Introduction
Apocalypse

Björk wearing Alexander McQueen's tinkling, red, glass, microscope slide dress on stage, turning it into a percussion object as she danced; a row of dummies in a Dutch museum dressed in Martin Margiela's decayed dress designs grown with moulds and bacteria; Viktor & Rolf's grey-on-grey fashion show of black-clad models with charcoal skin gliding into a darkened room; Hussein Chalayan's moulded resin dress whose flaps opened like an aeroplane coming in to land on the catwalk; Juergen Teller's fashion photographs for a Jigsaw menswear catalogue of a man falling to his death from a high building; John Galliano's belle époque vamps and sirens in their cigarettes and maharaja paste jewellery: what sense, if any, can be made of these images from late 1990s fashion? What do they add up to?

The challenge of this book has been to find a way to talk about contemporary and near-contemporary fashion. The existing frameworks did not make it easy. I wanted to find a way to discuss 1990s and turn-of-the-century fashion that offered more than the traditional focus of art and design history on the past, so that I could also accommodate the present meanings and future possibilities of fashion. I did not want to duplicate the role of fashion journalism which, when it is accurate and good, can provide much more up to the minute reports of fashion in magazines, newspapers and websites. A book is a different type of forum that can instead give space to critical and theoretical analyses of contemporary fashion and its context, if need be by reference to its historical precedents.

Rather than describing, I chose to join up disparate histories, designs and ideas in order to cast new light on contemporary practice and its context. The task therefore was to find a language and a methodology to do this that did not eclipse fashion with theory. I love fashion and I am as fascinated by the material conditions of its production and its business protocols as I am by its symbolic and cultural meanings. Too often theoretically oriented academics ignore the infinitely various material facts of fashion and fashion design, while more empirically minded writers have traditionally been resistant to theory (although this is changing now). My own interest has always been in applied, rather than pure, theory as it relates to contemporary visual culture and perhaps this is why I am happiest teaching in an art school, because those are the students' interests too.

I noticed a shift in writings from people as diverse as Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair and W. G. Sebald who, although writers of fiction, had each in their different way tried to find new discourses (including poetic reconstruction) to talk about history, and to understand what T. S. Eliot called 'the place where three dreams cross', those of the past, present and the future:

Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying.1

Frank Kermode has described the way in which, in the Western tradition, the literature of apocalypse satisfies our need for 'concord fictions' that map endings onto beginnings to

make sense of the brief span 'between birth and dying'.\textsuperscript{2} If the apocalyptic visions of late twentieth-century fashion can be construed as a kind of concord fiction, in this book I have tried to find a different method from that of design history to talk about contemporary fashion, with its inflections of money, sex and mortality, one that offers a paradigm shift; this new model draws on a metaphysical approach to history to articulate what it means to be modern today.

This is not an attempt to write an account of the present, however, so much as to develop a case study of a method, and this book makes no attempt comprehensively to examine all aspects and all types of contemporary fashion. It focuses on one strand of fashion only, and that one largely in terms of its symbolic and cultural meanings rather than its production, marketing and consumption. Nevertheless, I would argue for a properly materialist analysis of contemporary visual culture, even where such an analysis is concerned primarily with the meanings of texts, images and objects rather than the conditions of their material production. Elizabeth Wilson has written that 'fashion is as much a part of the dream world of capitalism as its economy.'\textsuperscript{3} In writing about recent fashion, this has required me to stretch the materialist account and to find some, perhaps metaphysical, connections to explain its uncanny, alienated horrors. To get really underneath the notions of deathliness and haunting that typified 1990s fashion when it presented the real ghosts in the machine of the fashion magazine and catwalk, I turned not so much to psychoanalytic or post-structuralist accounts as to historians and writers such as Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx. But I read Marx, in particular, against the grain, as gothic fiction rather than political economy. And where I used insights from psychoanalysis, it was for the way they give us a glimpse of 'the skull beneath the skin' that was also a concern of the Jacobean literary imagination early in the seventeenth-century.\textsuperscript{4}

**Fashion at the Edge**

From 'heroin chic' to Alexander McQueen, the distressed body of much 1990s fashion exhibited the symptoms of trauma, the fashion show mutated into performance and a new kind of conceptual fashion designer evolved. These are just three examples of fashion 'at the edge', fashion which exists at its own margins. While becoming more vivid in its presentation, many of its themes became correspondingly darker in the 1990s. Often permeated by death, disease and dereliction, its imagery articulated the anxieties as well as the pleasures of identity, alienation and loss against the unstable backdrop of rapid social, economic and technological change at the end of the twentieth century.

Perhaps this new trend marked a paradigm shift in sensibilities but it was also embedded in the tradition of Western consumer capitalism. Rather than examining the experimental fashion of the 1990s merely as a series of rapid style changes, I consider it as part of a broader historical and philosophical trajectory that has a relationship to concepts not always associated with fashion: modernity, technology and globalization. We speak of

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\textsuperscript{4} Eliot on Webster in 'Whispers of Immortality', l.3, in *Selected Poems*: 42.
"edgy" fashion to suggest fashion that is sharp, urban, knowing, experimental, unsentimental. We are at the edge of centuries, and on the edge of technological transformation. Such epochal change requires its participants to embrace a knowledge economy, turn their backs on the old age of industrial modernity and begin to make sense of the revolution in communications of the last thirty years. The fashion design discussed here was at the edge commercially, of the big global brands and of mass production. Its themes were on the edge too, at the borders of beauty and horror, where sex and death intersected with commerce. Conceptually as well as stylistically experimental, this strand of fashion design addressed contemporary anxieties and speculations about the body and identity.

These were legitimate concerns for cultural practitioners at the turn of the millenium, set as they were against the backdrop of the dark history of the twentieth century (holocaust and genocide, the rise of totalitarianism, and two world wars), the collapse of older epistemological certainties in the West, the rapid development of information technology since the first satellite was sent into space in 1957, the demise of the old Soviet Union in 1991, the consequent spread of globalisation and the intensification of an ideological divide between Islam and the secular West. Yet, although it is the business of cultural practitioners to speculate about questions of identity and community in a changing world, such concerns have not been the traditional domain of the fashion designer. Despite this, in periods in which ideas about the self seem to be unstable, or rapidly shifting, fashion itself can shift to centre stage and play a leading role in constructing images and meanings, as well as articulating anxieties and ideals. The time and place could be fin-de-siècle Vienna, Paris of the 1930s, or 1990s London: each has a relationship to modernity and to technological change and its impact on sensibilities. These sensibilities may be described as the 'decentered subject' of the inter-war years, or the 'emergent identities' of 1990s cyber-culture. What is significant in each case is the role which fashion plays in articulating contemporary concerns about the self and the world. Jonathan Dollimore has argued that the decentered self, far from being a singular product of contemporary thought, is simply a reiteration of the idea of the disintegration of human nature after the Fall: the "crisis" of the individual is less a crisis than a recurring instability. He argues that the individual has always been in crisis in the Western tradition, driven forward by the destabilising forces of mutability and death. But if this 'crisis' has been formally sanctioned in the Western tradition of tragedy, as Dollimore argues, it has also concealed itself, en travesti, at the heart of fashion, that discourse of youth, frivolity and lightness. The surface of fashion, like Watteau's fetes galantes, conceals a core of melancholy. The leitmotif of mutability, with all its perils and excitements, is threaded through this book, stitching in traces and fragments as it goes, and is ultimately its real, if fugitive, subject.

Many of the features of Western fashion today have their origins in the development of European mercantile capitalism from the fourteenth century, and in what Norbert Elias called 'the civilising process'. For Elias, the evolution of manners since the Middle Ages involved the suppression of aggressive and instinctual behaviour in favour of the development of a reflexive, modelled and nuanced self. It is in this sense that fashion 'speaks', both

8 Ibid: xviii.
as a discourse which articulates what we are, might be or could become, and as a kind of
etiquette or style book for the 'care of the self'.

The late twentieth-century articulation of the idea of the self as culturally constructed has important implications for fashion.

Gilles Lipovetsky has argued that fashion is socially reproductive, training us to be
dependent and responsive to change in a fast-changing world: 'fashion socializes human beings
to change and prepares them for perpetual recycling.'

The kinetic, open personality of fashion is the personality which a society in the process of rapid transformation most needs.

No longer derided as superficial, frivolous or deceitful, fashion thus has an important role
to play, not merely in adorning the body but also in fashioning a modern, reflexive self.

