

HART 7006: Museums, Display & the Writing of Art's Histories.

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Seminar Essay 2

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TITLE: WHEN FASHION TURNS BACK AS *SPECTRES/MALIGN MUSES*.

INTRODUCTION:

As fashion encompasses the new, ephemeral and ever- changing, it has challenged curators and museums in the construction of its displays, in the development of its discourse (as critical histories) and in the modes of circulation that establish its meanings in sociology, art history, cultural history, anthropology and social theory studies. In this essay I will further investigate the exhibition *Spectres/Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back* (2004/5) and the impact of this exhibition on the discourse of fashion theory, the impact on fashion curation and display practices, and the possible impact on the future of the writing of new fashion histories.

Recent attention in the study of fashion and the development of a more critical discourse, has increased the awareness of some of the theoretical frameworks established by, amongst others, Simmel (1899), Benjamin (1939), Barthes (1967), Bourdieu (1977) and more recently, Wilson (1985), Lipovetsky (1987), and Evans (2003). Fashion has moved from being merely a commodity (as an object of consumption) to a kind of cultural good (as a signifier); impacting on its importance in cultural and visual studies, and on the development of an inter-disciplinary discourse around its modes of circulation. Lipovetsky's *Empire of Fashion* (1994: 69) positions the circulation of the texts relating to dress and fashion by the latter half of the 18th century, as important to fashion which was by then already acknowledged as an entity "glorified, described, exhibited, and dealt with philosophically...and where [fashion] became a prolific machine for the production of texts and images". The primary circulation of these images and texts around fashion constructed the signification (Barthes, 1967), the urgency and agency of fashion to construct notions of modernity (Benjamin, 1939, Wilson 1985) and identity. Breward and Evans (eds. 2005, 2003) and Wilson (1985) discuss the relationship of fashion with instability, change and the display of a public identity within modernity. These shifts in the discourse of fashion not only reflect changes within the study of fashion, but also reflect the changes of the relationship of fashion to its modes of production and consumption and to its symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977).

As the fashion discourse changed, so too has the exhibition or display of fashion and the types of public brought into being through these changes. If publics exist only by virtue of their imagining (Warner, 2002) then changes in the discourse impact on the circulation of that discourse, the construction of its publics, and the criticality of its contents. Fashion is presented to many publics through a number of important modes of circulation. The fashion show, fashion TV, fashion magazines, photography, media and advertising all contribute to a continually changing currency in contemporary fashion. Exhibitions of fashion in museums constitute a further mode of circulation; albeit a complex relationship of temporalities, taste and meanings (as discussed in the previous essay). How then did *Spectres/Malign Muses* impact the discourse of fashion theory, the display of fashion and the public circulation of various texts? In what way did it create primary texts which would circulate and imagine future publics? And, why is the exhibition considered as influential in the field?

KEY CONCEPT 1: TASTE and PUBLICS + PUBLIC TASTE
And how *Spectres/Malign Muses* fits in?

Fashion curation can shift the way in which viewers engage with both the object (of fashion) and the meanings embedded or encoded in the objects or in the display of those objects. The potential of rewriting the relationship of a public to fashion through exhibitions of fashion has opened up new dialogues in understanding notions of taste, power and the politics of dress. Bourdieu (1984) includes fashion within his theory of distinction-making, using the notion of taste as a ‘marker that produces and maintains social boundaries’ within the framework of cultural taste and of class struggle. Kawamura (2005) states that the fashion system creates the conditions in which fashion exists and how this system allows fashion to continually write itself into the present. These conditions create the site/s for gatekeepers of taste (and distinction) where the power of fashion is maintained through the myths around its definition, favour and flavour. Claims to be fashionable, or in fashion, are made with little explanation to support these claims. Similarly, exhibitions of fashion in the past have perpetuated the hierarchies of distinction or taste by presenting what is considered fashionable or in good taste; also without justification or explanation.

