and CK agrees that Borain's weight up to 130 lbs. will be an acceptable weight pursuant to the provisions hereunder. Illustratively, Borain shall wear hair styles, utilize such make-up and wear such apparel and accessories as CK requests from time to time; use such hair stylists as CK engages or approves; maintain such reasonable physical regimen (including exercise, diet and nutritional programs) as will best enable Borain to perform her Services hereunder; and when requested by CK, consult and comply with the reasonable advice and reasonable recommendations of such physician, exercise coach, hair and makeup stylists and others, etc.;

C. Maintain a personal lifestyle which will, in CK's sole subjective judgment reasonably exercised, be appropriate and most suitable to project an image and persona that reflect the high standards and dignity of the trademark "Calvin Klein" and that do not diminish, impair or in any manner detract from the prestige and reputation of such trademark.

7. A. CK shall pay or cause Consultant to be paid the aggregate sum of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) for all of Borain's Services during the three (3) year term hereunder, i.e., the sum of \$333,333 per year for each employment year during the term of this Agreement...

13. CK may... terminate this Agreement forthwith by written notice to Consultant upon the occurrence, or upon CK's becoming aware of the occurrence, of any one or more of the following events:

A. In the event of Borain's disfigurement or disability, which shall be deemed to mean any illness, accident or other physical or mental impairment which renders her, in the sole subjective judgment of CK reasonably exercised (except with respect to disfigurement or other change in physical appearance which may be exercised solely based on Mr. Klein's

BODY INVADERS

sole aesthetic subjective standards), incapable of performing or unqualified to perform her Services whenever required under this Agreement...

B....If by reason of [Borain's] deliberate or inadvertent action or conduct she shall come into disrepute or her public reputation shall become degraded or discredited so that the Services she is to provide pursuant hereunder shall, in CK's sole subjective judgment reasonably exercised, have become less valuable to CK in projecting the desired image consistent with the dignity and high standards of the CK tradition...

G. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein contained, this Agreement shall terminate automatically and forthwith upon the death of Borain, the bankruptcy or insolvency of Consultant, or the dissolution, liquidation, merger or consolidation of Consultant.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in a session sponsored by the C.J.P.S.T., The Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association and The Winnipeg Art Gallery at the Learned Societies, Winnipeg, 1986.
2. While most sociological literature on fashion has tended to be primarily descriptive or historical rather than theoretical, the exceptions are phenomenologically oriented studies for the obvious reason that they take the embodied subject as their point of departure. In the introduction to John O'Neill's recent study of contemporary society, (*Five Bodies*, Cornell University Press, 1985) he writes, "We are continuously caught up and engaged in the embodied look of things, especially the look of others and of ourselves. Although philosophers and moralists have decried our attachment to appearances and superficialities, as sociologists we cannot ignore the elaborate social construction of embodied appearances in which we are necessarily engaged as persons... Because *society is never a disembodied spectacle*, we engage in social interaction from the very start on the basis of sensory and aesthetic impression." p. 22.
3. See vol. 1 ch. 1 of Karl Marx's *Capital*. It is also interesting to note in this regard that Adam Smith's archtypic example of the rationality of the division of labour in *The Wealth of Nations* was the manufacture of pins used primarily to secure clothing and cloth in sewing.
4. William Leiss, et al, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being*, Methuen, Canada, 1986, See esp. chs. 4 and 5.
5. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* Virago Press 1985, Ch. 6.
6. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton Univ. Press. 1971, p. 106.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Translated by Charles Levin, Telos Press, 1981, p. 98.
8. Ibid, p. 67.
9. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review*, #146, Fall 1984.
10. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Translated by R. Hurley, et al, The Viking Press, New York, 1977.

GAIL FAURSCHOU

11. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit 1983, p. 11.
12. Baudrillard, p. 97.
13. Ibid., p. 97.
14. Ibid., p. 188.
15. Ibid., p. 94.
16. Ibid., p. 65.
17. Ibid., p. 188.
18. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, B.B.C. and Penguin Books, 1979 p. 133.
19. *Vogue*, 'The Last Word', Sept. 1982, p. 568.
20. *Vogue*, 'The Last Word', Feb. 1983, p. 336.
21. Baudrillard, p. 94.
22. Ibid., p. 94.
23. Ibid., p. 188.
24. Ibid., p. 94.
25. Ibid., p. 94.
26. *Vogue*, May, 1986.
27. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.
28. Cf. Jean Baudrillard. *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, e.g. pp. 174-6.

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'OBSESSION' AND DESIRE: FASHION AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE

Berkeley Kaite

The insertion of 'fashion' into the postmodern terrain points to exciting possibilities regarding new ways of problematizing body adornment, visual codes and writing the body textual. The preceding papers allow for (at least) three important directions in feminist scholarship by dislocating previous assumptions about the fashion apparatus and visual imaginaries. First, the point is well argued that fashion as a sign system is not merely reducible to the commodity-form but is an exchange of products, bodies (biological and textual), subjects, meaning, desire, etc. Second, challenges are put to the (implicit and explicit) radical feminist and separatist indictments of the so-called 'counter-insurrectionist' concern with clothes; and, concomitant with that, the construction of a female spectacle. Finally, the three essays subvert representational logic: there *is* no essential, ulterior feminine 'real' to which all representations refer, and thus distinctions between "positive" and "negative" *images* are tenuous, as are antinomies which posit the representation as an alibi for a pure, distilled referent, be it the "feminine" voice, body or essentialist category 'Woman'.