However, if fashion is part of the 'civilising process', in the form of conventional and
mainstream fashion design, it is also and equally, in its experimental and avant-garde mani-
festations, capable of providing a resistant and opposing voice to that process. On the edge of
discourse, of 'civilisation', of speech itself, experimental fashion can act out what is
hidden culturally. And, like a neurotic symptom, it can utter a kind of mute resistance to
the socially productive process of constructing an identity. As we produce a disciplined and
controlled self, via the 'technology' of manners for example, what is repressed comes back
as a trace, under the weight of some cultural trauma, of which experimental fashion can
function as a tell-tale memory. Seen thus, fashion is hysterical. It can be a symptom of
alienation, loss, mourning, fear of contagion and death, instability and change. Like
psychoanalysis, it 'investigates the domain and configuration of incoherence, discontinu-
ity, disruption and disintegration.'

In arguing, however, that experimental fashion, like the psychoanalytic model of the
unconscious, acts out repressed desires and fears, I do not suggest that these are the desires and fears of the designers themselves. If fashion speaks, it speaks independently of its creators. This book seeks to locate it in the context of historical rather than personal trauma, by relating it to the larger questions of history, rather than to the designers' motives and intentions. Its 'symptoms' are wide-ranging and diffuse: death (or its corollaries mourning, trauma and shock), gender instability and free-floating anxiety. The memory traces invoked here are historical fragments of instability and transience from earlier centuries. These traces come back as fragments under the weight of a cultural trauma which has been 
expressed by earlier twentieth-century writers on modernity as 'shock' and 'neurasthenia',
and by writers about contemporary culture as 'trauma' or 'wound culture'.

Fashion, with its affinity for transformation, can act out instability and loss but it can also,
and equally, stake out the terrain of 'becoming' - new social and sexual identities, masquerade and performativity.

One of the concerns of this book is to contrast a cynical and knowing decadence on the one hand with a more passionate and hopeful approach on the other. If the imagery of late twentieth-century fashion seemed dark or bleak, it may be
because it signalled an attempt to chart new social identities in a period of rapid change,
while reflecting contemporary concerns with death and decay. Much fashion from the 1990s
appeared, in the glossy closure of its luxurious designs, to shore up and contain anxieties
about cultural continuity, the body and mortality. And this was particularly so among the

11 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume Three: The Care of the Self, trans. Robert
12 Gilles Lipovetsky, The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy, trans. Catherine Porter,
13 Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Policy Press,
14 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure, trans. Robert
15 Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Shell and the Kernel, vol. 1, trans. and intro. by Nicolás T.
16 For 'neurasthenia' see Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) in On
Individuality and Social Forms, ed. and with an intro. by Donald N. Levine, University of Chicago Press,
Harry Zohn, Fontana/Collins, London 1973 [1955]. For 'trauma' see, e.g., Hal Foster, The Return of the
For 'wound culture' see Mark Seltzer, Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture,
17 A range of cultural theorists in the late

twentieth century posited anti-essentialist models

of gendered identity, which they argued was

constructed in and through culture. For example, the

psychoanalyst Joan Rivière's 1929 discussion of female

identity as a form of masquerade was re-examined

in the late 1980s by feminist critics as a model of

female agency and power over the image. And in

1990 and 1993 Judith Butler argued that gendered

identity was 'performatively', that is, not ontologically

pre-given but constantly made and re-made

through daily acts of repetition. See Joan Rivière,

'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1929), repr. in V.

Burton, J. Donald, C. Kaplan (eds), Formations of

Fantasy, Routledge, 1989. Emily Apter, 'Masquerade',
in Elizabeth Wright, Feminism and Psychoanalysis:
A Critical Dictionary, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and

Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,

Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits

big players' and global brands of international fashion. But a small proportion of designers, many of them Japanese, Dutch, Belgian or British, rather than French, Italian or American, were among those whose work articulated the experience of cultural discontinuity, transforming 'negative' ideas into critical and questioning designs. In the small and commercially less lucrative hinterland in which they worked, new ideas were able to form, grow and spread. Many of the designers of the 1990s discussed here regarded it as hypocrisy simply to present happy, shiny images, rather than exploring the entire range of human emotion and experience. For them, it went without saying that fashion was an appropriate arena in which to investigate the complexities of modern life. And out of this questioning and experimental tendency in contemporary art and fashion emerged new images, of which some were bleak but others were curiously optimistic.

Segueing between Past and Present

This book looks primarily at the 1990s but also argues that contemporary sensibilities echo earlier moments of modernity, from the growth of mercantile capitalism in seventeenth-century Europe to the accelerated consumption of commodity culture in the industrialised nineteenth-century city. In the course of looking at contemporary fashion, I have made comparisons with other periods of change and instability in European history, and drawn on the imagery of these periods to explain that of the present.

In order to do so, I have relied on the sometimes problematic and perhaps over-used concept of modernity, albeit with some reservations. Definitions of modernity are as many as they are contradictory, particularly between the social sciences and the humanities traditions. A number of historians, for whom the idea of modernity is bound up with an analysis of industrial capitalist society as a form of rupture from the preceding social system, have used the term to designate the enormous social and cultural changes which took place from the mid-sixteenth century onwards in Europe. For the sociologist Max Weber, the origins of capitalism lay in the Protestant ethic; its leitmotifs were modernisation and rationalisation but also, and crucially, ambiguity. This sense of ambiguity underlies an important presumption in this book that there is an intimate connection between opposites - such as despair and optimism, beauty and horror, fashion and mortality - and these couplings are a leitmotif of the book, as they are of the type of design and photography it discusses. Rebecca Arnold has argued that it is in the nature of modern fashion to be inherently contradictory. It displays both 'the promise and the threat of the future ... revealing both our desires and anxieties ... constructing identities that use stylish dress as a route to self-creation and yet ultimately to self-destruction.'

I have followed Marshall Berman and used the term 'modernity' as one of a triumvirate of terms: modernisation, modernity and modernism. 'Modernisation' refers to the processes of scientific, technological, industrial, economic and political innovation that also become urban, social and artistic in their impact. 'Modernity' refers to the way that mod-

18 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 63, discusses the problems but also the merits of the term modernity as a way of understanding modern fashion.
ernisation infiltrates everyday life and permeates sensibilities; I use it frequently to refer to changes in sensibility and experience in the nineteenth century as a result of late eighteenth-century industrialisation, Berman’s ‘second stage’ of modernisation. And ‘modernism’ refers to a wave of avant-garde artistic movements that, from early in the twentieth century, in some way responded to or represented these changes in sensibility and experience.23 In 1863 Baudelaire described the experience of modernity in nineteenth-century Paris as ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent’.24 Baudelairean ‘modernity’ infused many late twentieth-century accounts of the city as a space of flux and unpredictability, and it is this modernity, along with the modernities of Simmel and Benjamin, that figure in the subtitle of this book.

In 1903 Simmel related fashion to the fragmentation of modern life and discussed its neurasthenia, that is, the over-stimulation and nervous excitement that came with the growth of the metropolis.25 He associated fashion with the middle classes and with the city, as well as with the stylisation of everyday objects (for him the Jugendstil movement in Germany) and he pointed to the close relation of art, fashion and consumer culture, connections which became topical again in the 1990s, for example in the work of Comme des Garçons, Martin Margiela and Viktor & Rolf. In 1939 Walter Benjamin described a change in the structure of experience whereby modern life was characterised by violent jolts and dislocations, a feature equally of many accounts of post-modern experience at the close of the century. Benjamin cites Baudelaire’s description of the crowd as ‘a reservoir of electric energy; the man who plunges into it is a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness.’ Urban encounters with telephones, cameras, traffic and advertising are experienced as a series of shocks and collisions and the fractured and dislocating experience of modernity is made formal in the principle of montage in early modernist cinema.

Ulrich Lehmann has noted that the etymology of the French words for fashion and modernity – mode and modernité – is the same.27 Among the many writers on modernity, only Lehmann and Elizabeth Wilson have addressed the role of fashion in modernity by making it central rather than peripheral to their accounts. Both assert the continuing relevance of nineteenth-century modernity to the present, Lehmann in general terms and Wilson in more specific ones.28 Wilson, writing in 1985, pinpointed the moment of dissonance in the modern city as being key to twentieth-century style: the ‘hysteria and exaggeration of fashion expressed the colliding dynamism, the thirst for change and the heightened sensation that characterise the city societies particularly of modern industrial capitalism [that] go to make up this “modernity”.’29 She argued that the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century Romantic movement was an early response to the advance of science and the ‘dark satanic mills of industrialism.’30 Unlike other writers on modernity, she traced a connection to today’s fashion, comparing Romanticism to the time in which she was writing, the 1980s, arguing that both emphasised individuality in a period of technological development. Wilson described post-modern fashion in 1985 as enacting ‘the most hallucinatory aspects of our culture, the confusions between the real and the not-real, the aesthetic obsessions, the vein of morbidity without tragedy, of irony without merriment,
and the nihilistic critical stance towards authority, empty rebellion almost without political content. Although from the 1980s many academics differentiated the present from the past by identifying post-modernism as a moment of absolute rupture, Wilson's analysis suggested that she too saw a connection with moments of instability in the past that were repressed in present-day fashion. Perhaps one could make the case for the late twentieth century and early twenty-first as 'neo-Romantic', a rapid response to the changes of the previous few years.