Recently fashion exhibitions have started to challenge the notions of taste and class hierarchies; since Dianne Vreeland’s exhibitions at the Costume Institute in the 1980s, and now including Tulloch’s *Black British Style* (2004), MoMu’s *Beyond Desire* (2005) and the V&A’s *AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (2006). Here fashion was used as a vehicle to construct new discourses on power, performance and identity, as well as reassessing notions of taste, hierarchies of influence and fashion’s enigmatic mysteries. In *Spectres/Malign Muses* curator Judith Clark chose to communicate ‘values’ by tracing the genealogies (or visual narratives) in fashion, beyond the ‘myths of the creative process’. In a recent interview with *Fashion Projects #3* (2010) Clark maintains that fashion is about ‘borrowing and stealing and concealing and manipulating and it is something that strangely, designers are coy about, whereas I think it is the most interesting thing they do’. This statement underpins much of Clark’s approach to borrowing, to history, to collaboration and to the curatorial directions that informed *Spectres/Malign Muses*. Pecorari (2009) maintained that dress in museological contexts is hardly ever contextualised in its visual process of creation, and that its displays seldom coincide with any representations of contemporary fashion. *Spectres/Malign Muses* managed to demystify a notion of fashion’s finished product by which fashion generally presents itself to a public which Breward talks about as “the flawless surface” which too easily “becomes the prime object – sometimes to the detriment of a deeper understanding” (2005: 11). By showing the genealogy of borrowing and manipulating, and by exposing the elusive of fashion, Clark managed to address another shift in the discourse of fashion: that of the position of individual talent (unique and original) to the recognition of fashion as a far more complex set of inter-textual social structures (of systems, genealogies and histories).

Navigating within the framework of these references, *Spectres/Malign Muses* started as a set of conversations around key issues confronting the discourse of fashion and the politics of display in fashion curation, and culminated in showing at two venues, namely MoMu in Antwerp and the V&A in London. These interventions created primary texts (as exhibitions, publics, reviews and a catalogue), with the potential for further circulation of these texts or the development of secondary circulations of the images, catalogues, interventions. *Spectres/Malign Muses* showed during the winter exhibition season (September to January) at the MoMu in Antwerp; the avant garde fashion capital, presenting an experimental exhibition project to a niche, cutting edge fashion public. Key figures in fashion discourse feature in Antwerp's current academic and creative scenes and act as gatekeepers, or public intellectuals with their cultural capital. The impact of this on the primary text formation was noticeable in the reviews and also in the design, layout and structure of the exhibition catalogue. When *Spectres/Malign Muses* travelled to the V&A for the Spring exhibition schedule (February to May), both the scale and the type of public called into being changed dramatically. The V&A's larger public, with an audience of fashion insiders as well as a general public, created a much wider mode of circulation for the exhibition, which was further supplemented by additional texts. A significant impact on the discourse was accomplished through the development of these further texts that included a catalogue, a one-day symposium, the *Friday Nights* events at the V&A, and various reviews in the Fashion Theory Journal, the Museum Journal and the History Workshop Journal. The discourse established through these multiple texts in the initial intervention established an extensive primary circulation that would not have been possible had the exhibition only shown at the MoMu. The V&A offers an interesting perspective on this with its founding statement by Henry Cole in 1850:

'Our first objective...has been ... to promote all the **several interests involved in the improvement of public taste:** the interest of the public, as consumer and judge, the interest of the manufacturer, as the capitalist and producer, and the interests of the artisan, as the actual workman.'

KEY CONCEPT 2: FASHION DISPLAY + CURATION as CIRCULATION **How does *Spectres/Malign Muses* fit in?**

Spectres/Malign Muses was an exhibition about itself, about its own traces, and about the problems and opportunities within its own practice. The notion of fashion in a museum is currently part of a larger analysis within both visual and material cultural studies and investigates 'ways of seeing', and socio-cultural or political 'statements' that are made by museums regardless of their nature or intentions. Museums as receptacles of objects included the collecting of dress as part of the ephemera of objects that reflect continuity, change, cultural associations, social identities and a host of other political and public narratives. Museums act as part of an organised background of texts that support the inter- and multi-textual frameworks of publics' understanding of the interwoven nature of all texts (Warner, 2002:16). The display of fashion in museums and the rise of fashion exhibitions (Steele, 2008) impacts on the public understanding of both the role of fashion in societies and on the public discourse that evolves from such display, for example; awe, amazement, appreciation, shock, intrigue, distinction, difference, etc.

