

*Judith Clark*

**WANDERING ALLUSIONS**

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*‘But if, either on the basis of what poets try to tell you, or by biological research, with or without the tools of the psychologist, you attempt to explain a poem, you will probably be getting further and further away from the poem without arriving at any other destination. The attempt to explain the poem by tracing it back to its origins will distract attention from the poem, to direct it on to something else which in the form in which it can be apprehended by the critic and his readers, has no relation to the poem and throws no light upon it.’*

T.S. Eliot, Three Voices of Poetry, The Eleventh Annual Lecture of the National Book League, Central Hall Westminster, 19th November 1953

If globalisation has affected fashion and its distribution symbolically like almost no other industry, the exotic detail is a shocking reminder of fragments of local culture, local culture on the move. We are given glimpses of alternative memories, alternative remembered traditions, nostalgia for a life lived differently, in couture always more - richer, more dramatic, more traditional than our lived lives.

It is as though decorative fragments disturb the conviction of progress, as though in dress progress is to do with streamlined democratic mass production - what is it we need to be reminded of? An honourable craft, of diversity, of individualism?

We are given through quotation the possibility to revise something, to re-describe

it, serve a different kind of continuity. Fashion designers flaunt diversity as bravado as though making a pledge to the diversity of language, of grammar, but inevitably take history on their own terms.

The word Orientalism has been one of the ways fashion has most successfully and consistently focussed our attention, or organised our ideas about recycling, or about reoccurrence. Continuity of this project was shown in the seminal exhibition in 1995 curated by the late Richard Martin and Harol Koda at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in their exhibition (and catalogue) *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western dress*, divided into five sections: China, India, Near East and Middle East, Japan, Southeast Asia: where recurring themes were linked across two and a half centuries magically through juxtaposition for the first time.

The silk rout was mediated for us by the imagination of western designers. We found out not about China, India etc, only more about the aspirations of western dress. Martin and Koda did for curators what Edward Said had provided within academia with his text *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the orient that is based on the Orient's place in European western experience, its place as contrasting idea, image, personality and experience, always elusive, always Other, and its associated mode of discourse, vocabulary, scholarship, and even colonial beurocracies.

Orientalism or exoticism in fashion has always been an accent not a disguise, always definitionally incomplete, its world beyond our field of vision, like Scheherazade's tales within tales in 1001 nights, her deferred erotic promise becoming the life saving element - and with it props: bold silk, turbans, fans, veils, gold bangles; Persian folk tales handed down to us through Leon Bakst's *Odalisques* for the Ballet Russes at the beginning of the last century, or Danilo Donati's 1970's costumes for Pasolini's tales, Matisse's disguised sitters or even the potent abstraction of Walt Disney. Scheherazade's promise which harnesses curiosity and desire projected into an indefinite future is a comfortable analogy for the fashion system itself. Encyclopedic, it tells a story that

enfolds all stories, endless, like the Bible or Humboldt's description of the physical universe, or Mallarmé's *Absolute* book.

*'For me it was important never to lose the thread of my instinct - my instinctive reaction against deep thought. I was refusing to think deeply, to swerve from the sharp tickle of intuition, the antechamber of visual thought, of illogical logic, of the paradox of contrasts.'*

Anna Piaggi, Fashion Algebra

There are drawbacks to being culturally informed. Through ignorance people make interesting mistakes, or are unimpressed by the difference between quoting high and low art, motifs invested with political or spiritual meaning, this is what is creative about it. Inaccuracy of details, changing scale. Maybe only freed from the responsibility of accurate description details are invested with this subversive potential.

What happens when allusions go astray, when a detail turns up somewhere else? It is like a poetic snapshot in which the detail is put on display and exhibited in all its unexpectedness. What gets lost in translation, or gained in translation? Fashion needs something that Orientalism or Exoticism satisfies or activates.

The overriding commitment is to experiment, to renewal, to design new solutions each season to the same confined anthropocentric brief. Commitment to wandering, against serving one grammar alone. It is the commitment to include other cultural motifs, to multiplicity. It is like a commitment to remain unseduced by one culture, period, or one silhouette. Made new, creativity comes from fear or mimicry, sameness, habitualisation.

Accuracy, like provenance seems to me to avoid the point. Does it matter if today's

asymmetrical drapery is derived from Indian saris or the Rome of Caesars; if turbans are quoted from Ottoman princes, Delacroix's tableaux vivants, or Beaton's photograph of Edith Sitwell sitting up in bed? Surely depending on the memories of the historian or designer the descriptions will differ, but which one is more accurate?

Like fairy tales set a long time ago and far away, the details are distorted, what we retain is a tale which leads towards an inevitable prophetic ending - in the case of fashion we know who will buy the dress, who will talk about it, how its success will be measured, it makes the seduction no less powerful.

Decorative quotations, like borrowed heirlooms, generate disparate genealogies, clues unknowingly to a diversity of stories, of histories. These histories in return act as a distracting device. What need we be distracted from? What would be a coherent genealogy for dress? Would it be possible to invest dress with a Darwinian lineage?

*'All these old things have a moral value'*

Charles Baudelaire, quoted in Walter Benjamin, Arcades Projects, beginning of section on The Collector.

There are lots of images for the way things return and are recycled. If strange genealogies can be derived and contrived and fabricated, it would seem that now we have been freed to reinvent culture - what would look like a mistake to a traditionalist, from the point of view of an outsider is innovation. Inventing tradition is a contradiction in terms, tradition is inherited, inhabited and conserved. We are therefore given a sinister reminder of what is lost, what is no longer complete. It could be something to do with the difference between migrancy and travel, and about imposed and desired and desired travel, and about imposed and desired travel, about destination. How can we tell the difference between innovation and exploitation?

Is explanation the way we console ourselves for exploitation?