With Wilson and Lehmann, I argue that modern fashion sits on the bedrock of nineteenth-century commercial relations, urbanisation and technological developments, and the impact of these upon sensibilities; further, that modern fashion continues to bear a relationship to them, for all the specific differences of its recent development. While modern modes of fashion production, along with the idea of inbuilt obsolescence, developed largely in the twentieth century, many features of the modern fashion industry and of modern consumption are traceable to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, if not earlier. However, it is not my aim to plot a precise and structural genealogy of the connection between Western fashion and modernity by tracking back through European culture. Furthermore, such an enterprise might construct a linear history which, in a sense, runs counter to my project. I have instead drawn on Benjamin's metaphor of fashion as a 'tiger's leap', the metaphor that provides the title to Lehmann's book on fashion and modernity, and on Benjamin's concept of dialectical images, with the aim of juxtaposing the more spectacular manifestations of the consumer explosion of the nineteenth century against those of the late twentieth-century fashion show to illuminate the way that the past can resonate in the present to articulate modern anxieties and experiences. And from Benjamin's references to urban space and time, I have developed the metaphor of history as a labyrinth.

Benjamin described how he once drew a diagram of his life as a labyrinth. The metaphor of history as a labyrinth allows the juxtaposition of historical images with contemporary ones; as the labyrinth doubles back on itself what is most modern is revealed as also having a relation to what is most old. Distant points in time can become proximate at specific moments as their paths run close to each other. Although there is no repetition without difference, nevertheless the conditions of post-industrial modernity are haunted by those of industrial modernity when fashion designers dip into the past for their motifs and themes. These traces of the past surface in the present like the return of the repressed. Fashion designers call up these ghosts of modernity and offer us a paradigm that is different from the historian's paradigm, remixing fragments of the past into something new and contemporary that will continue to resonate into the future. They illuminate how we live in the world today and what it means to be a modern subject.

The effect of developments in communications and information technology of the last thirty years of the twentieth century, and their acceleration in the final ten, as well as their impact on social relations, is still to be quantified. Rapid technological change alters the way we experience the world, from our social relations to the way we inhabit cities and make sense of our lives in them. Consequently, meaning frequently seems to mutate to the

33 The reason why I have chosen the term 'post-industrial modernity' as opposed to 'post-modernity' is discussed in Chapter 12.
surface of things; and clothing functions as a metaphor for the instability and contingency of modern life. Many of the fashion designers scrutinised in this book intuitively and inexorably drew on earlier images of disruption and instability from the past to interpret present concerns. In particular, the relevance of Renaissance and Baroque imagery on the one hand and the spectacle of nineteenth-century consumption on the other suggest that we are currently in a stage of capitalist transition as important as those of the sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Ken Montague has also identified these two periods as having a relation to modernity and dress, arguing that 'Victorian capitalism sought to map out the world of stable, biological, racial and social difference at a time when its own systems of production, observation, and exchange were accelerating the “destabilisation and mobility of signs and codes” that began in the Renaissance. This destabilisation of signs and codes appears to have accelerated exponentially throughout the twentieth century, first through print and latterly through electronic media, and Montague's argument too suggests that there is a similarity between the accelerated consumption of the nineteenth century and that of today, and that both have their origins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

I am not, however, making a claim for any crude historical equivalence between past and present. On the contrary, my historical examples are selective (indeed I have also alluded promiscuously on imagery recycled from the eighteenth century and the 1940s) and are chosen for what they can tell us about fashion today. In comparing, for example, a John Galliano dress with a turn-of-the-century vamp, the visual link uncovers interesting things about the present that has echoes in the past. If I have chosen to focus more on contemporary links with specific centuries, it is not because I am making a wider historical claim for similarities between periods but because what designers take from particular periods in the past tells us about our anxieties and concerns in the present. When designers hark back to such periods they are simply providing interesting instances that crystallise the use we make of history in the present. Hence the 'tiger's leap' and the 'dialectical image' are tools to map the modern, rather than to chart the past. For if there are stylistic similarities between the excesses and sleights of hand of late twentieth-century fashion spectacles and those of an earlier century, that does not in itself imply a lineage. Such labyrinthine returns could equally bring two other historical moments into proximity, such as Calvin Klein and Donna Karan's evocations of a modernist aesthetic in the sleek and streamlined elegance of American fashion.

There are risks attached to a form of interpretation that moves apparently irresponsibly across centuries to construct meaning in the present. For example, it might be a mistake to read the late twentieth-century memento mori imagery of Chapter 9 as one would interpret that of the seventeenth, for all its stylistic similarities. Perhaps in the 1990s the imagery of death, decay and dereliction came to stand for mutability more than for mortality. Perhaps it sketched a contemporary sense of change, instability and uncertainty that had more to do with rapid technological and social transition than with death itself. The impact of the information revolution of the late twentieth century had particular force and veloc-
Ragpicking

If late twentieth-century fashion looped back to earlier moments of modernity in specific formations, it was not because the moments of past and present were the same but because a visual link between them uncovered interesting things about the present that echoed the past. Fashion designers can elucidate these connections visually in a way that historians cannot do without falsifying history. For designers, it is precisely through the liberties they take that contemporary meaning can be constructed. In exploring this phenomenon, I have had recourse to many historical references and examples, but the book itself is not so much a history of either the past or the present, although it does document some aspects of a particular moment, as a case study of what to do with a method. The method in question is a kind of historical scavenging, and like many writers on fashion today, much of my text is inflected with the writing on fashion of Walter Benjamin.43

The labyrinthine relay between past, present and imagined future in the work of designers surveyed here is at odds with the idea of linear history, and their design methods approximate more to those of the nineteenth-century raggpicker who figures prominently in Benjamin's Arcades project: 'Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not describe but put on display.'44

Ragpicking, as well as describing fashion designers' methods, is also a useful tool for the cultural historian in thinking about fashion today. Bringing together two moments in the

40 Dollimore, Death, Desire and Law: 68.
41 Ibid: 77.
labyrinth, it gives cultural historians a method of conceiving of the experimental fashion design of the late twentieth century as historically located in the context of, for example, nineteenth-century capitalism. Contemporary fashion has fastened on the themes of instability and alteration, selecting past images of mutability which resonate in the present. Fashion imagery, itself semiotically unstable, thus fixes images of instability and change, but in ways that destabilize conventional history, and run counter to the idea of coherent narrative. It demands, rather, a re-evaluation of the imagery of the past in the light of the present, something that characterises the work of Michel Foucault as well as that of Walter Benjamin.

For Foucault, the breaks, ruptures and discontinuities of history serve to unravel the straightforward relationship of causes and effects over time. All history is written about from the perspective of the present, in the sense that the present throws up the themes to be studied historically. Since the present is always in a state of transformation the past must constantly be re-evaluated; and the past takes on new meanings in the light of new events in the present. This is 'genealogy' — history written in the light of current concerns. It is also closely similar to the actual process of fashion design as it reveals complex historical relays between past and present. In such collections, fragments and traces from the past reverberate in the present. Reversing Foucault's idea of 'genealogy', that is, of history written in the light of current concerns, one might use the idea of the historical fragment to uncover traces from the past and to read the present through them. This book tracks such temporal relays by finding traces of the past in the present that are articulated through visual means. Raphael Samuel's Theatres of Memory uses the idea that objects are emotion holders, traces of the past and carriers of discourse from other times into the present. The artist Joseph Beuys proposed that materials, such as the felt and fat which he used as metonyms of survival, carried traces of the past with them. In a similar way contemporary fashion images are bearers of meaning and, as such, stretch simultaneously back to the past and forward into the future. Not just documents or records but fertile primary sources, they can generate new ideas and meanings and themselves carry discourse into the future, so that they take their place in a chain of meaning, or a relay of signifiers, rather than being an end product of linear history.