The importance of studying sign systems relating to body adornment is well served here. *Everybody* wears clothes, at varying times in and out of bed, at home, on the street. Clothes invest the body symbolically: surely this has import beyond their functional significance. It is still of interest,

BODY INVADERS

however, that in the preceding essays the terms "fashion" and "style", and their attendant discourses, are addressed via their encoding/decoding in either the frozen or moving (i.e. TV) visual moment. This perhaps conforms to the postmodern "culture of sensation" (Lash, 1985): the camera, as we know, quotes death. Similarly, television is the self-reflexive medium, having created an "indigenous voice" as its defining characteristic: everything on television is about being on television — "antinarrative... preoccupied with performance over content; fascinated with bourgeois kitsch as a sort of moral principle" — television is concerned with its own performance, its look, its style: "... there are no stories anymore, no tales left to tell, nothing is at stake... Performance is its own content..."¹

Thus fashion here becomes its own performance, imbricated in its specular and spectacular (invoking visual/pleasurable imaginaries) discourses and, I would want to add, other discursive chains as well. The visual displays under discussion (magazine adverts or fashion spreads and television ads for Calvin Klein's 'Obsession') are constructed in highly symbolic ways, dependent on, and implicating, a female spectator. Her subjectivity is gendered around, among other things, enlistment in the pleasurable viewing of these ads with the fantasy (achieved or otherwise) of engaging in various forms of body adornment or costuming for her subjectivity. As noted by Faurschou, fashion and styles of clothing were originally designators of class location; however, the emphasis has gradually shifted to arbitrary gender positions. Thus I would want to highlight questions regarding a gendered Symbolic (in Lacanian terms), women's location within it, and signifying chains which position these ads — and the female spectator — for their meaning. In other words, I'm left wondering about the "institution of the subject in the visible", how we "see" ourselves through the "culturally seen".²

I would also want to invoke 'questions of desire' on a number of levels: after all, the artifacts under discussion were chosen by the authors following, one assumes, their consumption as objects of pleasure (and I agree with Faurschou for the need to theorize "not only power and domination but also desire and play"). And, representations of desire within 'dominant fictions' sustain sexual identity and sexual difference, certainly central to the formal and substantive composition of the photos/ads.

Clothes and the Model Woman

Self-adornment is the inscription of the body into discourses or, as Elizabeth Wilson would say, the linking of the "biological body to aesthetics."³ Perhaps an ad like that of Galliano's (discussed by Emberley), in the words of Angela Carter, "captures the mood of the times almost to the point of parody, as if to say: we are all... refugees in an empty world. (T)he dominant mood of the eighties (is) a way of dressing

that makes you look like the victim of a catastrophe.”⁴ However, an “aesthetic of poverty” or the “recession style” only go so far toward an understanding of *which* bodies are linked to any particular aesthetic. I therefore enjoin the significance of the broken glasses and “woman-as-Afghanistan” motif in the Galliano ad. One could argue that there are other than “adventure narratives” at play which inflate the glasses with meaning. The “visions” Emberley refers to also point to a sexual narrative around a *female* (perhaps not Third World but Other-worldly) appropriation of the gaze, although this is occluded by the model looking over the rim of her glasses, and the very fragile state of the glasses themselves: always threatening to destroy her vision. Her subject position lies somewhere between seeing and not-seeing, that discursive no-woman’s land. Is this Lacan’s evocation: “Nothing can be said of woman”?

But, also, the dominant movement of the photograph directs our eyes to hers and the useless glasses (for indeed she is not using them and they have already been rendered near-defunct by their two broken places) and thus the viewer is privy not just to the look of the model but of a model looking. She is not simply the object-of-the-male-gaze (a familiar cliché) but subject of, and subject for, *women* watching, presumably in pleasurable or, at least, contradictory ways. After all, men don’t make passes at girls who wear glasses. Indeed, the semantic use of glasses and metaphors of vision in sexual discourse are demonstrated elsewhere (cf. the 1942 Bette Davis film, “Now Voyageur”).

How then do women encounter desire, the scenario of which is informed by a patriarchal symbolic, and at what cost? Loss of vision? Castration? Desire, like the body, is a script into which we are written. This is not to support the impulse behind “French feminisms” which wants to re-instate “writing the body,” but to argue that the body is written on, and is thus a history of discourses. The point is simply that there are visions and there are visions: women’s vision(s), of themselves, of each other and of men, form a complex of narratives which can be overdetermining, shifting, and part of the signifying operations of culture and the unconscious. There is no unmediated body. But surely one needs to stress how bodies are articulated through their insertion into discourses which privilege, in the first and final instance, sexual difference.