Two display methodologies, taxonomy and tableaux feature predominantly in the display of fashion in museums. Thompson (2010) describes *The Gallery of Costume*, Manchester, which opened in 1947, as definitive of the didactic, chronological displays which created an authoritative voice in dress history, illustrating order and evolution in the histories of fashion. The displays attested to educational and instructional approaches to the public interface in terms of fashion. In recent years, museums have shifted to newer display methodologies, including more narrative displays of dress. Melchior (2005) described how fashion is presented in museum settings in four different ways; namely the aesthetic, biographic, material and design cultural modes of representation. These modes of display impact on the viewing public as they modify both the perception of fashion and the discourse that extends from the initial iterations. *Addressing the Century: 100 years of Art & Fashion* showed at the Hayward Gallery (1998). It was considered a seminal exhibition in a number of ways as the exhibition explored the creative relationship between art and fashion, and was the outcome of collaboration with Zaha Hadid Architects in the development of the spatial relationships of the displays to the museum setting. However fashion was displayed here in themes (Decoration, Function, Fantasy, Performance and Convergence) that still related to classic 20th century chronologies. *Armani* at the Guggenheim Museums, New York and Bilbao, in 2001, on the other hand, sparked controversy as the exhibition was a super-styled, theatrical, spot-lit display of fashion and mannequins, and was considered a biographic, self-branding exercise.

Spectres/Malign Muses challenged the existing traditions of exhibiting fashion and used instead the metaphors, traces and ghosts in the spectacle of fashion (referencing Debord, Benjamin, and Evans, 2003). This experimental and explorational new thinking around exhibitions and fashion curation developed from Clark's observations in the catalogue of *Backstage* (2001), in which she describes ideas around dress that were allowing "surfaces [to] float free of their histories". This is similarly reflected in Warner's statement of the modern concept of a public which "seems to have floated free from its original context" (2002). Contemporary discourse around museums and the politics of display, not only in fashion, but across a broad spectrum of disciplines, investigates a number of issues that relate to narratives, origin, imaginations, power and acculturation. As part of a growing awareness of these curatorial challenges and changes within the field, the London College of Fashion established a MA in Fashion Curation (2004), led by Clark and De La Haye. The programme has since raised awareness, brought issues to the attention of a public, and influenced the discourse concerned with the cultural worth of dress on display.

The changes brought about in the discourse around fashion curation have encouraged exhibitions to take greater risks as they move away from the aesthetic, biographic and material approach, towards more conceptual curatorial methodologies. Subsequent to *Spectres/Malign Muses*, exhibitions like *Beyond Desire* (2005), *Anglomania* (2006) and *Sport vs Fashion* (2008) have followed a trajectory from that set out by *Spectres/Malign Muses*. A current project at Kensington Palace, *The Enchanted Palace* (2010), follows a display concept that imitates contemporary fashion styling (Kim, 2010). The viewers engage with fantastical narratives as a re-interpretation of history, applying imagination and spectacle in the interpretation of the visual display.

Not all fashion exhibitions though have taken to these new directions. Looking at a number of major exhibitions in 2010, the chronological, biographic and material approaches to fashion in museums are still evident. Currently on at the V&A is the 'spectacular wardrobe of Grace Kelly tracing the evolution of her style' in *Grace Kelly: Style Icon* (2010) accompanied by film clips and posters, photographs and her 35 haute couture gowns in a distinct materiality of the dress as object. At the Museum at FIT *Eco-Fashion: Going Green* (2010) is presented chronologically, exploring the evolution of the fashion industry's multifaceted and complex relationship with the environment. And, the Kyoto Costume Institute presents a fashion exhibition *Luxury in Fashion Reconsidered* (2010) as a manifestation of affluence, a perception of luxury, and a look at 'fashion—the most sensitive indicator of our values and social trends'.

KEY CONCEPT 3: OBJECT + MEANING

Does Spectres/Malign Muses fit?

As hosting institutions, some museums have started questioning the way they react to the new proposals offered around dress within their collections. *Spectres/Malign Muses* aligned its research approach around the study of the fashion object with other art disciplines and academic practices. A shift occurred in visual cultural studies in the latter half of the 20th century, as part of a larger redress of the object in cultural studies. Barthes's study of *The Language of Fashion* (1967) highlighted the individual recognition that there is (often) more to a dress, object etc encoded through the social discourse that surrounds the object. Similarly Warner (2002) remarks that nearly all of our pleasures come to us coded in some degree by the publicity of mass media, of which fashion/dress is clearly one key component. This semiotic as communication plays out in consumer society, where "the referential and the real dissolve in an enchanting play of floating signs, signification, simulation, and rule of code" (Baudrillard: 2009 [1976]). McRobbie (1994) also positions fashion within a context of cultural studies, situating the role of dress in the expression of politics, identity constructs and critical narrative around the visual semiotic of fashion. The signification in dress extends beyond the mere materiality, biography or chronology, and therefore needs to be addressed and curated as an object within the social, cultural and political frameworks that helped create or construct their original meanings.