Benjamin's concept of the trace, from his Arcades project, could be used in a new kind of cultural analysis, more fragmented and less coherent than the historian's, in which the fashion historian and the designer alike are scavengers, moving through cultural history like the figure of the ragpicker sifting rubbish in the nineteenth-century city. The historical fragment, or trace, can illuminate the present. Benjamin uses the term trace to describe the mark left by the fossil (that is, the commodity) on the plush of bourgeois interiors or on the velvet linings of their cases. Here history turns into detective story, with the historical trace as a clue. The figures of the collector, the ragpicker and the detective wander through Benjamin's landscape. Thus the historian's method, like that of the designer, is akin to that of the ragpicker who moves through the city gathering scraps for recycling. Irving Wohlfarth argues that the ragpicker, as a collector of 'the refuse of history',

48 For an account of the historian as ragpicker see Irving Wohlfarth, 'Et cetera? The Historian as Chiffonier', New German Critique, no. 39, Fall 1986: 142–68.
is the *incognito* of the author: ‘the historian as chiffonnier unceremoniously transports these leftovers of the nineteenth-century across the threshold of the twentieth’. The result is a series of chiffons, not fragments but a sort of death mask of its own conception. The rag-and-bone historian is a cousin of the Shakespearean grave digger, ‘the grave digger of the bourgeois world’. Indeed the cultural ragpicking of my own method, not less than the bricolage aesthetic of London designers from the 1980s onwards, becomes an emblem of modernity itself.

In the process, the distinction between past and present is almost imploded. In exactly the same way, the fashionable moment that constantly collapses into the outmoded realigns the present as it goes, transforming it into a past that it will one day revive as it trawls through it for new motifs. The modern fashion designer rummages in the historical wardrobe, scavenging images for re-use just as the nineteenth-century ragpicker scavenged materials for recycling. And, in turn, the book does something similar, scavenging images from the past to examine and reinterpret those of the present. I have assumed an equivalence here between the historian and the designer. Perhaps, however, the designer is a better equipped cultural chiffonnier. Stephen Greenblatt articulated the notion of a historical method of ‘talking to the dead’ and the dead themselves leaving textual traces. He has been taken to task for his tendency to ‘cultural poetics’ rather than ‘cultural materialism’ by Howard Felperin and Graham Holderness has suggested that Greenblatt’s approach tells us much about our own concerns in the present than about the period studied. While such criticisms may legitimately be made of the historian, it is the task of designers to take liberties and poeticise, suborning ghosts to speak to contemporary concerns. My own descriptions of the historical to-ings and fro-ings of contemporary fashion are not properly cultural materialism at all but, rather, examples of how the traces of the past can be woven into the fabric of a new story to illuminate the present. Yet they serve as something more than a mere hermeneutic tool to interpret the work of a few designers. They unlock the way in which the work of these designers - fragmented, episodic and emblematic - helps us to make sense of contemporary culture and its concerns.

Walter Benjamin’s historical rummaging in the archive moved among the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the reverberations of the nineteenth century in the twentieth. In them all he saw periods of mourning or decline. The decline of pagan antiquity, the Thirty Years’ War, the devastation of the First World War and the threat of the Second World War all caused a heightened sense of transience or, in Benjamin’s words, of history as a desolate ‘place of skulls’. Perhaps the experience of transience in Benjamin’s own historical period, as well as in his personal life, led him to track a comparable sense of transience in earlier periods. And, by the same token, one could argue for a sense of transience, impermanence and anxiety in the modern period which results in fashion images leaping back to comparable ones in the past.

I hope that my own crisscrossings may produce new and unexpected connections by writing about ephemera, images and traces in such a way as to invoke a poetics of history rather than solid historiography. Jacques Derrida described the architecture of the unini-

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51 Wolfarth, *Et cetera*: 146.
54 See essays by Howard Felperin and Graham Holderness in Frances Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson (eds), *Uses of History*, Manchester University Press, 1992.
56 Buck-Morss, *Diacritics of Seeing*: 169–70.
habited or deserted city, 'reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art', as 'a city haunted by meaning and culture.' This state of being haunted keeps the city from returning to nature.57 To extend Derrida's analogy of the city as skeleton, late twentieth-century fashion can function, like urban building types that are not neutral but experimental structures, as armatures for ideas, as well as skeletons of history. Looking back at history from the vantage point of contemporary fashion, like Benjamin's angel of history we are blown backwards into the future. As we go, history becomes a kind of haunting, the haunting that keeps nature at bay from the ruined city, so that we may refashion the skeletons of history into armatures for ideas.

one history
Turns and Returns

On the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz two young men with shaved heads wearing dressing gowns and striped pyjamas with numbers on them strolled down a Paris carwalk. It was the day of the Comme des Garçons Spring–Summer 1995 menswear collection, disingenuously entitled Sleep. The image was widely criticised, both for its timing and for its resemblance to concentration camp uniform. The dismayed designer, Rei Kawakubo, withdrew her garments from sale, claiming that the similarity was accidental. Five and a half years later, in March 2000, the Belgian designer Martin Margiela showed his Autumn–Winter 2000–1 collection at a French National Railway depot in Paris. Guests with standing tickets only waited on a cold platform; those with seats were ushered onto a stationary train to watch the models parade through the carriages under sparkling disco balls suspended from the roof. But to those seated in the carriages, it was the sight of the standing spectators, glimpsed through grimy windows and doors, rather than the models, that, according to the influential trade journal Women’s Wear Daily, evoked the image of Hitler’s death trains. ‘Only the historically impaired would not have had at least a fleeting thought of Sophie’s Choice’, it wrote. It also pointed out that other guests interpreted the show’s presentation as a reference to the end of the Soviet state, before moving on to give equal coverage to Margiela’s emphatic denial of these interpretations: ‘rather than shocking, we fully believed the intimacy would be appreciated by the professional journalists and buyers who would come to the show and often complain of not being able to see the clothes at a show for reasons of either distance or poor lighting.’

The deployment of such themes was to be found not only in the work of more experimental designers like Comme and Margiela who might be expected to produce challenging and controversial presentations, but also in that of more mainstream designers. The academic Joanne Finkelstein opened her book After a Fashion (1996) with a description of the French house of Jean-Louis Scherrer’s use of Nazi insignia in its 1995 couture collection and the Italian house Dolce e Gabbana’s revival of American gangster motifs at a time of Mafia murders in Italy. Finkelstein argued: ‘these allusions to fascism, poverty, dislocation and violence in a Europe not only concerned about its undeclared wars in Bosnia and further east but also about its expanding underclass have been regarded by the international media as inexcusably callous.’ Steven Meisel’s photographs for an underwear spread in Italian Uomo Vogue in 1995 were criticised, particularly in the American press, for their connotations of eating disorder and drug abuse, but perhaps to European eyes the imagery was closer to the 1992 news photograph syndicated around the world of severely malnourished Muslim refugees in the Bosnian detention camp at Omarska, an image that at the time was compared to scenes from the Nazi death camps.

In late 1999 the British novelist J. G. Ballard looked back on the twentieth century at the turn of the millennium:

I suspect that within a few years there will be a widespread rejection of the 20th century, its horrors and corruptions. Despite huge advances in science and technology, it will

seem a barbarous time. My grandchildren are all under the age of four, the first generation who will have no memories of the present century, and are likely to be appalled when they learn what was allowed to take place. For them, our debased entertainment culture and package-tour hedonism will be inextricably linked to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, though we would never make the connection.³