Writing the body textual also applies to the association of the female model with the terrain — Afghanistan — and the harmonious twinning or metonymic usage of “Les Coloniales” (the Dior make-up line) and its accompanying photo-advertisement. The unwritten female body, denied access to masculine discourse, is prey to colonization: we are talking of more than a western representation of a Third World subject. The female

BODY INVADERS

subject/body is colonized through its inscription into patriarchal discourses: there is more to *this* discourse-of-difference than what is masked in the relations of production.

Obsession: A Play on Desire

Calvin Klein's 'Obsession' ads invite discussion of the symbolic legislation of sexual difference and questions of desire.

His television ads are astonishing, alluring and seductive. They operate on a number of levels; some notes from Lacanian problematics of desire may provide entry to their allure and larger questions regarding the anatomy of subjectivity.

Desire, within this framework, emerges when need and demand are not met and coheres around a desire for the mother and to *be everything* for the mother (hence circuits of desire). The primary dyadic relationship between mother and child, constituted around unrepresed longings to be satisfied by and to satisfy the central care-giver, is an Imaginary register disrupted by the "Law of the Father" (signified by the phallus: discursive, not anatomical), the prohibition against incest. Desire is coincident with lack (lack of the phallus or paternal signifier which will satisfy the mother's desire), which also defines sexual narratives based on difference: the most fixed of sexual discourses. Conjointly, desire is fixed around the inauguration of the subject into meaning with the acquisition of language, figurative of the Symbolic order. What Lacan calls "kinship nominations" (the power behind the name 'mother,' 'father,' 'sister,' 'brother,' etc.) are the superimposition of "the kingdom of culture" and it is these linguistic transactions which secure sexed identity.

Calvin Klein's "Obsession" is another man's/woman's "Desire": I want to argue that the ads can be seen as dramatic plays on the workings of desire. The relational nature of desire — it only emerges with meaning, alienation of the self and separation from the first objects of identification — situates it around lack and the impossibility of its (i.e. desire's) realization. The impossibility of desire is structured into one's relationship to two ideal representations "forever beyond the subject's reach": the first being model perfection in its mirror image, the source of its "identity;" the second refers to identifications made in the symbolic order which center further on lack and paternal signification⁵

A Lacanian reading of the text renders the formal qualities of desire — or obsession — as being shared by both narrator and the female subject of the narrative. Indeed, there is no discernible boundary between the narrative of one and the narrative of another: that is, whose obsession/desire is speaking? The individuals', whose lives are briefly incited by the young woman's desire? or *her* story/desire? We return to Lacan's *circuits* of desire. She (the central and recurring character of all four television

and print 'Obsession' ads) is possessed by her desires and the three males (one a young boy) and one female who narrate are possessed with desire of her. The elusive yet pervasive nature of desire is signified by the model's mysterious appearance (she is always there but with no point of origin); and around her just as mystical departure (although she leaves her traces or marks of desire). And the traces of others' desire are left with her as well — the flowers, the chess piece, the child's book... Desires are conflated to the unconditional whim of the Other, "this whim that introduces the phantom of the Omnipotence, not of the subject, but of the Other in which his demand is instilled... and with this phantom the need for it to be checked by the Law."⁶

The "content" of this desire shifts according to its discursive context. This is best exemplified in the ad which dramatizes a young boy's need/demand/desire for his at-once present and absent mother wherein configurations of desire conform to Lacan's emphasis on the first instance of lack: being, with the realization that one cannot have a symbolic unity with the mother. This is consolidated with the child's entry into the Symbolic Order, typified by acquisition of linguistic signifying systems, *this* signified by the boy's book = language.

Within the Lacanian schema the Symbolic is a patriarchal one, represented by the Law of the Father (the "ruler" in the "kingdom of passion," mentioned in one of the ads), a father endowed with phallic power who interferes with the original dyadic unity between mother and child. The unconscious is opened up in encountering the Symbolic and is founded on *repression* of desire for merging with the mother. The father interrupts these "imaginary" desires and constitutes the law which is repressed desire. Thus, in the "kingdom of passion" the "ruler" is Obsession/desire. The most intriguing aspects of the text surround the circuits of desire involving the narrated and the narrator: which is which? Also, it appears that the central female character is saturated with a desire rarely seen so explicitly in television advertising (although one wants to avoid reference to a "feminine" specificity or non-discursive desire). This poly-sexuality, the insatiability of desire, a female-centered discourse in which she is a carrier of far more than the male gaze: these are the representations of desire, a "... description of feminine sexuality... an exposure of the terms of its definition, the very opposite of a demand as to what that sexuality should be."⁷ This is relief from the dominant fictions into which we are inserted: best rejected by our obsessive/desiring subject who, in knocking the chess pieces off the board, refuses to play by the rules of the game.

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BODY INVADERS

Notes

1. Powers, 1986:40.
2. Lacan, 1981:106; Silverman, 1987.
3. 1983:25.
4. 1983:65.
5. Lacan, 1977; Silverman, 1983.
6. Lacan, 1977:311.
7. Rose, 1982:44.

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