Contextualising *Spectres/Malign Muses* within the framework of this discourse highlights Clark's curatorial approach to the object; taking dress as the starting point to display a "narrative". The object was a means to a narrative with meanings proposed through the architecture of the space and the means of display. Clark used visual associations to genealogies to suggest ways of looking at fashion; indicating the metaphors or the marks that 'refer to something else, often in a relation to what is not visible' (Evans 2005: 44). These traces offer the viewer a glimpse into "drama of the combinations" (Loscialpo, 2010). This new emphasis on the image/object that contains within it the trace of the past, stresses Evans's notion that images are not free-floating signifiers but part of a network of signs which are haunted by histories and which continue to constitute an expanded society of the spectacle (2003: 67-68).

ARGUMENT: THE IMPACT OF THE EXHIBITION

The Secondary Iteration of its Texts

With the initial iteration of *Spectres/Malign Muses*, primary texts were formed through the two exhibitions, publics were addressed through these interventions, a catalogue was published, and a symposium titled *Fashion on Display* was held (February 2005) with participants from the London College of Fashion (LCF), the V&A, and the curators and collaborators from the exhibition. The symposium took a critical look at key debates within the curation of fashion, and thereby established some of the primary discourse that has since developed around fashion curation.

Considering the MA in Fashion Curation was established in 2004 at the LCF, the course, practitioners and coordinators have dominated the study of fashion curation, and the LCF are considered leaders in this niche research field, with Clark as one of its strongest proponents. This dominance in the field has also supported the continued circulation of the primary texts. Clark's ongoing practice in curation further circulates the texts which remain in the discourse through Clark's visibility in the field. *A Concise History of Dress* at Blythe House (2010) is Clark's most recent exhibition which continues to provide insight into the practice with its 'evocative and innovative curatorial and display choices'. Similarly, Evans's *Fashion at the Edge* (2003) is highly regarded in contemporary fashion theory, and continues to circulate the texts, many of which refer directly to curatorial aspects of *Spectres/Malign Muses*.

In the short space of five years since, there is evidence of a shift in a number of fields relating to cultural studies, fashion theories and fashion curation itself. Because *Spectres/Malign Muses* was an exhibition that challenged all of these issues, it remains fundamental in the construction of the original discourse that has since evolved. The exhibition was the topic of a debate at the international *Museum Quality* symposium (2006) at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), it featured on a short bibliographic list for the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) blockbuster exhibition *Skin and Bones* (2007) and was included in the Fashion Theory Journal Issue Volume 12, Issue 2: Special Issue: *Fashion Curation* (2008) has an extended exhibition review by Alister McNeil, three years after it had shown. Recently Fashion Projects: *Fashion & Memory* issue # 3 (2010) published an in-depth interview with Clark, *Experiments in Fashion Curation*, and located much of the interview within the frameworks of what had informed *Spectres/Malign Muses* in 2004.

Having attended the International Costume Conference: *Endyesthai* (to dress) in April 2010, it was clear that further iterations of the texts continue to circulate and impact the practice. Thompson's paper *Conceptualising Fashion in the Museum* at the Gallery of Costume, Kim's study *Fashion, History & the Fantastical* at the Kensington Palace, Pecorari's analysis *How to study Fashion? A Case Study of Fashion Resources in the Library of the ModeMuseum Provincie Antwerpen*, and finally, Loscialpo's *traces & constellations: the invisible genealogy of fashion* all mentioned, discussed, cited or referenced Evans, Clark and the exhibition *Spectres/Malign Muses*.

CONCLUSION:

It is therefore evident that the initial impact of *Spectres/Malign Muses* in the field of fashion theory and fashion curation can be seen in a number of current iterations. What is perhaps more important is to recognise that *Spectres/Malign Muses* reflects changes within a much larger framework of visual, cultural and material studies. Recent academic interest in fashion has led to the publication of journals, critical studies and fashion readers that identify the importance of fashion theory within social, cultural, personal, political, material and global phenomena.

Evans (2003: 79) cites Susan Sontag's claim that "a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images" clearly positions the notion of fashion in the modern world. *Spectres/Malign Muses* continues this dialogue by producing images that reflect on their own consumption.

Interestingly this shift in fashion where the new no longer abruptly discredits the old, and so many styles or tastes are simultaneously available, that the boundaries or definitions are blurred and it becomes more difficult to be unfashionable.

Lipovetsky (1994: 28)

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