In his comment on the enormity of state-controlled death in the twentieth century Ballard made a connection between its horror and the debased, as he saw it, entertainment culture and hedonism of the century. Without endorsing Ballard’s condemnatory tone towards popular culture, in this book I aim to scrutinise just such an attraction of opposites, between fashion and ideas previously considered inimical to fashion. The connection that Ballard argued we ourselves would never make was in fact made, self-consciously and knowingly, in the work of a range of fashion designers at the end of the century that suggested the body as a site simultaneously of perfection and decay, drawing attention to the fascination of beauty and horror entwined. These conjunctions were often articulated through historical design references, particularly in the work of less mainstream commercial designers such as Olivier Theyskens, in whose hands a certain gothicised version of the past was obsessively recycled in 1990s fashion (fig. 1). Despite the fact that fashion is an arena dedicated to novelty, indeed that could be said to fetishise novelty, in the work of such designers the present was constantly invaded by images of the past that seeped into the cracks and colonised the terrain of ‘the new’. Walter van Beirendonck photographed one of his Aesthetic Terrorists collection of rough-cut graffiti-style T-shirts under an eighteenth-century dress. The T-shirt’s neon graphics were more vibrant and alive than the model’s bleached skin tones that matched the deathly grey of her dress, her scruffily pulled back hair, eutoliated arms and depressed expression (fig. 2). In the work of many innovative designers of the period, what was most modern doubled back on itself as the oldest and, to borrow Lynda Nead’s phrase from a different context, the past ‘returned to disturb and unsettle the confidence of the modern.’⁴ Nead develops the idea of modernity as vitally and urgently engaged in a dialogue with its own historical conditions of existence so that ‘the modern’ can never represent a clean break with the past; instead ‘modernity can be understood as a set of historical discourses and processes that are profoundly and necessarily caught up with the construction of the past.’⁵ Thus fashion, while ostensibly a paradigm of novelty and innovation, is in fact trammeled by the very historical conditions that produce it; and this is made explicit in the work of some designers. Figures 1 and 2 both suggest this ‘dialogue’ with the past. Nead uses the metaphor of a crumpled handkerchief to describe the way that historical time folds back on itself in designed objects; in figure 2 the vibrant style of the modern T-shirt is overlaid with the faded, tired fabric of the historical overdress, so that the image is an aggregate of historical moments that, in Michel Serres’s words, ‘reveal a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats’. Nead’s metaphor of the crumpled handkerchief evokes a topological concept of time as folded, whereby distant points become ‘close or even superimposed’, and tears in the cloth can
bring unconnected periods into proximity. She argues that our experience of time resembles the crumpled version of the handkerchief, rather than the flat, ironed one: 'modernity, in this context, can be imagined as pleated or crumpled time, drawing together past, present and future into constant and unexpected relations and the product of a multiplicity of historical eras.' The textural quality of the crumpled evokes the old, just like the tired, greyed fabric of the eighteenth-century dress in figure 2; this textile metaphor seems to work particularly well for fashion, not only because of the visceral and material possibilities of both fabric and body, but also because of fashion's particularly promiscuous historical behaviour, its brief life span and its incessant trawling through the old to refabricate the new.

**Labyrinth**

The recycling of historical motifs that dominated a certain strand of fashion design in the 1990s also punctuates this book as a recurring motif. A consideration of historicism in 1990s fashion enables the articulation of a series of metaphors to think about fashion time and how it operates - crumpled fabric, the labyrinth, the telescope and the tiger’s leap. Writing in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin argued that 'every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.' As it developed in the 1990s, late twentieth-century fashion had an unerring eye for the topical in its choice of historical imagery that articulated contemporary concerns. The metaphor of historical time as a labyrinth or maze, doubling back on itself, provides a model to understand the historical relay between past and present in 1990s fashion. In particular, Benjamin's concept of the *juxtaposition or 'now-time' as 'an archaeology of modernity' seems relevant to the historical returns of contemporary fashion. For despite fashion’s insistence on innovation and novelty, the historical trace that Frank Kermode has called a 'complementarity with the past' persisted in many designs from the late 1990s, constituting 'a network of historical constellations in which past and present are telescoped together.'

The revival of the corset as outerwear by late twentieth-century designers is a paradigm of this process of historical telescoping. It first appeared in the designs of Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gaultier in the mid-1980s. In the 1990s the corset became ubiquitous as almost every major European designer incorporated it into her or his collections, ranging from Christian Lacroix's opulent conservatism, through Hussein Chalayan's experimental 'flower press' corset carved from cherry wood and fastened with chrome screws at the side, to Olivier Theyskens' corset with its connotations of the nineteenth-century asylum and madhouse (fig. 3). Alexander McQueen's corsets ranged from the vampish femme fatale's to the orthopaedic neck brace. From the idealised and romantic to the malign and troubling, these reinterpretations of the historical corset evoked a range of ideas about women, spectacle, image and history. Some were benign or nostalgic, others were threatening and darkly disturbing. In itself the corset's range of meanings were a microcosm of
late twentieth-century fashion’s ability to draw creatively on its own past to recreate an image for the future, sketching conflicting fears and desires on the one body. These eclectic borrowings together constitute a set of instances that crystallise the use that designers can make of history in the present, retracing convoluted routes through the labyrinth that bring historically separate themes into contact, and returning to the same point via a different route.

In 1984 Fredric Jameson argued that history was being plundered in contemporary visual culture to make a post-modern carnival, and that the incessant return to the past was itself a kind of deathly recycling of history which emptied it of meaning, rendering it bankrupt, good only for costume drama and fantasy. In this analysis, fashion seems to be a quintessentially post-modern form, and on the face of it 1980s fashion bore this out. In 1980s post-punk London, a form of designer-led historicism emerged, initiated first by Vivienne Westwood and then by John Galliano. From the late 1970s onwards, starting with her 1979 Pirates collection, Vivienne Westwood plundered the past, helping herself liberally to seventeenth-century men’s shirts and eighteenth-century women’s stays. Refashioning the male codpiece as a decorative rosette for women, mixing hunting pink with punk bondage and eighteenth-century stays (fig. 4), her polemical visual games played with images of class and gender in a contemporary way, for all their nostalgic evocations of an aristocratic past. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Westwood continued to lead bold and swashbuckling raids on the past, treating history and culture as a dressing-up box from which to recreate the self as a flamboyant and spectacular creature (fig. 5).
At the same time, the gestural mockery of post-punk London clubland produced extreme forms of self-styling that regrouped cultural motifs, such as the club and magazine poses of Leigh Bowery and Trojan from the mid-1980s (fig. 6), creating something from ephemera in their self-representation, as when Trojan cut his ear and then rouged it with lipstick in a parody of Van Gogh. Out of these same groups emerged a form of urban raggpicker, the charity shop stylists whose work figured largely in the magazine *i-D* and whose magpie aesthetic sought items of cultural detritus to recycle into new, cutting-edge, magazine imagery. This bricoleur’s aesthetic that characterised British club and sub-cultures in this period also provided a model of the design process for designers like Jean-Paul Gaultier in Paris and Westwood and Galliano in London, and goes some way to explaining their own versions of cut-and-mix in the 1980s. For the metropolitan body that was on display in 1980s London was both informed and defined by the street, mediated by the new fashion magazines such as *Blitz*, *i-D*, with its ‘straight-up’ street fashion photographs, and *The Face*. In differing degrees these magazines reconfigured the cultural geography of the street through a reportage style of fashion journalism that relied as much on coverage of street- and club-led innovation as on traditional fashion editorial coverage. The power of these magazines’ editors was to map fashionable identities onto British cities and then disseminate them across national boundaries through publication.

This scavenging aesthetic underpinned much of the historicism of 1990s design that ‘inaccurately’ pillaged the past to produce a contemporary aesthetic. Rather than recreating one period, its historical borrowings were multi-layered. Like the 1990s figure of the DJ, fashion designers sampled and mixed from a range of sources to create something new, rummaging through the historical wardrobe to produce clothes with a strictly contemporary resonance. And in the same way that musical history lost its linearity when mixed by the DJ who assumed a relationship with history and tinkered with it in the course of collecting, archiving and mixing tracks, 15 so too did fashion and cultural history lose its linearities when ‘remixed’ by late twentieth-century designers, folding one historical reference back on another.

**Unhappy Returns**

Benjamin traced the metaphor of the labyrinth and made it corporeal through the figures of the flâneur and the prostitute, from where Christine Buci-Glucksmann has extended it: ‘the image moves from the labyrinth of big cities to the labyrinth of the commodity, and by no means least is the ultimate labyrinth of history.’ 16 Many designers in the 1990s exhibited an almost neurotic habit of historical citation, in both experimental and conventional work. One the one hand, several French and Italian designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, Gianni Versace, Christian Lacroix, Krizia, Anna Molinari, Dolce e Gabbana and Hervé Léger, in the early to mid-1990s, produced collections akin to historical fancy dress, drawing on a range of sources from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. On

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the other hand, some British, Belgian and Dutch designers such as Vivienne Westwood, John Galliano, Viktor & Rolf, Olivier Theyskens, Veronique Branquinho, Robert Cary-Williams, Jessica Ogden and Shelley Fox also reprised historical themes, albeit not such resplendent ones. Theirs, on the contrary, were frequently dark and doom-laden.

To some extent, particularly when fashion historicism evinced romantic nostalgia for a vanished past, this trend could be attributed to the recession of the early 1990s. But the more troubling historical returns of these British, Belgian and Dutch designers was not the quaint and picturesque version of history usually referred to by fashion but a darker, more despairing re-run of the past. Whereas Westwood's tartans (see fig. 5) evoked swaggering eighteenth-century individuality, Alexander McQueen's Highland Rape collection (see fig. 104) reprised a harsher moment, the eighteenth-century Jacobite rebellion and the nineteenth-century Highland clearances that McQueen referred to as genocide. Viktor & Rolf's second collection in 1994 consisted of twenty versions of the same white Victorian dress on which they had carried out various experiments including slamming it in a door, cutting it, burning it and embroidering stains on it. Olivier Theyskens, who first showed in Paris in 1998, designed narrow linen Edwardian dresses made of old sheets, and black ball skirts worn with sinister tight leather jackets that seemed to constrain the model. His compatriot Veronique Branquinho first showed her Bohemian version of Gothic Victoriana in 1997. In London, Robert Cary-Williams's Victorian Car Crash collection (Autumn-Winter 1999–2000) was shown in spring 1999. Smoke poured from under the runway; the air was thick and chalky. In the words of the designer, 'the inspiration for this collection was a woman from the Victorian era who somehow ends up in the present day . . . She's run over by a car. She survives, but the clothes get damaged.' Latex and leather jackets, dresses and full skirts were cut to fall away from the body; other garments were completely sheared away, leaving only an armature of trailing zips and seams. Seams and random pleats were left over from stiffened ecru shift dresses; a flesh-coloured leather coat was shredded into ruched and plaited strands; a pair of shoes that seemed to be morphing into hooves was described by the designer as 'veterinary horse boots'. The full-skirted bride, the final outfit that traditionally ends the catwalk show, was dressed not in white but in black and wore blinkers and a black plume on her head, like a Victorian funeral horse.

Cary-Williams's design and styling (fig. 7) typified the way in which many younger fashion designers, stylists, make-up artists and photographers began to use the visual language of dereliction, death and despair in their work. Fashion, conventionally associated with lightness, frivolity and pleasure, gathered darker meanings, meanings which it seemed could best be articulated by a return to the past. The darkness of this imagery suggested, in the work of designers such as Alexander McQueen and Andrew Groves, that what was being told was a horror story. It is perhaps simplistic to speculate that such designs echoed present-day realities in any straightforward way, but possibly modern life is easier to anatomise and explore at a distance, re-narrativised through a historical lens. Certainly the labyrinthine twists and turns of 1990s fashion made use of historical references from the past to produce a visual economy that seemed to resonate in an entirely new way, even


where such designs were nostalgic rather than darkly gloomy. Whereas much fashion shored up and contained anxieties about cultural continuity, the body and mortality, this new type of fashion design, often originating from London or Antwerp, seemed to function like a hysterical symptom that could articulate current concerns. Just as Finkelstein and Ballard's comments cited at the beginning of this chapter drew attention to the particularly bleak history of the twentieth century, so in the 1990s a number of fashion designers' work referred to an equally bleak view of earlier centuries, evoking comparable periods of capitalist excess, instability and change in the past to sketch these features in the present.

In the 1990s the strand of fashion historicism that revisited the past and reconfigured it in the present came mainly from Japanese or European designers, in particular the British, Dutch and Belgians (but not Italians), rather than from American designers. Lynda Nead has differentiated the spatial logic of modernity in nineteenth-century London from that of Paris or New York as being that of the maze rather than the étoile or the grid.\textsuperscript{19} Something of this logic is discernible in the historical returns of London- and Antwerp-trained, as opposed to Paris- or New York-trained, designers of the late twentieth century. This might have something to do with their art school training (although Westwood has no formal fashion training). Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London emphasises the role of research in the design process; at the Antwerp Academy fashion students devote half their time to historical subjects and materials in some form. The majority of trained fashion designers discussed here graduated from one or other of these schools. However, fashion historicism in the 1990s cannot be explained alone by reference to the training and cultural background of a few individual designers, some of whom worked very much like artists, divorced from the protocols of their industry; it also has to be explored in relation to wider questions of markets and mass culture, themes which are returned to in the final chapter.

Ulrich Lehmann has asserted that a defining characteristic of fashion since the second half of the nineteenth century is that 'in order to become the new, fashion always cites the old – not simply the ancient or classical, but their reflection within its own sartorial past.'\textsuperscript{20} Yet what is interesting in such citations is not the similarities but the differences between them; for it is by these that we make sense of them as marking different moments of modernity.\textsuperscript{21} The subject matter of this book is not the simple fact of historical returns, which Barbara Burman has effectively shown to have occurred in Western dress at least since the Renaissance,\textsuperscript{22} but the nature of specific returns from the late 1990s, and the ways in which these might differ from earlier ones. There is a world of difference, for example, between Vivienne Westwood's late 1980s and 1990s citations and Robert Cary-Williams's late 1990s designs. In his Victorian Car Crash historical images from the past were grafted onto the present in a peculiar temporal hybrid. Other historical images were, so to speak, back-projected onto the present, as where Alexander McQueen photo-printed images of the doomed Russian Romanov children onto a contemporary jacket worn on the catwalk (fig. 8). Sometimes yesterday's history and today's politics came together, for example in Andrew Groves's collection based on the Troubles in Northern Ireland; sometimes

\textsuperscript{19} Nead, Victorian Babylon: 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Kermode, \textit{Sense of an Ending}: 95–6, makes this point about the way that a literature of crisis and apocalypse recurs throughout modernity, not in a generic way but in specific formations that can be correlated to specific moments in and stages of modernism.
\textsuperscript{22} Burman Baines, \textit{Fashion Revivals}.
dystopian images of the future surfaced, as in McQueen's alienated androids for Givenchy (fig. 9). By layering and cross-referencing images from the past and an imagined future, these designers played with time, and historicised the present.

The historical imagery of 1990s fashion that was darkly dystopian and inflected with trauma or, in Herbert Blau's phrase, 'post-modern mourning', signalled a particularly contemporary concern. On the dust jacket of Blau's book on fashion, Nothing In Itself (1999) Meaghan Morris asked 'how we might write cultural history for a "post-historical" time in which... there's a lot of history about' and Blau himself argued that 'how the past is approached... is still the determining problem of post-modern forms'. The effect of rendering the present as history has the effect of making the here and now unfamiliar and alien, estranging the spectator from the present. It makes a cultural space for the representation of estrangement, alienation and reification, as Fredric Jameson has argued in his analysis of the way American film and literature in the 1980s incorporated both historical and futuristic themes to articulate current concerns.
Dialectical Images

These narratives may therefore either articulate contemporary fears, for example in McQueen's designs, or provide reassurance against them, for example in Galliano's luxurious evocations of Edwardian splendour. In keeping with his celebratory approach to the past, one July day in 1998 an old steam train chuffed into the Gare d'Austerlitz in Paris, drawing up at platform number 21 (fig. 10). Above its front fender was stretched a wall of orange paper, through which a model dressed as the Princess Pocahontas burst as the train steamed into the station. Out of its windows hung more, waving models. The railway platforms were dressed like a set for an oriental souk; the ground was covered in sand on which an audience sat surrounded by huge bronze platters of spices, potted palms, antique Louis Vuitton suitcases and Moroccan lanterns, consuming champagne and turkish delight. Once stationary, the train disgorged its cargo of models onto the platform, dressed in a jumble of native American and sixteenth-century European dress, juxtaposing feather headdresses and beads with Medici princesses, female page boys and Henry VIII outfits. This Christian Dior Haute Couture Autumn–Winter 1998–9 collection was called A Voyage on the Diorient Express, or the Story of the Princess Pocahontas. Stencilled on the side of the train were the words 'Diorient Express'. They aptly suggested both Galliano's orientalism and the disorienting effects of his showmanship. His collections of this period eclectically combined cultures, continents and centuries, transposing, for example, African beading to Western corsetry which was worn on top of a black evening dress and modelled by a black model with a turban on her head (fig. 11). The first haute couture collection that Galliano designed for Dior (Spring–Summer 1997) juxtaposed Dinka beading, Edwardian silhouettes and 1950s couture historicism in full-blown evening gowns that required 410 metres of fabric (fig. 12). Subsequent collections collaged together motifs from different cultures, mixing maharaja jewels and an aigrette with Burmese neck jewellery and Afro-Caribbean braids, while styling the model to look uncannily stiff and Parisian. Morphing references and motifs from different periods and cultures into single fusions, his collections eclectically mixed images of empire and Africa, Japonism and the Weimar Republic, early cinema and the belle époque.

Galliano's neo-colonial fusions invoked images of empire and otherness from the displays of nineteenth-century world fairs and department stores. Like them, Galliano's fusions reduced non-European cultures to exotic spectacle. Parisian department stores of the second half of the nineteenth century staged oriental scenarios that eclectically mingled goods from different cultures and communities in a fantasy bazar. Very like Galliano's runway shows at the end of the twentieth century, they often drew on the conventions of theatre and exhibitions to produce either human tableaux set in Turkish harems, Cairo markets and Hindu temples, or dance spectacles with snake charmers and Indian pipes. Similarly, in nineteenth-century world fairs the illusion of exotic locations was created in the form of 'Cairo belly-dancers' and 'Andalusian gypsies' which, in their fantastical hybridity, were comparable to Galliano's catwalk scenarios a hundred years later. His techniques of his-

26 At the 1900 exhibition in particular twenty-one out of the thirty-three main attractions involved taking a fantasy journey to 'distant visions'. See Williams, Dream Worlds: 23–8.
torical pastiche and cultural collage fused disparate cultures and places, much as the World Tour did in the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition by having standing visitors propelled round the exhibition on a 'travelator' that in a single journey took them promiscuously from culture to culture in a geographical simulacrum that had no regard for spatial distance. Elsewhere the exhibition staged an exotic orient by abutting a Hindu pagoda, a Chinese
temple and a Muslim mosque, enlivened by jugglers and geishas.27 In the modern fashion show the spectator is stationary and the exotic orient parades before her or his eyes, but the overall effect is the same. The effect both of a Galliano show and of the displays in the 1900 exhibition is to normalise, contain and manage non-European cultures through the very process of creating them as spectacle. As the twentieth century developed, early cinema began to replace world fairs and department stores as sources of popular spectacle. In 1907 there were two cinemas in Paris, in 1913 there were 160. Movie houses showed a kind of medley of films, not unlike the medley of fantasy journeys provided by the 1900 Exhibition. One type of film would succeed another: Western, light comedy, travelogue, social documentary. Rosalind Williams has argued that the mixed-up genres had the effect for contemporaries of obliterating reality because all levels of lived experience were reduced to the same level of technical ingenuity, and something of this nature permeates the extravagant catwalk shows of the 1990s.28

As Galliano’s shows expanded in the late 1990s with the backing of a major couture house, their themes began more and more to revisit the commercial origins of couture in nineteenth-century Paris. Increasingly his collections invoked the themes and images of nineteenth-century Parisian modernity, an important period and city in the development of the modern fashion industry, particularly as regards business, retailing and advertising. His spectacular runway shows were highly innovative, but the link they evoked between spectacle and commodity culture had been made in the second half of the nineteenth century. The 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition had been the first French world fair to feature

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28 Williams, Dream Worlds: 79.


contemporary fashion, brightly lit by electricity, in glass cases containing couturier-clad wax dummies. In one, the spectacle of a fitting for a wedding dress at Maison Worth brought the luxury and extravagance of haute couture to a wider audience, just as videos of couture shows did a hundred years later (fig. 13). The style of these displays resurfaced, particularly, in the staging of the Dior Spring-Summer ready-to-wear 1998 show, in a series of classical rooms dressed with period furniture around which the models draped themselves like Hollywood starlets from the 1930s (fig. 14).

Galliano’s opulent designs also recalled Emile Zola’s description in *The Ladies’ Paradise*, based on extensive research done in Paris department stores in the 1860s, of a window display of female dummies dressed in the most sumptuous and elaborate fashion: snowfalls of costly lace, velvet trimmed with fox fur, silk with Siberian squirrel, cashmere and cocks’ feathers, quilting, swansdown and chenille. In such shows Galliano created the illusion of a walk through a salon like the earliest couture shows when the mannequins would parade decorously in the salon of the couture house that was decorated to look like a private mansion rather than commercial premises. The more conventional parade down a runway was replaced by a series of rooms dressed like film sets. The audience was scattered through these rooms in small groups so that they were closer to the clothes than in the usual fashion show. The models paraded through, striking attitudes and poses in each room, staging *tableaux vivants* as they went. Each model had only one outfit per show, rather than making a series of rapid costume changes, and was encouraged to feel her way into and act the part of her character. Galliano began to use more theatrical techniques to stage his fashion narratives, for example replacing runway lighting with theatre lighting.
and minutely choreographing each section of the show three days before, transforming empty venues into fantasy palaces, and creating something evocative from air, like the spectacular displays of the nineteenth-century city.

The juxtaposition of these images, on the one hand of late twentieth-century fashion shows, and on the other of the merchandising and retail extravaganzas of a century earlier, invokes Walter Benjamin's idea of 'dialectical images'. Dialectical images were not based on simple comparisons but, rather, created a more complex historical relay of themes running between past and present. For Benjamin, the relationship between images of the past and the present worked like the montage technique of cinema. 30 The principle of montage is that a third meaning is created by the juxtaposition of two images, rather than any immutable meaning inhering in each image. Benjamin conceived of this relationship as a dialectical one: the motifs of the past and the present functioned as thesis and antithesis. The flash of recognition, between past and present images, was the dialectical image that transformed both, jolted out of the context of the past, the dialectical image could be read in the present as a 'truth'. But it was not an absolute truth, rather a truth which was fleeting and temporal, existing only at the moment of perception, characterised by 'shock' or vivid recognition. It was not that the past simply illuminated the present, or that the present illuminated the past; rather, the two images came together in a 'critical constellation', tracing a previously concealed connection. 31

Throughout the 1990s, conjuring something out of nothing, Galliano could be seen as a master of ephemeral ceremonies, whose essence shares the nature of a ghost – transient, restless, evanescent – whose work is haunted by the excessive displays of conspicuous consumption of consumer capitalism. His nostalgic designs conjured up an earlier period of idleness and luxury, yet the historical period he drew on was also, like the present, a time of mutability, instability and rapid change, when all fixed points seemed to be in motion, and in which the image of woman was correspondingly highly charged. For the image of woman as commodity and consumer was as ambivalently coded in the 1990s, in the work of Galliano, as in the 1890s, in the figure of the Parisian woman of fashion. The femme fatale from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, the cypher of desire and dread simultaneously, finds some contemporary parallels in Galliano’s vamps and sirens, and his 1990s luxurious and lingerie-inspired designs recall the image of woman as an objet de luxe at the turn of the previous century (figs 15 and 16). By evoking the link between modernity, spectacle and consumption in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city, he simultaneously brought it into the present by picturing the relationship between fashion, women, spectacle and commodification in the present. 32

Benjamin’s concept of dialectical images gives us a way of understanding Galliano’s historical and cultural promiscuity in terms of simple stylistic similarities. However, in addition to being an interpretative tool they point more significantly to an underlying structural connection between urban consumer culture then and now. They ground the poetry of the images in a material base. Benjamin’s ideas, although formulated in the 1920s and 30s looking back at nineteenth-century Paris, have a new relevance today in understanding the

31 Ibid., 221, 250 and 290–1.
present. His ideas offer art and design historians a complex and sophisticated model of how visual seduction works, because they are predicated on an understanding of how visual similes function, something on which other historians have not focused. His method allows us to perceive similarities across periods apparently separated by rupture and discontinuity, and to plot historical time not as something that flows smoothly from past to present but as a more complex relay of turns and returns in which the past is activated by injecting the present into it. They enable us to see the relevance of earlier moments of modernity to late twentieth-century fashion.

In the opening passages of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte Marx evokes the revolution of 1848 set in a Paris haunted by figures from the revolution of 1789, his ‘modern’ bourgeois revolution peopled with ‘the dead of world history’, ghostly revolutionaries from the previous century shrouded in the dress of the past. Writing in 1938, Walter Benjamin described this as typifying the ‘tiger’s leap’ of fashion:

[To the French Revolution] ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now . . . blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution . . . evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past.

The tiger’s leap was made and the ghosts of the 1789 revolution were conjured up again over a hundred years later in John Galliano’s 1984 debut on a London college catwalk that was influenced by a production of Danton at the National Theatre in London where
Galliano worked as a dress-er (fig. 17). Ben-jamin wrote that ‘the true diale-ctical theatre of fashion’ was due to its ability to re-fab-ricate the very old as the most up to the minute.35 At the same time as it looks for-ward, fashion also looks back-wards. Simi-larly, Galliano’s 1990s modern si-ren is a ghost that re-veals a trace of ninetee-enth-century mo-der-ness. In this way, although his de-signs of the late 1990s were, on the face of it, nostal-gic and es-ca-pist fantasy, they never-never signalled ‘a flair for the topical’, making a tiger’s leap into the past. Ulrich Lehm-an has used Ben-jamin’s phrase tigersprung to de-scribe the way that fashion can dou-ble back on itself. He draws on Proust’s and Ben-jamin’s for-mu-lation of true memory as ‘in-voluntary’ to argue that ‘in fashion, quota-tion is sa-torial re-men-bra-ence’ and that fashion acti-vates the past in the present by re-writ-ing its own themes and motifs through his-to-rial quo-ta-tion.36 In Proust’s mémoire in-volun-tai-re chance encounter with objects bring back experiences which would other-wise have re-mained do-rmant or for-get-ten.37 Lehm-an dis-cuss-es how the early twen-teenth-century designs of Jeanne Paquin evoked the French revolu-tion-ary period at the end of the eighteenth.38 In the 1990s Paquin’s period furnished the im-age-ry for Galliano’s vamps, si-rens and sed-uc-tresses that brought belle époque opulence into the present.

Suffering from Reminiscences

The designs for Dior by Galliano can be com-pared with the luxu-rious dis-plays of the ninetee-enth-century de-partment store and world fair, but the changes in sensibili-ties pro-duced as a re-sult of eighteenth- and nine-teenth-century in-dus-trialisation were not necessarily like those produced in the late twentieth century by the in-forma-tion revolu-tion. Rather, the con-itions of post-in-dus-trial modernity today are haunted by those of in-dus-trial modernity and this is made visible when fashion designers dip into the past for their motifs and themes. If, as Lynda Nead has argued, modernity is ‘a set of his-tor-i-cal dis-courses and pro-cesses that are pro-foundly and neces-sar-ily caught up with the con-struction of the past’, this is nowhere clearer than in the opера-tions of West-ern fashion.39 In par-tic-u-lar this can be traced via two of Ben-jamin’s key tropes of ninetee-enth-century Parisian commodity culture that are evoked in the designs of Galliano and Martin Margiela re-spectively: the woman of fashion and the rag-pick-er.

Whereas Galliano pro-duced a range of de-signs for Dior that re-mained firmly in the couture house’s tradi-tion of exquis-i-te work-man-ship and luxu-ry fab-rics, em-phasising tech-niques such as bead-ing, em-broid-ery and fea-ther work, the equally pre-sti-gious Paris-based Belgian de-signer Martin Margiela, who de-signed for a very differ-ent mar-ket, pro-duced, in the same pe-riod, a range of de-signs that were the com-plete op-posite. Instead of feti-chising craft-work and luxu-ry, Margiela ap-peared to de-con-struct couture tech-niques sci-en-tif-ically and to draw instead on de-based and abject clothing that he cut up and re-assem-bled in new for-mations.40 Old army socks were par-tially unpicked and re-sewn to make jumpers, the heel se-cions en-suring a snug fit over bust and el-bows; ‘retro’ dresses from the 1950s

36 Lehmann, Tigersprung. Lehmann changes ‘fashion has a flair for the topical’ to ‘fashion has the scent of the modern’. 'The thickest of long ago' becomes 'the thickest of what has been': xvii.
38 Lehmann, Tigersprung 251-6.
were cut up and remade into new ones; coarse linen was cut into a bodice that resembled a tailor's dummy (fig. 18); and unrippable industrial paper was made up into a wearable man's jacket cut to resemble a flat paper pattern (fig. 19).

In 1997 Margiela produced an entire exhibition for a museum of art where moulds and bacteria were 'grown' on his clothes (figs 20 and 21). Their tracery of mould and decay recalled the figure of the ragpicker who so fascinated Baudelaire and Benjamin, just as Galliano's designs recall the woman of fashion about whom both Baudelaire and Benjamin were rather more ambivalent. In the nineteenth century the ragpicker scavenged cloth for recycling, recuperating cultural detritus cast aside by capitalist societies. Ingrid Loschek has observed that, when he destroyed his clothes with mould and bacteria, Margiela 'compared the natural cycle of creation and decay to the consumer cycle of buying and discarding."

Although Margiela used the techniques of the avant-garde, his practice was rooted firmly in commerce. His patinated textiles illuminated the parallels which underwrite the free-market economy of fashion, both past and present: between elite fashion and ragpicking, luxury and poverty, excess and deprivation. Contemporary fashion is framed, symbolically, by these two nineteenth-century emblems of the capitalist process to which it obsessively returns: the woman of fashion and the ragpicker, thesis and antithesis, captured eloquently.
in the early twentieth-century photographs of Henri Lartigue and Eugène Atget (figs 22 and 23). The status of the woman of fashion was as exalted as that of the ragpicker was debased, but both were equally locked into a dialectical fashion system by nineteenth-century laissons faire economic policies, just as Galliano and Margiela were nearly a century later. For Margiela’s images of melancholy dereliction are the reverse of capitalist excess, just as the nineteenth-century ragpicker formed an eloquent counterpoint to the woman of fashion: ‘Another modernity, dark but not degraded, slipped into view, a modernity that shadowed all that gaiety on the boulevard, picking up its trash; the shadow knew, it smiled, and then withdrew.’42 Whereas Galliano’s opulent fin de siècle evocations evoke the vigour and liveliness of consumer capitalism, Margiela’s lifeless mannequins and mouldy clothes signal that there is a dark and deathly side to capitalist modernity as well. These are the twin ghosts of the past that today’s designers call up – Galliano in his evocations of fin-de-siècle luxury and excess, Margiela in the mouldy tatters of his more experimental practice.

Galliano and Margiela both practise a form of ‘cultural poetics’, evoked through visions of either capitalist excess or melancholy dereliction, the two opposing poles of nineteenth-century laissons faire economic policies, both locked equally into the fashion system. This historical relay is an index not merely of sensibilities but also, and equally, of how such sensibilities are anchored in specific moments of capitalist production and consumption, and of technological change. As I have suggested, this is due in part to the sense of instability produced in a period of rapid change that leads it back to comparable images of instability in the past. The historicism of 1990s fashion imagery, which continually revisited the past only to reformulate it in the present, was paralleled by rapid changes in social and economic life at the end of the century. Perhaps the return to the commodity culture of the past helped to make sense of the present when both the commodity form and its appeal to consumer desire were being so rapidly restructured. In this context, the compulsive return to historical imagery by a range of designers in the 1990s, both in the mass market and the designer spectrum, suggests factors beyond merely picturing or reflecting such change; they may equally, and also, be a way of accommodating and understanding its potentially unsettling nature, and as such operate a kind of ‘return of the repressed’ in which fashion becomes a symptom to articulate cultural trauma.

While cultural trauma may be argued to be inherent in modern experience at the end of a century marked by world war, totalitarianism, terrorism and environmental crisis (all invoked in a certain millenarian trend in cultural commentary and historical interpretation43), it may equally be attributed to the more banal but no less bruising consequence of rapidly accelerated consumption in the West, where fashion in particular articulates the ambivalent nature of consumer capitalism. The culture is caught up in an oscillation between novelty and decay as cycles of consumption consign everything belonging to ‘yesterday’ to the scrap heap.44 This is not in itself new, and the nineteenth-century ‘version’ is invoked in Galliano’s designs at the end of the twentieth; however, increasing affluence and new, infinitely faster communications systems have accelerated the process of con-
sumption to such an extent that now, more than ever, everything new and beautiful seems to arrive already haunted by its own demise. Fashion is the paradigm of this process and therefore reveals and comments on a ‘crisis’ of Western culture at the millennium which is partly a crisis of affluence. In particular, it is the consequence of comfort and security experienced in the West, compared to populations in other parts of the world, to want to feast our eyes in horrified fascination on images of despair, for ‘industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies’, as Susan Sontag argued in her book on photography.45

Whereas early twentieth-century ‘modernism’ thought it could produce a brave new world, the post-modern period was marked, rather, by the sense of an ending:46 this shift was reflected in the ‘cultural poetics’ of contemporary designers whose evocations of history and the passage of time suggested a sense of crisis or trauma in the present. The compulsive repetition of their turns and returns to history closely mimicked the structure of trauma itself. After the First World War, in which many soldiers suffered from shell shock, Sigmund Freud described the repetition compulsion of trauma, in which, for example, the subject might vividly relive the traumatic incident in recurring dreams night after night as a way of dominating it.47 Thus, as Freud wrote, ‘hysteric[s] suffer mainly from reminiscences’.48 Freud’s analyses of trauma relate to individual pathologies, rather than to the wider notion of cultural trauma that characterised much cultural production by the end of the century, but his aphorism can be extended from the arena of individual pathology to culture and society. By the end of the twentieth century, like Freud’s hysteric at its start, much of the most interesting experimental fashion design seemed to suffer mainly from reminiscences. Its ruminations on the past, and its fragmented and episodic imagery, like a hysterical symptom, seemed able to put a finger on contemporary concerns in ways that more coherent narratives could not achieve. The haunting of contemporary fashion
design by images from the past can thus be understood as a kind of return of the repressed, in which shards of history work their way to the surface in new formations and are put to work as contemporary emblems.

23 Eugène Atget, ragpickers, 1913. Photograph Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris