

P9623
08.15
Adn 5100

5188

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género

Seminario **Vestido, moda y cultura**
Construcción y comunicación de
identidades sociales diversas: del vestido
medieval al estilo *dark*.

Sesión 8 Estatus cultural de la moda hoy

ARNOLD, Rebecca (2001), *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety. Image and Morality in the 20th Century*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, pp. 32-47.

249

Two: Violence and Provocation

Cropped abruptly at the waist, only the model's ultra-short skirt and tanned legs are visible. She stands girlishly, one knee slightly bent, the pastel tones of her clothes and the strappy retro style of her high-heeled sandals contrasting starkly with the silver metal of the gun she holds and the sticky red of the blood that drips and trickles down her legs. The photograph's colour is heightened, the vibrant green of the grass verge she stands on intensifying the effect of the red fluid that stains her lower body. The model seems to be standing in an anonymous American suburb, which features in each of the series of images taken by Jean Baptiste Mondino for *The Face* in June 1994. Revealingly, this graphic tale of Middle America's fragile mask of respectability fractured by gun violence was entitled 'Reality Bites'. As Richard Stivers noted in his book *The Culture of Cynicism, American Morality in Decline* of 1994, since western culture is drowned in imagery: 'Violent images are the *most real* images because they provoke the strongest emotional response: they simultaneously give us a sense of being alive and of having control over others.'¹

The photo-shoot's visual impact is a mix of deathly calm, models seem carefully posed in bloody tableaux that recall the 1993 film *True Romance*'s seedy glamour,

and throwaway references to violence, combined with the claustrophobic hyper-real environments conjured up by David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* of 1986, which depicted suburbia as a stifling world of hidden vices and threat. There is a contrast between the model's youth and beauty, and her gaudy too-tight clothes that ape the trailer-park aesthetic that permeated both fashion and film in the mid-1990s. This visual 'slumming' represented a form of rebellion against designer dictates of style and 'good' taste epitomised in the conservative tailoring of Giorgio Armani, that had taken hold in the late 1980s. When combined with carefully choreographed scenes of violence this aesthetic plays upon western culture's fears of and fascination with the underbelly of consumer society. Such images represent dark dreams of taking control of the chaos of contemporary life by resorting to violence. Jean Baptiste Mondino's photographs parodied tabloid headlines dealing with hit-and-runs and serial killers. His pictures showed models, themselves physical emblems of consumerism, acting out fantasies of revenge for the alienation and sense of lack felt by those who are too poor to gain power through the acquisition of lifestyle-enhancing goods. Spiralling violence is shown as a response to exclusion, boredom and lack of opportunity

more and status based on consumption and wealth generates.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, fashion designers and photographers increasingly examined anger, frustration, rebellion and destruction in the images they created. Both bloody physical violence and an insidious internalised violence that spoke of self-abuse, inner torment and physical decay were explored in fashion photographs and advertisements. They drew upon the excitement and allure of films like *Reservoir Dogs* of 1991 and *Kalifornia* of 1993, which dealt in a heady mix of brutality, narcotics and style.

However, the seeds of this move towards images that reflected cultural anxiety had been sown much earlier in the century. During the inter-war years, surrealist artists like Man Ray brought a strong sense of ambiguity and brutality to their fetishised representations of the fashion mannequin in photographs that fragmented the model's body, blurring between shop dummy and real woman in disturbing collages of body parts. The devastation of the Second World War had also dented fashion's immaculately groomed self-image. Cecil Beaton's photographs of elegant models against the dereliction of bomb-sites brought feelings of dissonance and gritty realism to fashion photography that hinted at the possibility of more serious and disturbing issues being reflected in fashion magazines. In one photograph by Beaton published in *British Vogue* in December 1945, a model is swathed in a plain Balmain jacket, her hair wrapped in a chic turban that mimics factory workers' practical styles. She poses against a bombed building, the ..."

Arnold, Rebecca (2001), *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety. Image and Morality in the 20th Century*,
New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, pp.32-47.

Provocation

he and throwaway references to violence, combined with the claustrophobic hyper-real environments conjured up by David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* of 1986, which depicted suburbia as a stifling world of hidden vices and threat. There is a contrast between the model's youth and beauty, and her gaudy too-tight clothes that ape the trailer-park aesthetic that permeated both fashion and film in the mid-1990s. This visual 'slumming' represented a form of rebellion against designer dictates of style and 'good' taste epitomised in the conservative tailoring of Giorgio Armani, that had taken hold in the late 1980s. When combined with carefully choreographed scenes of violence this aesthetic plays upon western culture's fears of and fascination with the underbelly of consumer society. Such images represent dark dreams of taking control of the chaos of contemporary life by resorting to violence. Jean Baptiste Mondino's photographs parodied tabloid headlines dealing with hit-and-runs and serial killers. His pictures showed models, themselves physical emblems of consumerism, acting out fantasies of revenge for the alienation and sense of lack felt by those who are too poor to gain power through the acquisition of lifestyle-enhancing goods. Spiralling violence is shown as a response to exclusion, boredom and lack of opportunity

more and status based on consumption and wealth generates.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, fashion designers and photographers increasingly examined anger, frustration, rebellion and destruction in the images they created. Both bloody physical violence and an insidious internalised violence that spoke of self-abuse, inner torment and physical decay were explored in fashion photographs and advertisements. They drew upon the excitement and allure of films like *Reservoir Dogs* of 1991 and *Kalifornia* of 1993, which dealt in a heady mix of brutality, narcotics and style.

However, the seeds of this move towards images that reflected cultural anxiety had been sown much earlier in the century. During the inter-war years, surrealist artists like Man Ray brought a strong sense of ambiguity and brutality to their fetishised representations of the fashion mannequin in photographs that fragmented the model's body, blurring between shop dummy and real woman in disturbing collages of body parts. The devastation of the Second World War had also dented fashion's immaculately groomed self-image. Cecil Beaton's photographs of elegant models against the dereliction of bomb-sites brought feelings of dissonance and gritty realism to fashion photography that hinted at the possibility of more serious and disturbing issues being reflected in fashion magazines. In one photograph by Beaton published in *British Vogue* in December 1945, a model is swathed in a plain Balmain jacket, her hair wrapped in a chic turban that mimics factory workers' practical styles. She poses against a bombed building, the walls

The image evokes the numb silence of fractured cities and destroyed houses. The model's body seems as frail and as fallible as the structures that surround her.

By the 1960s latent violence and drug culture were increasingly explored in fashion representation. Images imbued with references to melancholy and self-destruction were created by American photographer Bob Richardson, who produced photographs of suicide and alienated youth culture for stylish magazines like *Nova* and *French Vogue*. In contrast, in 1961, British photographer Terence Donovan produced dynamic film-still inspired shots of male models for *Man About Town*, dressed in snappy black suits and shades clutching pistols that they pointed at the camera. His pictures had parallels not just with the sleek Hollywood hoods of 1930s gangster films like *Scarface* of 1932, but also with newspaper photographs of London's East End gangland and the stylish image of the Kray Twins.

Such imagery has entered the vocabulary of western culture, as potent icons that repulse and yet thrill. It was inevitable that fashion would reflect the rise in both real violence and violent imagery that have saturated newspapers, television and film. Feeding on the same influences as the rest of the arts and popular culture, it has been used to create styles of aggressive display for subcultural groups from the gangster to the skinhead, just as it has in photographs. Groups who felt disenfranchised from mainstream culture, and therefore from any real possibility of gaining status or power, turned to visual codes that would give them some control of their identity and would express their

feeling of being outsiders, because of the loss of status of their social group found ways to create an alternative lifestyle. At first this exposure of the underbelly of capitalist society was reserved for the real criminals, it then spread to the subcultural styles of young men (for it was mainly men), keen to be rebellious, while maintaining group loyalty through uniform styles.

They used conspicuous consumption subversively to create their own visual codes of status, loyalty, wealth and, importantly, of the threat they potentially pose to the 'norm'. In the West, notions of morality and social acceptability have traditionally centred around the belief in a stable 'norm' around which all other behaviour, belief or representation is defined as unacceptable or even deviant. In the aftermath of the Second World War, as traditional institutions such as religion, politics and faith in the establishment declined, various subcultural groups, artists and designers have sought to explore the increasingly blurred lines between what is acceptable and what is transgressive. The fissures that have developed from the fragmentation of traditional belief systems and the impact of various ethnic, gender and class groups seeking to assert their own versions of the 'norm' has highlighted the fluid nature of ideas of 'acceptability'. Fashion has provided a fertile realm for negotiating new moralities, able to construct and reflect continuously mutating moralities of representation through the directness of visual display.

Both street and high fashion represent spaces in which anxieties surrounding

comfortable affluence and vibrant city life, violence has been used as both aggressive confrontation with the flawed nature of capitalism that taunts bourgeois morality, and as a means to assert glamorised visions of power for the alienated. It sparked the dulled senses of the post-war generations, raised on a barrage of images and constantly seeking to consume new thrills, either by membership of a provocative subcultural group or through the vicarious excitement of visually consuming fashion imagery.

Ultra Style, Ultra Violence

Clothing can act as a disguise that confers power by drawing the wearer into a particular social or cultural group. Consuming fashion can also assuage the monotony of existence, the pressures of work and the alienating effect of anonymous city life. During the late twentieth century, in the relentless search for satisfaction through shopping, the consumer has been continually assailed by images promising newer, greater experiences that may provide opportunities for creating new identities but which also have a brutalising effect. People are reduced to generic consumers, labelled and defined by market research into lifestyle groups, and individuality is sought in vain in a marketplace that is carefully stratified and driven by forecasting trends.

Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* of 1991 crystallised the malaise that can develop as a result of the need to

caused a huge moral outcry, both because of the graphic detail of murders, and the hollow world of consumer obsession it portrayed. It was an evocation of the city as hell, catapulted by the media and technology into a postmodern simulacrum of life, where communication is through technological and sartorial codes. It drew upon the rise of violent imagery and its links to high fashion, which was to become such a dominant strand in the 1990s. The novel morbidly satirised glamorous depictions of brutality in film and fashion with grindingly realistic descriptions of violence intercut with obsessive notes on both killer's and victim's clothing and accessories. Easton Ellis constructed a dark parody of the 'sex and shopping' novels that were so popular in the 1980s. His anti-hero, Bateman, segues between sex, shopping and violence, consuming and consumed by each in turn.

While others sought to shape the 1990s as a decade of New Age understanding, authors like Douglas Coupland and Easton Ellis examined urban life. Easton Ellis's novel dwelt on the degeneration of a wealthy city financier, trapped in a spiral of sartorial display and mental decline, as his self-revulsion and alienation from his environment leads him into ever more grotesque acts of violence. The minute details of each character's clothes are obsessively listed and given more importance than their characters, each of whom descends into a bland conformity to the latest designer labels: 'Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt, and the same pair of silk-satin d'Orsay pumps Courtney has on.'² The

perpetuate and conform to unwritten rules of visual expression. The book caused a huge moral outcry, both because of the graphic detail of murders, and the hollow world of consumer obsession it portrayed. It was an evocation of the city as hell, catapulted by the media and technology into a postmodern simulacrum of life, where communication is through technological and sartorial codes. It drew upon the rise of violent imagery and its links to high fashion, which was to become such a dominant strand in the 1990s. The novel morbidly satirised glamorous depictions of brutality in film and fashion with grindingly realistic descriptions of violence intercut with obsessive notes on both killer's and victim's clothing and accessories. Easton Ellis constructed a dark parody of the 'sex and shopping' novels that were so popular in the 1980s. His anti-hero, Bateman, segues between sex, shopping and violence, consuming and consumed by each in turn.

While others sought to shape the 1990s as a decade of New Age understanding, authors like Douglas Coupland and Easton Ellis examined urban life. Easton Ellis's novel dwelt on the degeneration of a wealthy city financier, trapped in a spiral of sartorial display and mental decline, as his self-revulsion and alienation from his environment leads him into ever more grotesque acts of violence. The minute details of each character's clothes are obsessively listed and given more importance than their characters, each of whom descends into a bland conformity to the latest designer labels: 'Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt, and the same pair of silk-satin d'Orsay pumps Courtney has on.'² The

loss of personal identity that leads Easton Ellis's characters to hide behind blandly similar clothing, leads to constant cases of mistaken identity, and subsequently the anonymity and apathy that enables his anti-hero, Bateman, to perpetrate numerous murders.

This nightmare vision is a dark satire of the fears that dominated the end of the century, anxieties about disease, poverty and insecurity, that are papered over with consumer dreams, the promise that the right fashions will produce the required lifestyle, that appearance will overcome the empty reality. Ultra style becomes a substitute for job satisfaction or home life and a corollary to violence. As long as the designer objects – the contemporary totems of power and status – are in place, the facade of respectability is maintained. The relationship of this controlled exterior, gym-toned body, healthy tanned face and impeccable suits to the chaos and casual, brutal violence of the novel remains shocking, as does the lack of any consequences for Bateman. The lack of moral judgement was difficult for many critics to accept, despite the ending of the novel that underlined the ultimate imprisonment in this destructive maelstrom with the final words, 'This is not an exit.'³

It was the James Bond films of the 1960s, like *From Russia with Love* of 1963 and *Goldfinger* of 1964, which started to make violence into entertainment. The slick, rather camp treatment of the 007 story formalised the relationship of sophisticated fashions married with the ultimate masculine accessory: the gun. The fast-moving action and witty one-liners made Bond a screen hero that many wished to emulate. His cool, controlled, suited image somehow neutralised the impact of the

and a strong cause of the group found lifestyle. At the derbelly of for the real subcultural was mainly while mainly uniform

consumption own visual health and, potentially, notions of ability have e belief in a all other entation is an deviant. World War, as religion, ablishment il groups, sought to rred lines id what is that have ntation of the impact ass groups ions of the l nature of hion has egotiating, tract and moralities rectness of

represent rrounding

violence and decay have been explored. The flipside of the consumer dream of comfortable affluence and vibrant city life, violence has been used as both aggressive confrontation with the flawed nature of capitalism that taunts bourgeois morality, and as a means to assert glamorised visions of power for the alienated. It sparked the dulled senses of the post-war generations, raised on a barrage of images and constantly seeking to consume new thrills, either by membership of a provocative subcultural group or through the vicarious excitement of visually consuming fashion imagery.

Ultra Style, Ultra Violence

Clothing can act as a disguise that confers power by drawing the wearer into a particular social or cultural group. Consuming fashion can also assuage the monotony of existence, the pressures of work and the alienating effect of anonymous city life. During the late twentieth century, in the relentless search for satisfaction through shopping, the consumer has been continually assailed by images promising newer, greater experiences that may provide opportunities for creating new identities but which also have a brutalising effect. People are reduced to generic consumers, labelled and defined by market research into lifestyle groups, and individuality is sought in vain in a marketplace that is carefully stratified and driven by forecasting trends.

Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* of 1991 crystallised the malaise that can develop as a result of the need to

perpetuate and conform to unwritten rules of visual expression. The book caused a huge moral outcry, both because of the graphic detail of murders, and the hollow world of consumer obsession it portrayed. It was an evocation of the city as hell, catapulted by the media and technology into a postmodern simulacrum of life, where communication is through technological and sartorial codes. It drew upon the rise of violent imagery and its links to high fashion, which was to become such a dominant strand in the 1990s. The novel morbidly satirised glamorous depictions of brutality in film and fashion with grindingly realistic descriptions of violence intercut with obsessive notes on both killer's and victim's clothing and accessories. Easton Ellis constructed a dark parody of the 'sex and shopping' novels that were so popular in the 1980s. His anti-hero, Bateman, segues between sex, shopping and violence, consuming and consumed by each in turn.

While others sought to shape the 1990s as a decade of New Age understanding, authors like Douglas Coupland and Easton Ellis examined urban life. Easton Ellis's novel dwelt on the degeneration of a wealthy city financier, trapped in a spiral of sartorial display and mental decline, as his self-revulsion and alienation from his environment leads him into ever more grotesque acts of violence. The minute details of each character's clothes are obsessively listed and given more importance than their characters, each of whom descends into a bland conformity to the latest designer labels: 'Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt, and the same pair of silk-satin d'Orsay pumps Courtney has on.'² The

loss of personal identity that leads Easton Ellis's characters to hide behind blandly similar clothing, leads to constant cases of mistaken identity, and subsequently the anonymity and apathy that enables his anti-hero, Bateman, to perpetrate numerous murders.

This nightmare vision is a dark satire of the fears that dominated the end of the century, anxieties about disease, poverty and insecurity, that are papered over with consumer dreams, the promise that the right fashions will produce the required lifestyle, that appearance will overcome the empty reality. Ultra style becomes a substitute for job satisfaction or home life and a corollary to violence. As long as the designer objects – the contemporary totems of power and status – are in place, the facade of respectability is maintained. The relationship of this controlled exterior, gym-toned body, healthy tanned face and impeccable suits to the chaos and casual, brutal violence of the novel remains shocking, as does the lack of any consequences for Bateman. The lack of moral judgement was difficult for many critics to accept, despite the ending of the novel that underlined the ultimate imprisonment in this destructive maelstrom with the final words, 'This is not an exit.'³

It was the James Bond films of the 1960s, like *From Russia with Love* of 1963 and *Goldfinger* of 1964, which started to make violence into entertainment. The slick, rather camp treatment of the 007 story formalised the relationship of sophisticated fashions married with the ultimate masculine accessory: the gun. The fast-moving action and witty one-liners made Bond a screen hero that many wished to emulate. His cool, controlled, suited image somehow neutralised the impact of the

mained
ttles he

violence
nre, as
d many
ed this
violent
ran an
icted a
rel of a
image
ion of
e need
isngly
t that
blicity
ticular
d sent
trans-
ks of
rbras.
nives
cesso-
s and
ayne
rotest
t the
iolent
v that
n the
such
neral
aded
garet
this
tion
osive
the

ing the even much debated in the 1990s, with computer games being particularly criticised. PlayStation's character Lara Croft, from the *Tomb Raider* game, embodied many of the issues raised. With her voluptuous figure, and multiple weaponry, she drew upon earlier cartoon heroines like Tank Girl for her tough image. Although her costume in the game itself is minimal, her cult status led to her computer-generated form being used to model the latest high fashion styles in the June 1997 edition of *The Face*. Clad in skimpy Gucci bikini or Alexander McQueen fitted suit, with accessories by



Figure 10: Red or Dead, spring / summer 1996, photograph by Niall McInerney. Copyright Niall McInerney.

Uzi, she combined erotic fantasies of sex and power in images that used ultra style with the threat of ultra violence in the guns she carried. Inspiring numerous websites, mainly concerned with her digitally created hourglass figure, and making an appearance in U2's Popmart tour, she demonstrated the continued fascination for violence with a stylish, eroticised face. Quentin Tarantino's films have mined the same rich vein of postmodern, stylised violence, presented with an ironic artificial over-wash. 'Tarantino has said that violence is just another colour in his palette. His films are so referential, parodic and playful that this could be true: everything is artifice, composition.'⁵ It is true that both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* encapsulate the 1990s nostalgic, self-referential stylisations that have also dominated fashion, but this has, if anything, made them more controversial, as treating extreme violence and drug abuse in a semi-humorous manner is disquieting to many.

Tarantino has seen, though, that the use of sophisticated, subtle suiting by Agnès b, constructs a slick exterior, which he uses with sharp, slangy speech to give his characters an instant air of cool status, even if they are essentially small-time criminals. This image, the gestures and the spoken style of his films have been much copied, the narcissism of his male characters defused by the sudden plunges into violent excess, the clothes bathed in fake blood, highlighting the instability of the facade that he has created. This instability has done nothing to diminish the appeal of the film's imagery, which has inspired numerous fashion shoots in men's style magazines like *Arena*, eager to appropriate the fantasy of careless, brutal style that Tarantino's work portrays.

Confusion in some sections of the public between the fiction of such filmic images and the perceived increase in actual violence muddies moral debate about depictions of inner-city crime. The desire to preserve a semblance of calm and control, and the appearance of secure identities has led to the use of simple silhouettes and structured, clean styles that confer value upon the perpetrator of fictional violence and conceal the chaos of city life. The push by both consumers and producers for new experiences means that in the blurred areas of the real and the fictional, new moral boundaries are constantly negotiated. Both market forces and photographers' and designers' desire to push boundaries and attract the attention of increasingly media-literate consumers jaded by over-exposure to visual stimuli means that cultural perceptions of acceptability in relation to the depiction of violence are continually questioned, in the name of art as well as commerce. As Durkheim said: 'Reality seems valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations ... A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savour once known.'⁶

Gangsters

The desire to create new rules, to break free from social and moral restraint has always had a strong fascination. For those who feel they cannot gain status and value through the normal channels, violence, combined with a distinctive visual style, signals directly the anger and alternative loyalty of groups who, on the outside, seem contained and controlled. The gangster

violence, combining the controlled exterior of sharp tailoring with the constant threat of brutality to become at once a folk devil and a folk icon, evoked with nostalgia and terror in equal measure.

Combining flamboyant styles and sartorial swagger with the Italian love of visual display, the Mafia gangsters of the 1930s cut a swathe through the despondency and poverty of the Great Depression in America, using intimidation to enforce their power and control over sections of American cities. Real gangsters like the infamous Al Capone paid great attention to their attire, aware that a coherent, highly stylised image can help to realise and maintain the fantasy of setting your own rules, creating your own power base. Capone's all-white ensemble of individually tailored three-piece suit, handmade shirt, trilby hat and full-length overcoat created a striking image that combined individual style elements with uniformity in its eerie inversion of the business-man's dark suiting.

Stella Bruzzi, in her account of fictional gangsters, highlights the significance of this style: '[these] are characters who have cultivated an aggressively masculine image and are immensely vain, and whose sartorial flamboyance, far from intimating femininity or effeminacy, is the most important sign of their masculine social and material success'.⁷ The wealth, and therefore the success of the gangster, is substantiated by the quality of his tailored suits, his monogrammed silk shirts, his flawless accessories, his slick trilby, and the strength of his instantly recognisable silhouette. The inverted triangle of the gangster's figure is so potent a symbol of his power, that films need only show his

potential threat.

The vanity and obsessive detail of the real and fictional gangster's image could be construed, as Bruzzi noted, as feminine, especially since it requires constant attention and careful consumption to be maintained. But, crucially, the oppressive threat of violence, the knowledge that the gangster is no mere passive consumer, but a man of action, neutralises such accusations. Just as in the military narcissism and attention to the details of outer appearance are legitimised by their link to potential violence, to duty, discipline and power, so too in the world of the gangster, a subversive vision of this stereotype of masculinity reigns supreme. Any lack of a sense of individual worth is overridden by the inclusive nature of the gang style.

Gangsters' constant inspection of appearance and lesser criminals' aspiration to the impeccable style of big-name gangsters has been rehearsed continuously in films since the 1930s. The essential amorality of those who created their own codes of business practice in bastardised versions of the city suit was ignored by those for whom the image outweighs the reality of the gangsters' lifestyle. The messages of films like the *Godfather* trilogy remain confused; even if the brutality and violence is shown in graphic detail, and the main protagonists are punished for their crimes, the fascination and strength of the image overpowers any moral lessons to be learned. The desire to emulate gangster style was discussed by Martin Scorsese in 1996, who recalled the mobsters he had seen in New York as a child:

When we were kids we were very aware of the shirts the wise guys wore, and

never had these shirts in stores; they were always made to measure. That was power to us.⁸

As with the legitimate gentleman, exclusivity and an elitist desire for the hand-made, individual garment, were paramount. The shirt-maker used in Scorsese's film *Casino* of 1995, Mike Athanatos, went on to collaborate with London-based designer David Butler. They produced sharp lapelled shirts in narrow stripes or jet black, with contrasting white collars and cuffs, that enabled their wearers to consume this image of notoriety and exaggeration. Real gangsters from Bonnie and Clyde to the Krays are also remembered with fear, and yet viewed through a gloss of nostalgia as those who have taken the law into their own hands, who have lived out the fantasy of power and status that holds such fascination. This conflict between the critical and the envious responses to the style, may be symptomatic of the American ambivalence towards law and order, the general desire for order, and the resentment of laws.⁹

The gangster's style quickly became a 'classic', quoted endlessly in fashions and film costumes since the 1930s. The mix of vulgar, conspicuous consumption and sharp tailoring has appealed to both men and women, the frisson of amorality and violence that the silhouette carries merely adding to its attraction. Many have sought to emulate the style. The French New Wave films like *A Bout de Souffle*, of 1959, depicted gangsters obsessed with every fetishised aspect of their American predecessors' image. The film *Bonnie and Clyde*, of 1967, also influenced contemporary fashion, the stylish wardrobe inspiring

ultra menacing shadow to signal a character's potential threat.

The vanity and obsessive detail of the real and fictional gangster's image could be construed, as Bruzzi noted, as feminine, especially since it requires constant attention and careful consumption to be maintained. But, crucially, the oppressive threat of violence, the knowledge that the gangster is no mere passive consumer, but a man of action, neutralises such accusations. Just as in the military narcissism and attention to the details of outer appearance are legitimised by their link to potential violence, to duty, discipline and power, so too in the world of the gangster, a subversive vision of this stereotype of masculinity reigns supreme. Any lack of a sense of individual worth is overridden by the inclusive nature of the gang style.

Gangsters' constant inspection of appearance and lesser criminals' aspiration to the impeccable style of big-name gangsters has been rehearsed continuously in films since the 1930s. The essential amorality of those who created their own codes of business practice in bastardised versions of the city suit was ignored by those for whom the image outweighs the reality of the gangsters' lifestyle. The messages of films like the *Godfather* trilogy remain confused; even if the brutality and violence is shown in graphic detail, and the main protagonists are punished for their crimes, the fascination and strength of the image overpowers any moral lessons to be learned. The desire to emulate gangster style was discussed by Martin Scorsese in 1996, who recalled the mobsters he had seen in New York as a child:

When we were kids we were very aware of the shirts the wise guys wore, and

tried to copy them ... But you could never find these shirts in stores; they were always made to measure. That was power to us.⁸

As with the legitimate gentleman, exclusivity and an elitist desire for the hand-made, individual garment, were paramount. The shirt-maker used in Scorsese's film *Casino* of 1995, Mike Athanasatos, went on to collaborate with London-based designer David Butler. They produced sharp lapelled shirts in narrow stripes or jet black, with contrasting white collars and cuffs, that enabled their wearers to consume this image of notoriety and exaggeration. Real gangsters from Bonnie and Clyde to the Krays are also remembered with fear, and yet viewed through a gloss of nostalgia as those who have taken the law into their own hands, who have lived out the fantasy of power and status that holds such fascination. This conflict between the critical and the envious responses to the style, may be 'symptomatic of the American ambivalence towards law and order, the general desire for order, and the resentment of laws'.⁹

The gangster's style quickly became a 'classic', quoted endlessly in fashions and film costumes since the 1930s. The mix of vulgar conspicuous consumption and sharp tailoring has appealed to both men and women, the frisson of amorality and violence that the silhouette carries merely adding to its attraction. Many have sought to emulate the style. The French New Wave films like *A Bout de Souffle*, of 1959, depicted gangsters obsessed with every fetishised aspect of their American predecessors' image. The film *Bonnie and Clyde*, of 1967, also influenced contemporary fashion, the stylish wardrobe inspiring

women to adopt berets and pencil skirts mimicking those worn by the star, Faye Dunaway. Angela Carter spoke at the time of the added resonance a garment could be given by the transformative power of film, describing the mix-and-match dressing-up style of fashion popular in the late 1960s. She described a girl dressing for a party, 'her old school beret dug out of the loft because she saw Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde*'.¹⁰

At a time when many were tired of having to seem shocked, and wanted to assert new values and freedoms the film achieved widespread success. This image of an ultimately destructive ideal, has been revived in numerous fashion spreads, most notably Peter Lindbergh's atmospheric black and white photographs for British *Vogue* in May 1991, which provided added ambiguity by using female models to play both Bonnie and Clyde. In 1995 the *Independent* reported¹¹ that the wife of a judge murdered by the Mafia, had complained about the inclusion of gangster style designs in Dolce & Gabbana's collections of autumn/winter 1994/5. This exposed the stark difference between the reality of Mafia life and the glamorous visions created in its image.

When transposed to womenswear the gangster style takes on an erotic edge sparked by the contrasting masculine and feminine components it comprises and this juxtaposition of femininity and threatened aggression, of narcissism and violence, continues to resonate despite protests. Dolce & Gabbana's style has always drawn heavily upon this strong, Italian image. In 1992 Steven Meisel shot their advertising campaign: against an urban backdrop, a group of models strike defiant poses in monochromatic gangster

the ultra-masculine cut of their white shirts and black ties. They stare out at the onlooker with taunting looks that reinforce the unity of their dress and gang-style stance. They are playing at being mobsters, the pinstripes and leather gloves a pastiche of male narcissism, the nostalgic gloss of their cut fusing the real and the fictional gangster, an iconic dress code ripe for consumption. The interchange between legitimate and illegitimate styles may be distasteful to some, but the reference-grabbing that has ensued from the postmodern fragmentation of divisions between previously clearly delineated areas of culture makes it inevitable.

Gangstas

The functions of violence are also numerous – violence as release, violence as communication, violence as play, violence as self-affirmation, or self-defence, or self-discovery, or self-destruction, violence as a flight from reality, violence as the truest sanity in a particular situation.¹²

The hardcore gangsta rappers of the early to mid-1990s touched upon all these uses of violence. Their uncompromising stance and strident appearance spoke as eloquently of their anger and frustration, as their explicit lyrics.

Born out of the burgeoning black music scene in California, they represented a hardening of attitudes amongst young

through passive, political routes, sought to assert their strength through their music and visual style. There had been a resurgence in violent gang crime at the start of the 1990s, with its threat spreading out from the ghettos of major American cities. Unlike the original gangsters that their name referred to, they subverted the casual sportswear that represented the healthy outdoors spirit of America, rather than the more traditional suiting of the older generation. Rap and hip-hop had already fetishised the status of branded sportswear, old skool rappers Run DMC's 'My Adidas', of 1986, had already provided an anthem to the supremacy of the trainer. Gangsta rap was never designed to be as palatable to the mainstream though, and added work-wear to the sartorial mix, as well as references to prison dress, in light denim shirts and baggy jeans worn low-slung to reveal the top of the boxer shorts.

At first simply providing an echo of the established New York rap scene, the West Coast gangstas quickly developed their own more confrontational style, where the authenticity of ghetto experience was a vital element and the anger and resentment it created spoke out against the contemporary 'peace and love', pan-Africanism of groups like De La Soul. This was music and fashion that flaunted references to shootings, drug dealing and sexual domination as a mark of power rather than degradation, where status and therefore value came from threat and menace. bell hooks commented, 'Rather than seeing it [gangsta rap] as a subversion or disruption of the norm, we would need to see it as an *embodiment* of the norm.'¹³ Its

argued, an intrinsic element of American culture itself. However, appropriated by a marginalised group like black youth, it was viewed as dangerous and unfamiliar.

Artists such as NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) drew on their real experiences of gang life to express their contempt for white society. While many found the whole premise of gangsta rap offensive, others defended what it stood for. Andrew Ross wrote of the phenomenon

After a quarter of a century of fronting black politicians and almost ceaseless economic warfare, it's no surprise that kids believe they can only locate sincerity in a musical genre top-heavy with humour and creativity, that delivers fantasies much closer to home than the distant dream world of affirmative action politics.¹⁴

The continual negative portrayal of young black men in the media had demonised them, and gangsta rappers played up to the stereotypes that a racist culture had shaped for them, revelling in talk of violence and gang warfare, eager to show journalists their gun collections, and flaunt their new-found wealth.

Since they came from poor communities, marginalised politically, they had formed their own group loyalties and had no desire to be assimilated into the mainstream. While earlier rappers like Public Enemy had used an aggressive stance and military-inspired dress to speak of black awareness and the message of Malcolm X, gangstas used hard black leather and Palladium boots to assert their own harsh lifestyle as it already existed rather than seeking change.

tried to copy them ... But you could never find these shirts in stores; they were always made to measure. That was power to us.⁸

As with the legitimate gentleman, exclusivity and an elitist desire for the hand-made, individual garment, were paramount. The shirt-maker used in Scorsese's film *Casino* of 1995, Mike Athanasatos, went on to collaborate with London-based designer David Butler. They produced sharp lapelled shirts in narrow stripes or jet black, with contrasting white collars and cuffs, that enabled their wearers to consume this image of notoriety and exaggeration. Real gangsters from Bonnie and Clyde to the Krays are also remembered with fear, and yet viewed through a gloss of nostalgia as those who have taken the law into their own hands, who have lived out the fantasy of power and status that holds such fascination. This conflict between the critical and the envious responses to the style, may be 'symptomatic of the American ambivalence towards law and order, the general desire for order, and the resentment of laws'.⁹

The gangster's style quickly became a 'classic', quoted endlessly in fashions and film costumes since the 1930s. The mix of vulgar conspicuous consumption and sharp tailoring has appealed to both men and women, the frisson of amorality and violence that the silhouette carries merely adding to its attraction. Many have sought to emulate the style. The French New Wave films like *A Bout de Souffle*, of 1959, depicted gangsters obsessed with every fetishised aspect of their American predecessors' image. The film *Bonnie and Clyde*, of 1967, also influenced contemporary fashion, the stylish wardrobe inspiring

women to adopt berets and pencil skirts mimicking those worn by the star, Faye Dunaway. Angela Carter spoke at the time of the added resonance a garment could be given by the transformative power of film, describing the mix-and-match dressing-up style of fashion popular in the late 1960s. She described a girl dressing for a party, 'her old school beret dug out of the loft because she saw Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde*'.¹⁰

At a time when many were tired of having to seem shocked, and wanted to assert new values and freedoms the film achieved widespread success. This image of an ultimately destructive ideal, has been revived in numerous fashion spreads, most notably Peter Lindbergh's atmospheric black and white photographs for British *Vogue* in May 1991, which provided added ambiguity by using female models to play both Bonnie and Clyde. In 1995 the *Independent* reported¹¹ that the wife of a judge murdered by the Mafia, had complained about the inclusion of gangster style designs in Dolce & Gabbana's collections of autumn/winter 1994/5. This exposed the stark difference between the reality of Mafia life and the glamorous visions created in its image.

When transposed to womenswear the gangster style takes on an erotic edge sparked by the contrasting masculine and feminine components it comprises and this juxtaposition of femininity and threatened aggression, of narcissism and violence, continues to resonate despite protests. Dolce & Gabbana's style has always drawn heavily upon this strong, Italian image. In 1992 Steven Meisel shot their advertising campaign: against an urban backdrop, a group of models strike defiant poses in monochromatic gangster

police in Los Angeles in 1992. The acquittal of the policemen involved sparked riots in Los Angeles, and the bravado of the gangsta rappers suddenly seemed hollow at such a volatile time. Artists like Snoop Doggy Dog expressed the darkness of the mood in their songs, while continuing to use a combination of sports- and work-wear, highlighted with gold jewellery as their signature style. Snoop Doggy Dog projected 'an affectless masculinity, conceived under siege and resonating with the long history of presenting a neutral face, a mask of inscrutability, to the white gaze'.¹⁵ While rappers have continued to use conspicuous consumption to challenge their detractors, the references to violence have declined. In 1997 the killings of two prominent rap artists, Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, prompted a more sombre mood, and highlighted the dangers of living the gangsta lifestyle.

Skinheads

The dramatically pared-down but always pedantically-styled combat dress of Dr Martens, Sta-Press, red socks, braces, Ben Sherman shirt and Crombie overcoat became the dominant terrace look. Out there in football thug land, clothes and violence have always been the twin routes to kudos.¹⁶

There had been fights on the football terraces in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, but it was in the 1960s that the mods really cemented the relationship between team/gang loyalty, violence and style. As the hard mods evolved into skinheads at the

working-class youths found a vicious outlet in terrorising those who did not adhere to their identikit style.

Joe Hawkins, the anti-hero of Richard Allen's series of skinhead novels including *Skinhead*, *Suedehead* and *Skinhead Escapes* of the early 1970s, epitomised the cocky, brutal attitude and the obsessive attention to detail of the real subculture. The son of a docker, he loathed what he viewed as the passivity of his father's generation, which stood back and watched as traditional industries were eroded along with the role of the manual worker. Joe was sick of the bad housing, the poor lifestyle and the sense of hopelessness of his peers and, like the gangsta, strove to create a sense of identity 'under siege', a feeling of value that would unite him with fellow skinheads, while simultaneously believing himself to be individual and special. The clothing he adopted stood for a nostalgic (and largely imagined) working-class Britishness that deified work-wear and tough masculinity. The crucial element that added threat and menace to the image was the Dr Marten boots:

Without his boots, [Joe] was part of the common-herd – like his dad, a working man devoid of identity. Joe was proud of his boots. Most of his mates wore new boots for a high price in a High Street shop. But not Joe's. His were genuine army disposal boots; thick-soled, studded, heavy to wear and heavy if slammed against the rib.¹⁷

The desire to 'cause mayhem' and make use of these boots, in combination with various other home-made weapons,

and the style became synonymous with brutality. The battles between skinheads and mods at seaside towns on bank holiday weekends became a tradition that the police tried to stamp out by confiscating belts and bootlaces from skinheads as they arrived in these resorts, reasoning that they could not fight if their trousers were falling down and their boots falling off.

Despite their propensity to cause trouble, skinheads felt themselves to be victims, always at the bottom of the pile, part of a reviled lower class, bitter because of their lack of status, and dreaming of an imagined past when people could at least take pride in being British. Now they felt they were ignored by the dominant middle classes, expected to accept their lot without complaint. Three decades later, skinhead George Marshall expressed this feeling in his book *Skinhead Nation*, saying:

While the lucky few can sit in wine bars wearing suits by Hans Van Kooten, dresses by Ann Demeulemeester and smiles by Persil Automatic, the rest of us are left to fight over the mass produced fodder that fills your High Street shops.¹⁸

This sense of exclusion even from quality consumer goods led to the fetishised nature of skinhead style. Jim Ferguson's 'Fashion Notebook' in Nick Knight's *Skinhead* book of 1982, provided a template for the revivalists of the period, as well as the first American skins in the 1980s.

Although certain American skinheads, like some groups in Britain, sought to assert a multi-racial image, the involvement of significant numbers of skinheads with right-wing organisations like the

the
The
lved
the
the
only
ime.
ssed
ngs,
n of
with
tyle.
tless
and
of
cru-
hile
pic-
heir
ave
om-
ggie
ood,
the

at
ss
s,
ie
ze
d,
n

ball
'30s,
ally
um/
the
the

end of that decade, the feeling of alienation of a generation of mainly white working-class youths found a vicious outlet in terrorising those who did not adhere to their identikit style.

Joe Hawkins, the anti-hero of Richard Allen's series of skinhead novels including *Skinhead*, *Suedehead* and *Skinhead Escapes* of the early 1970s, epitomised the cocky, brutal attitude and the obsessive attention to detail of the real subculture. The son of a docker, he loathed what he viewed as the passivity of his father's generation, which stood back and watched as traditional industries were eroded along with the role of the manual worker. Joe was sick of the bad housing, the poor lifestyle and the sense of hopelessness of his peers and, like the gangsta, strove to create a sense of identity 'under siege', a feeling of value that would unite him with fellow skinheads, while simultaneously believing himself to be individual and special. The clothing he adopted stood for a nostalgic (and largely imagined) working-class Britishness that deified work-wear and tough masculinity. The crucial element that added threat and menace to the image was the Dr Marten boots:

Without his boots, [Joe] was part of the common-herd - like his dad, a working man devoid of identity. Joe was proud of his boots. Most of his mates wore new boots for a high price in a High Street shop. But not Joe's. His were genuine army disposal boots; thick-soled, studded, heavy to wear and heavy if slammed against the rib.¹⁷

The desire to 'cause mayhem' and make use of these boots, in combination with various other home-made weapons,

caused moral uproar. The newspapers were full of reports of skinhead violence and the style became synonymous with brutality. The battles between skinheads and mods at seaside towns on bank holiday weekends became a tradition that the police tried to stamp out by confiscating belts and bootlaces from skinheads as they arrived in these resorts, reasoning that they could not fight if their trousers were falling down and their boots falling off.

Despite their propensity to cause trouble, skinheads felt themselves to be victims, always at the bottom of the pile, part of a reviled lower class, bitter because of their lack of status, and dreaming of an imagined past when people could at least take pride in being British. Now they felt they were ignored by the dominant middle classes, expected to accept their lot without complaint. Three decades later, skinhead George Marshall expressed this feeling in his book *Skinhead Nation*, saying:

While the lucky few can sit in wine bars wearing suits by Hans Van Kooten, dresses by Ann Demeulemeester and smiles by Persil Automatic, the rest of us are left to fight over the mass produced fodder that fills your High Street shops.¹⁸

This sense of exclusion even from quality consumer goods led to the fetishised nature of skinhead style. Jim Ferguson's 'Fashion Notebook' in Nick Knight's *Skinhead* book of 1982, provided a template for the revivalists of the period, as well as the first American skins in the 1980s.

Although certain American skinheads, like some groups in Britain, sought to assert a multi-racial image, the involvement of significant numbers of skinheads with right-wing organisations like the

National Front in Britain, and their defence of a monolithic notion of national identity did not sit easily with the Two Tone dreams of ska-influenced groups like the Specials, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The skinhead movement had evolved in Britain at a time of racial tension. The Race Relations Act of 1965 was extended in 1968 and sought to assert greater rights and equality for ethnic minorities and this antagonised right-wing white people. This was exacerbated by Conservative MP Enoch Powell's hostility towards black and Asian immigrants to Britain, expressed in his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968, in which he claimed that unless African, West Indian and Asian immigrants were repatriated there would be widespread violent rioting. Powell was sacked from the shadow cabinet for his views but his racist statements reinforced some skinheads' feelings of being under siege because of their race as well as their class status. This resentment was crystallised in the violent racism of late 1970s Oi! bands, like Skrewdriver whose white power sentiments gained sympathy among sections of the skinhead subculture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Skinheads had entered the American scene via punk and, as they were smaller in number, they tended to group together, keen to seem tougher than the punks and open to persuasion from right-wing organisations looking to find a younger audience. Other, earlier British subcultures had failed to take hold in America, partly because of the different mood in the US after the Second World War, and because more young people went to college, forming their own groups within that structure. As Jack B. Moore pointed out in



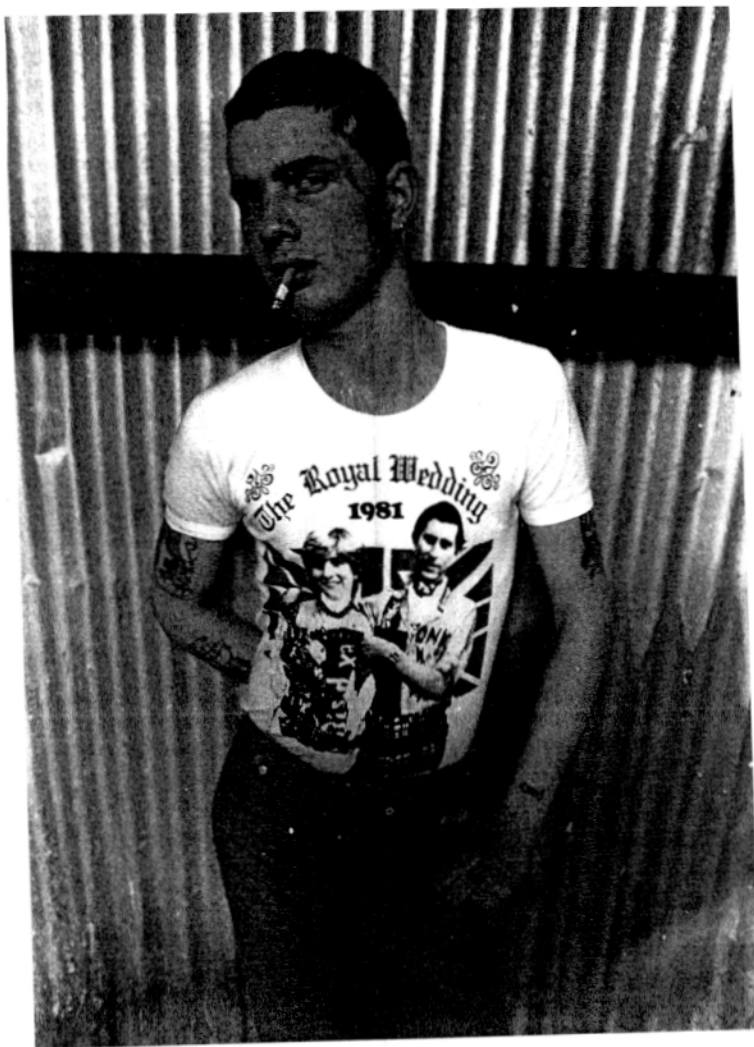


Figure 11: Skinhead photographed outside the Last Resort, a skinhead shop in Petticoat Lane, London, 1981, photograph by Syd Shelton. Copyright Syd Shelton.

...these had seemed too extreme, with their obsessive neatness, but skinheads touched a nerve, especially in the poor white suburbs of cities with a large black population, like Atlanta. There, young skinheads felt a similar sense of being outsiders, marginalised, with no future to look forward to. They saw being a skinhead as a lifestyle to be imitated and acted out. Fastidious attention to the details of the style was not as pronounced a feature of American skinhead culture, but once again the subculture became associated with outbreaks of gratuitous violence. Although less class based, their anger was focused on rejecting traditional authority, channelled through the pages of numerous fanzines that spoke of the right-wing Oi! bands imported from Britain, which often had links with the National Front in that country. The Ku Klux Klan began to take an interest in skinheads as potential foot soldiers for their racist manifesto. They were never large enough in number to cause the moral outcry that had occurred on the other side of the Atlantic, however, where members of Oi! group, Skrewdriver, were arrested for wearing a political uniform¹⁹ that was allied with the skinhead look, and by the late 1980s skinheads were viewed with the same fear and loathing as the Ku Klux Klan had been in the 1950s. Jack B. Moore described the unfocused anger that he felt epitomised the subculture by writing, 'Skinheads appear to favour disorder. They are lords of misrule. Many seem not to have progressed much beyond the desire to break up society, without much desire to restructure it.'²⁰

Skinheads dabbling in fascist insignia only hardened attitudes to the movement,



the Last Resort, a skinhead shop in Petticoat Lane, London, Syd Shelton.

his book *Skinheads Shaved for Battle, A Cultural History of American Skinheads* of 1993, mods had seemed too effeminate, with their obsessive neatness, but skinheads touched a nerve, especially in the poor white suburbs of cities with a large black population, like Atlanta. There, young skinheads felt a similar sense of being outsiders, marginalised, with no future to look forward to. They saw being a skinhead as a lifestyle to be imitated and acted out. Fastidious attention to the details of the style was not as pronounced a feature of American skinhead culture, but once again the subculture became associated with outbreaks of gratuitous violence. Although less class based, their anger was focused on rejecting traditional authority, channelled through the pages of numerous fanzines that spoke of the right-wing Oi! bands imported from Britain, which often had links with the National Front in that country. The Ku Klux Klan began to take an interest in skinheads as potential foot soldiers for their racist manifesto. They were never large enough in number to cause the moral outcry that had occurred on the other side of the Atlantic, however, where members of Oi! group, Skrewdriver, were arrested for wearing a political uniform¹⁹ that was allied with the skinhead look, and by the late 1980s skinheads were viewed with the same fear and loathing as the Ku Klux Klan had been in the 1950s. Jack B. Moore described the unfocused anger that he felt epitomised the subculture by writing, 'Skinheads appear to favour disorder. They are lords of misrule. Many seem not to have progressed much beyond the desire to break up society, without much desire to restructure it.'²⁰

Skinheads dabbling in fascist insignia only hardened attitudes to the movement,

whose shaven heads have been a symbol of aimless hate for 30 years. Attempts in the early 1990s to integrate elements of the style into mainstream fashion were largely unsuccessful; the skinhead is too virulent a folk devil to be comfortably glamorised within the mainstream. It is therefore ironic that the style has been successfully assimilated by Gay subculture in London, where khaki MA1 bomber jackets, Levi's jeans, Dr Marten boots and cropped hair were all adopted by Gay men in the late 1980s. The ultimate subversion of the skinhead's intolerant reputation, the style has become fetishised for its tough masculinity and uniformed control, the very elements that had made it so appealing to the working-class youths of London's East End.

Punks

In contrast to skinheads, punks in the mid-1970s were more concerned with visual than physical confrontation. Their style was about chaos and anarchy, attacking the establishment with images and words, eschewing the controlled exteriors of the other groups discussed in this chapter, which masked the actual violence of their lifestyles. Although punks also adopted swastikas this was more from a blatant desire to shock and confront than any real affiliation with right-wing organisations. This dress style reflected: 'a desire for intensity, a sense of frustration, and the use of clothes as a prime form of personal political expression. Black clothing in itself manages to signal both drama and introversion.'²¹

This desire for intensity and immediacy of experience spoke of disgust with

P. 32-44

contemporary popular culture as well as with the establishment. Music, fashion and existing subcultural styles, all seemed irrelevant to the lives of youths who wanted to kick back at the complacency of glam rock and the tired rebellion of ageing hippies. Punks expressed their boredom and contempt for morality through a compendium of references scoured from the underside of mainstream culture. Fascist imagery ensured their notoriety and rejection by the older generation. This disregard for the serious and offensive meaning of such symbols, the playful, ironic use of the most despised emblems of the century, led to the creation of an image of spectacular subversion that has reverberated down subsequent decades.

The appropriation of the paraphernalia of threat and violence was mirrored in the performance style of punks Sid Vicious and Iggy Pop, who would smash glass and cut themselves during performances, and was combined with a bricolage of bad taste and dark imagery. This nihilistic bravado of self-mutilation was aped in the multiple piercings of many punks. The style was self-absorbed, parading its self-inflicted wounds in front of a society it saw as bland and uncaring, while threatening the destruction of that society with its anarchic, cut-up graphics and antagonistic musical style.

Situationist-style tactics were used at punk concerts; groups aimed to repulse and antagonise the audience with aggressive performances rather than to seduce them into believing in the Spectacle. Malcolm McLaren, designer Vivienne Westwood's then partner and collaborator, was influenced by the ideas of the Situationist International of the late 1960s, which were espoused in theorist Guy Debord's book,

The Society of Spectacle of 1967. Debord discussed the dominating power of the mass media: 'The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.'²² McLaren employed the sloganeering and plagiarising techniques of the Situationists to attack the boredom and frustration of consumerism through his manipulation of punk's media coverage. McLaren, with his organisation Glitterbest, managed various rock bands, most notoriously the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls, as well as contributing to Vivienne Westwood's creations. The theatrical interior of Westwood and McLaren's King's Road shop, the name of which changed to reflect their current design ethos, for



Figure 12: Punk girls at West Runton Pavilion, Cromer, Norfolk, c.1979, photograph by Syd Shelton. Copyright Syd Shelton.

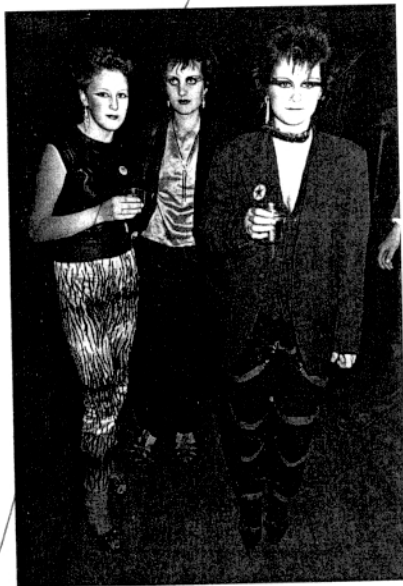
example, *Sex* in 1974 and *Seditionaries* in 1976, provided a focal point and inspiration for young punks. It brought art school strategies of subversion into the previously calm world of retail, turning consumption into an anarchic act, loaded with menace and threat. Punk created another world parallel to the 'norm' of the cities it inhabited, where skinny youths flaunted their violent secrets of sado-masochism, bondage suits and unravelling strippers' jumpers, and swaggered with cocky delight at the outrage they inevitably provoked.

Whereas previous subcultures had usually cast women as marginal figures with clothes that were imitations of the male peers, punk allowed young women to flaunt a strong, if intimidating dress code. Punk flouted accepted notions of femininity, preferring to shock with ripped fishnet stockings, plastic mini-skirts and garish, unnatural make-up. As one commentator pointed out: 'By hi-jacking the imagery of sexual perversion, and inverting the meaning of bondage clothing, Westwood made young women's fashion threatening and overtly hostile for the first time.'²³ It was a look that combined the obvious sexuality of the dress of prostitutes with a violent retraction of the sexual invitation that the latter's clothes represent. While such imagery was disturbing, it did at least free women from the need to aspire to a particular fashionable ideal of beauty or to attempt to fit their bodies into the current silhouette.

Westwood was clear as to the reason for the unease such clothing caused: 'We were interested in what we thought was rebellious, in wanting to annoy English people - and the way to do that was through sex.'²⁴

as
ion
ed
/ho
/ of
ing
om
a
om
are.
iety
[his
sive
/ful,
ems
f an
has
es.

The Society of Spectacle of 1967. Debord discussed the dominating power of the mass media: 'The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.'²² McLaren employed the sloganeering and plagiarising techniques of the Situationists to attack the boredom and frustration of consumerism through his manipulation of punk's media coverage. McLaren, with his organisation Glitterbest, managed various rock bands, most notoriously the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls, as well as contributing to Vivienne Westwood's creations. The theatrical interior of Westwood and McLaren's King's Road shop, the name of which changed to reflect their current design ethos, for



ed at
pulse
gres-
educ-
tacle.
West-
r, was
tionist
were
book,

Figure 12: Punk girls at West Runton Pavilion, Cromer, Norfolk, c.1979, photograph by Syd Shelton. Copyright Syd Shelton.

example, *Sex* in 1974 and *Seditionaries* in 1976, provided a focal point and inspiration for young punks. It brought art school strategies of subversion into the previously calm world of retail, turning consumption into an anarchic act, loaded with menace and threat. Punk created another world, parallel to the 'norm' of the cities it inhabited, where skinny youths flaunted the violent secrets of sado-masochism in bondage suits and unravelling string jumpers, and swaggered with cocky delight at the outrage they inevitably provoked.

Whereas previous subcultures had usually cast women as marginal figures, with clothes that were imitations of their male peers, punk allowed young women a strong, if intimidating dress code. It flouted accepted notions of femininity, preferring to shock with ripped fishnet stockings, plastic mini-skirts and garishly unnatural make-up. As one commentator pointed out: 'By hi-jacking the imagery of sexual perversion, and inverting the meaning of bondage clothing, Westwood made young women's fashion threatening and overtly hostile for the first time.'²³ It was a look that combined the obvious sexuality of the dress of prostitutes with a violent retraction of the sexual invitation that the latter's clothes represent. While such imagery was disturbing, it did at least free women from the need to aspire to a particular fashionable ideal of beauty, or to attempt to fit their bodies into the current silhouette.

Westwood was clear as to the reasons for the unease such clothing caused: 'We were interested in what we thought was rebellious, in wanting to annoy English people – and the way to do that was through sex.'²⁴

Despite the sexual liberation of the 1960s, much of England remained resolutely conservative in its attitude towards sex. Westwood's approach to design as a means to assert a personal political stance used this anxiety, exposing hidden desires, with pornographic imagery and slogans.

While punk may not have brought down the establishment it reviled, slipping instead into a pastiche of itself in the early 1980s, with mohican-haired punks as much a cliché of London's image as the red double-decker bus, it had a profound effect upon fashion. The do-it-yourself mentality launched a plethora of young designers as manufacturer-retailers of their own work sold from small outlets and market stalls, as well as influencing designers like John Galiano and Rei Kawakubo, who sought to push the boundaries of high fashion. It also fractured previous notions of the need for a pre-ordained idea of beauty and perfection. Punk entered fashion's vocabulary as a signifier of amoral revolt, and its legacy has been felt in the 1990s by generation X, Douglas Coupland's term (and also the name of Billy Idol's punk band), for the generation after the Baby-boomers – unmotivated and cynical twenty-somethings – who were depicted as 'slackers'. Generation X sought to distance themselves from the conspicuous consumption and flash styles of the previous decade, with punk a strong influence on their low-key style. Once again neo-punk brought about a turning in on the self, signalled by the upsurge in piercing and tattooing, on both the street and the catwalk, as well as inspiring designers and image-makers to seek new definitions of beauty which would reflect the frustrations of youth, rather than the ideals and morals of their parents.

MAN-EATER

Da Cruz, Elyssa (2004), "Man-Eater" en Andizew Bolton (comp.), Wild: Fashion Untamed, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, pp. 144-175.

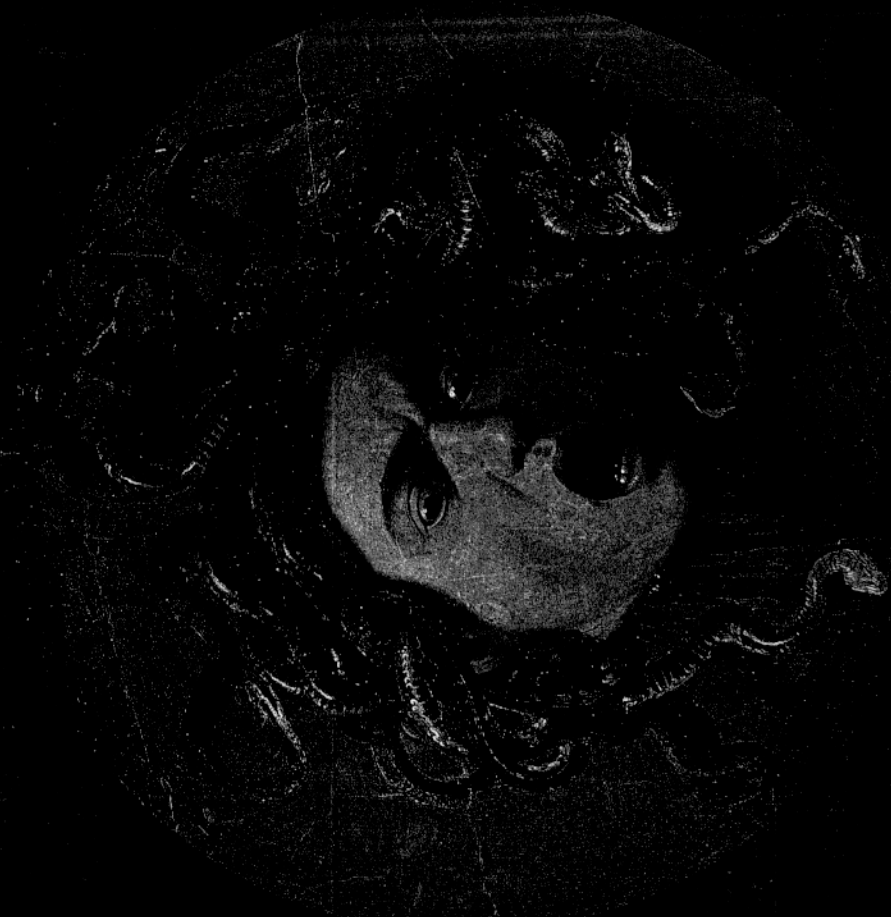
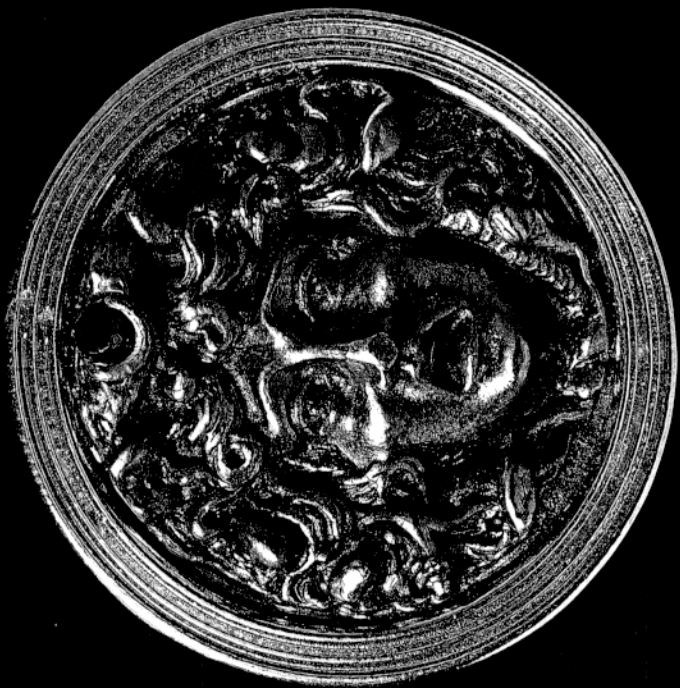
265

In the nineteenth century, art, fashion and literature connected femininity to the more insidious predators of the animal kingdom. As is typical of periods that witness significant growth in women's sociopolitical advancement, fashion alluded to notions of the seductress or dominant matriarch as represented in ancient history. Such metaphors for the empowered woman served to inspire the cultural identification of an archetypal femme fatale. Victorian art and literature referenced the Biblical portrayal of the serpentine woman as fatal temptress and reinvented the fearsome she-creatures of Medusa and Siren of Greco-Roman mythology. From Pre-Raphaelites to fin-de-siècle *Décadents*, nineteenth-century aesthetes promoted narratives that championed a conceptual fusion of woman and beast.

Concurrently, the frequency of and attention to female sexual crimes such as abortion, infanticide, and poisoning increased in both Europe and America, fostering a more potent societal fear of women, specifically of their so-called "passionate" instincts. In *Female Criminality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (1996) Anne-Louise Shapiro described the late nineteenth-century female sexual criminal as "perverse," "hidden," "cunning or invisible," inherently "duplicious" in moving between ostensible helplessness and aggressive predation. The animal's armaments that she employed to physically lure her prey became the emblems of this persisting *criminelle*. The webbed spider dance hall dresses of the late 1910s and early 1920s reincarnated *les grandes empoisonneuses*, Victorian-era killers who used small doses of arsenic as weapons in revenging the indifference of uncaring and faithless husbands. The frightening persona of the "black widow," while identifying a specific form of murderess, in fact cast a far larger shadow on any woman whose reputation was unprotected by the conventional precincts of marriage and motherhood. The barren wife and the spinster by their mere existence could in certain instances be seen as a repudiation of Victorian marital and familial expectations. Her vilification was expressed in the popular nineteenth-century fables of the Brothers Grimm, whose portrayal of the female antagonist was often a fusion of spidery spinster and evil witch.

By mid-twentieth century, animal-skin camouflage and leather had become popular in high fashion and clothed the empowered, unattainable man-eater. The tight-laced corseted silhouette of the nineteenth century, which insinuated physical domination and sexual control, resurfaced in Christian Dior's wasp-waisted "New Look" collection of 1947. Taut or pinched leather fashions that employed Dior's corseted shape emerged from fetishist subculture, which had developed in a marginal sexual underground through black leather boot and corset photography in the 1930s and confronted more general audiences through representations of the filmic noir fatale in the 1940s. They were eventually further popularized to a rather circumscribed cult following by John Willie's Bizarre publications in the early 1950s.

The adoption of leather and its synthetic surrogate fabrics in womenswear has coincided with the transformation of feminine identity over the last half-century. Impeccably tailored into second skins, apparel in black leather has negated prior notions of women as the weaker sex by projecting an image of physical dominance and sexual predation. Cloaked in lavish sheaths and pelts that display a material success on par with her male counterpart, thereby threatening traditional economic gender designations, the leather-clad woman has become a paradigm of sexual and social intimidation. Transforming the once all-purpose "little black dress" with the accompaniments of the black leather fetishist and branding garments with avian, reptilian, and entomological iconography, contemporary fashion is championing the aesthetics of the man-eater.



The terror-inducing image of Medusa aptly signifies the danger and allure of the mythical femme fatale. Classical myth tells us that Medusa was originally a beautiful maiden who embodied the ideal of Greco-Roman beauty, especially in her long tresses. This mistress of Poseidon was the god's virtuous subservient, nurturing his children, Pegasus and Chrysaor. She made the fateful mistake of vying in beauty with Athena, prompting the goddess of war and wisdom to transform her flowing ringlets into hissing snakes, creating a cruel monster whose stare turned all who looked on her into stone. It is Medusa's conflicted self that is her tragedy. Her dual nature is fortified by the legend of the divine powers of her blood, which, extracted from one vein, could heal even those near death, while just a drop from another could cause death.

Using the reflective surface of Athena's mirrored shield to avoid Medusa's direct gaze, the heroic Perseus succeeded in decapitating the Gorgon. He presented the gruesome head to Athena, who placed it on her shield. Caravaggio's *Shield with the Head of Medusa* is a powerful example of the many works of art that have referenced Athena's armament (see page 146). In this arresting image by the master of early seventeenth-century realism, Medusa's wide eyes and frozen scream convey her agony, inciting fear and even horror in all who view it. Tobin Siebers, in *The Mirror of Medusa* (1983), explored the notion that the Medusa is Athena's subconscious adverse and that the goddess must deflect her own hatred and perversity to protect her virginal altruism. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Athena "wears on her breast / the very snakes that she herself had set / as punishment upon Medusa's head."

The image of Medusa, reminiscent of the famed Roman *Medusa Rondanini*, inspired the creations of Gianni Versace in the early 1990s, and it continues to emblazon the company's logo. In "Medusa's Head" (1922), published in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (1963), Sigmund Freud cited Medusa's serpents as representative of the dominant phallus, conveying an overpowering sexuality that preys on man's fear of castration and challenges his affirmations of masculinity. Versace's use of the fetishistic black leather skins and straps of the streetwalker and the dominatrix infused sexually perilous tones into the refined couture of his 1992–1993 "Bondage" collection. He incorporated the Medusa button represented on page 147 as a cohesive element in every design, as if to protect the wearer with the powerful imagery of Athena's shield. The gowns' angular corseted bodices convey an almost frightening vampishness, enhanced by supermodels Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell, the foils for Versace's vision of empowerment, who were, in this period of their most consummate beauty, both physically intimidating and irresistibly seductive. Evocative of both the exquisite maiden and the fearsome marauder, the painterly shield of Caravaggio and the ornamental emblem of Versace embody the fragility and deadliness of Medusa, the Greco-Roman femme fatale.

Page 146 Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi), Italian (1571–1610). *Shield with the Head of Medusa*, oil on wood covered with canvas, ca. 1597–1600. Photograph: Scala/Art Resource, NY

Page 147 Gianni Versace, Italian (1946–97). Button from dress, autumn/winter 1992–1993. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Costume Institute, Gift of Barbara R. Kaplan, 2004 (2004.65.1)

With its visually dynamic composition and insidious and mythical connotations, the serpent has been consistently employed in the jewelry and clothing of the haute couture to affect a striking beauty that is ageless in its tone and alarmingly contemporary in its ferocity. Inextricably linked with the fabled serpent, Lilith is mythologized as Adam's first wife, who was exiled from the Garden of Eden for refusing to remain his inferior. According to Talmudic teachings, she exacted vengeance on her successor, Eve, as a killer of women and children. In his 1887 interpretation, shown on page 150, John Collier gave his Lilith a Pre-Raphaelite tumble of lush free-falling auburn locks that contrasted with the fashionably-controlled hairstyles of the period. Her waist is unnaturally pinched-in, despite the absence of a corset. Collier rendered the supple, milky surface of Lilith's skin against the slimy, mottled form of a giant serpent. The iconography of Lilith, with its opportunity to juxtapose human and reptilian flesh, was especially popular in the artistic and literary traditions of the late nineteenth century. In *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (2001), Alison Smith detailed Lilith's significance to Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti and also to women's suffrage: "The fascination of Lilith for Rossetti resided in her legendary malignancy. . . . Lilith was the archetypal femme fatale, as well as the first independent-minded woman, qualities which gave her contemporary relevance as the original advocate of women's rights." The snake winds dangerously around Lilith's form, yet Lilith does not appear threatened or repulsed but rather appears caught in a psychosexual entanglement with the serpent, who nestles at her neck as she leans her cheek against it with unseemly intimacy. In many theological and artistic works Lilith adopts the form of the snake that tempts Eve to taste the Garden's apple. In her incarnation as serpent, Lilith is said to inspire in her victim the shame of nudity, which prompted Eve to clothe herself and to value the substance and function of adornment. In *After Paradise, or Legends of Exile* (1887), Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, a nineteenth-century poet and diplomat who wrote under the pseudonym Owen Meredith, explained: "Eve eyed with tenderness the serpent, to whose craft she owed her dress."

Horst P. Horst's photograph shown on page 151, which features the model Yasmín LeBon wearing a Chanel design, is a contemporary representation of woman's mastery over the serpent. The image merges the iconographic features of Lilith and the Minoan Snake Goddess of ancient Crete (see page 152). LeBon's silhouette is exaggerated in shadow, emphasizing her voluptuous form to recall the carnal knowledge and seductive capability of the mortal Eve and the ophidian constitution of Lilith. The serpentine dress suggests Lilith's domination over the phallic snake, while the ensemble's lavish pearl embroidery obeys Lilith's command for exquisite adornment. Remarkably, the aristocratic posturing of Horst's statuesque model echoes that of the regal Minoan goddess, thereby referencing her powers of destruction and regeneration. Karl Lagerfeld's design evolved from Coco Chanel's famed "little black dress" of 1926, which is credited with modernizing women's fashion and allowing early twentieth-century Parisians a contemporary persona, and it stands as a symbol of woman's economic and sexual equality. Both Collier and Horst communicate the persona of Lilith as the archetypal femme fatale, an amalgam of vampiric demon, seductress, and feminine prototype.

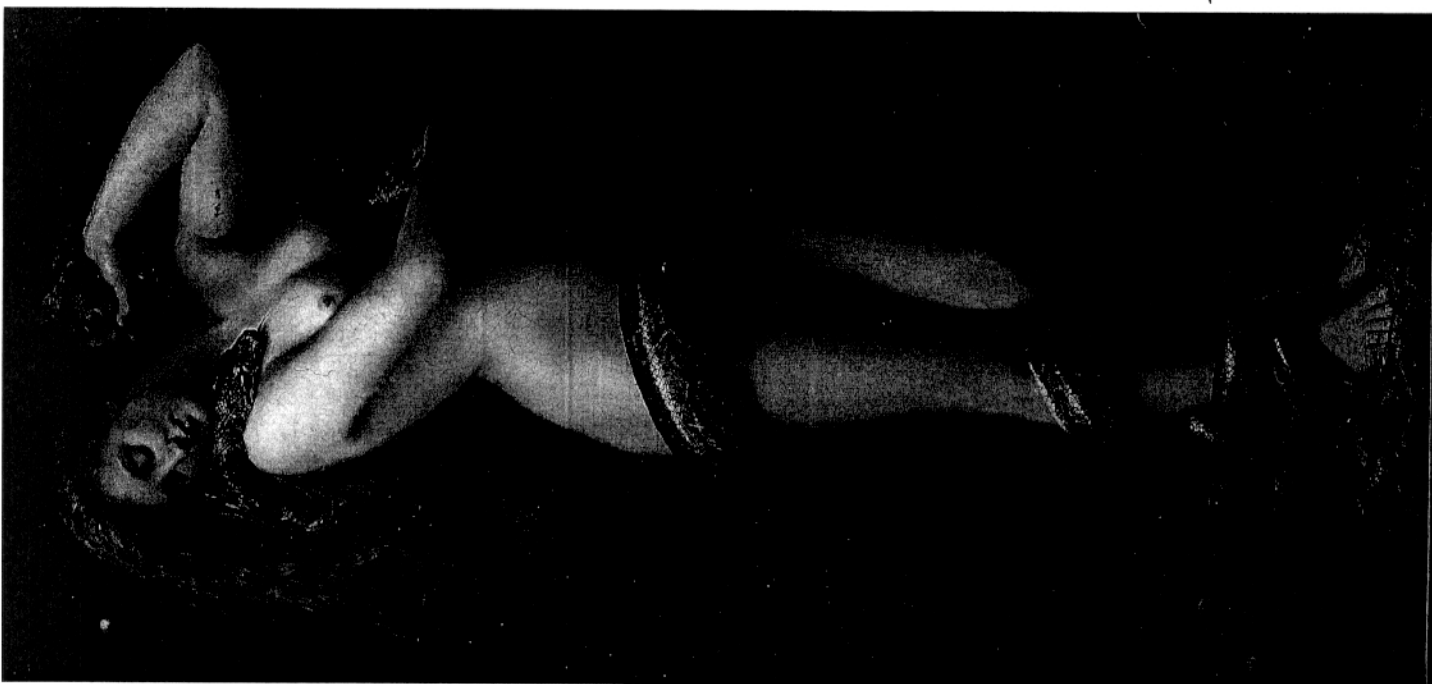
Page 150 John Collier, British (1850–1934). *Lilith*, oil on canvas, 1887. Courtesy of the Family of John Collier and Sefton M.B.C. Leisure Services Department, Arts and Cultural Services, Atkinson Art Gallery

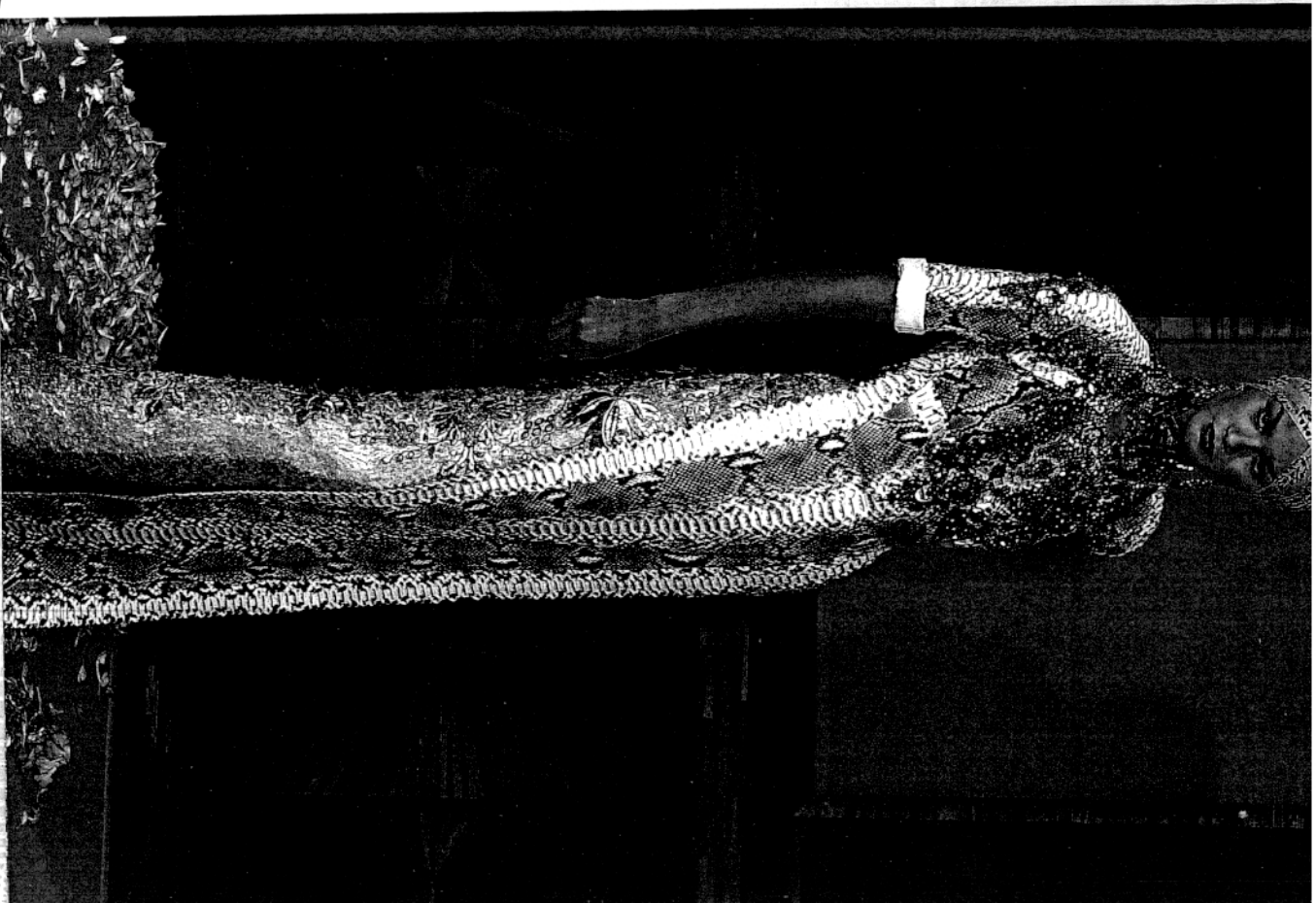
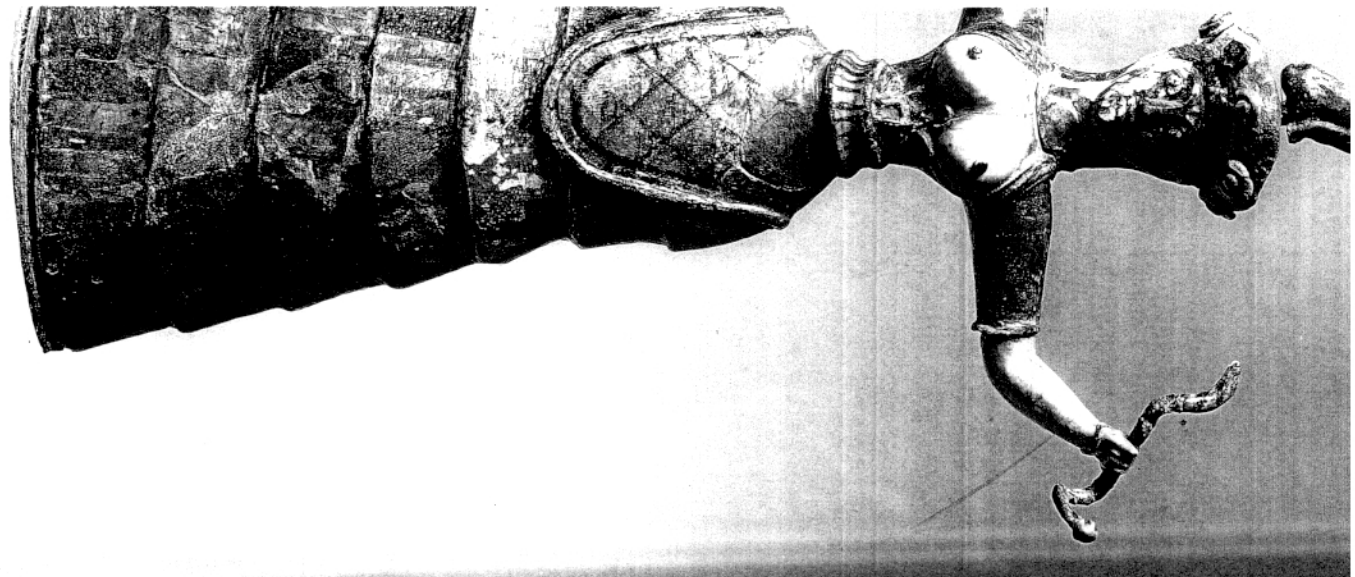
Page 151 House of Chanel, French (founded 1913) by Karl Lagerfeld, German (born 1938). Ensemble, 1996. Courtesy of Vogue. Copyright © Condé Nast Publications Ltd. Photograph: Horst P. Horst

268



269





270

As exemplified on page 152, the Late Minoan idols of ancient Crete express a sexual and regenerative female strength that was not yet effected by the negative associations conveyed in Christian doctrine. British archaeologist Arthur Evans was among the first to excavate the palaces of Knossos, and he recovered a religious symbology that centered on the "Snake Goddess," a term he coined in 1903. Evans posited that a strong matrilineal hierarchy was championed at Knossos and that the Snake Goddess was the foremost figure of worship in that spiritual system. This protectress of the sky and waters of Crete asserted a divine femininity and evidenced a strong cult association with and reverence for the snake. Coiled around her arms, and entwined in her avian crown, the serpent encompassed her and supplied her with the ability to regenerate the vegetal and human populations of Knossos. While the emphasis on the Snake Goddess's breast and hips fortified the symbolism of her fertility, the ominous bird perched atop her head and her constricted waist, suggestive of barrenness, communicate her contrary death-dealing capabilities. In Cretan religious ceremony, she was often referenced as the Lady of the Dead.

Jean Paul Gaultier's millennial ensemble, shown on page 153, echoes both the diagonal scale-like hackings of the Snake Goddess's apron and the avian pillar of her headpiece. Employing the darker shades of the python around the garment's bust, Gaultier emphasized the matronly woman's breast as a universal symbol of fertility and sexual power. The ensemble amalgamates the decorative and the deadly, as the taut python sheath appears to consume the runway model. Conversely, with her serpentine curves and python-patterned form, the model seems ready to shed her sartorial skin to reveal a regenerated body beneath. The ensemble is accessorized with glittering jewelry and lavish gilt brocaded underpinnings, which contrast sharply with the utilitarian forms employed by Cretan sculptors to communicate authority and divinity. Gaultier hyperbolized his image of the alpha woman. He coalesced contemporary manifestations of sexual and social empowerment with telling details of wealth, status, and physical perfection, evoking the awesome matriarchal authority of the ancient Minoans and the prototypical strength of Lilith. Gaultier's hypnotic python-woman revisits the imagery of a fecund female power for the new millennium.

Page 152: Cretan, Knossos (Late Minoan Period). Snake Goddess figurine, polychrome terracotta, 1700–1400 B.C.

Courtesy of the Archaeological Museum, Heraklion, Crete. Photograph: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY

Page 153: Jean Paul Gaultier, French (born 1952). Ensemble, spring/summer 2000. Photograph: copyright ©

MCV Maria Valentino

While the ancient civilizations of Crete associated the snake with fertility and rebirth, Egyptian magico-religious texts emphasized its deadly and destructive capabilities. In *The Cult of the Serpent* (1983), Balaji Mundkur explained: "Egyptians tended to imagine all threats to light or the sun as serpent demons, and the archenemy of the sky/heaven . . . was seen as a mighty serpent which the sun god had to conquer in a fierce struggle that recurred every morning." The "evil one," manifested in alternate forms as the divine serpent Nehebka or the Nile crocodile, "Devourer of the Dead," was viewed as the gatekeeper to the underworld. The most commonly depicted Egyptian crocodilian deity was Sobek, or Sebek, a male god characterized by volatile passion and a treacherous nature (see page 156). The ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote of Sobek's deceased children, who were buried with various high-ranking mortals and cradled in individual tombs in temples at Faiyum and Kom Ombo. Those sanctuaries venerated Sobek, portraying him as half-human, his crocodile head ornamented with a domical crown to symbolize his relative discordance with the sun. The tombs at Kom Ombo have revealed crocodilian carcasses decorated with gold jewelry and wares, accoutrements of wealth intended to appease the deadly instinct of the villainous crocodile.

John Galliano has frequently drawn from the intricate aesthetics of Egyptian costume. In his spring/summer 2004 collection for Christian Dior, he presented gowns rendered in translucent organdies and accessorized with serpentine pharaonic crowns. The most extravagant pieces in the collection evoke the luxury and lavish artistry of Egyptian dress with a fevered imagination, in which the Queen of the Nile is the acme of beauty and power. In his autumn/winter 2002–2003 Dior collection, Galliano was inspired by the armored skin of the ferocious and predatory Egyptian crocodile. His design shown on page 157 incorporates some characteristics of the ancient Egyptian's linen *kalasaris*, worn in its most ornamental form by queens and goddesses. During the Egyptian Late Period the more elaborate *kalasaris*, gathered through pleating and pinning, featured a prominent knot at the breast. Galliano's black gown is constructed from cut squares of reptilian-patterned leather applied to a black silk tulle base fabric, which has been gathered along the center seam to construct a *kalasaris* knot. Painted with thick black eye makeup, Galliano's model affects the threatening glower of an ominous predator, a nocturnal reaper. The silver star and moon charms affixed to Galliano's black feather headpiece allude to the fanlike crown of Sobek and also recall the ancient Egyptians' fear of the monstrous serpent demon Apopis, who emerged to hunt as night fell. With these symbolic references to Egyptian crocodilian lore, Galliano infused the voracious predatory sexuality of the contemporary femme fatale with the menacing markings of the male crocodile god Sobek. The ominous aspects of the gown are mediated only by its lavishness, which asserts this deadly fatale's supremacy over the runway, her majestic domain.

Page 156: Egyptian (Ptolemaic Period). Relief of Crocodile-God Sobek wearing crown of Amun, Temple of

Kom Ombo, 2nd century B.C. Photograph: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

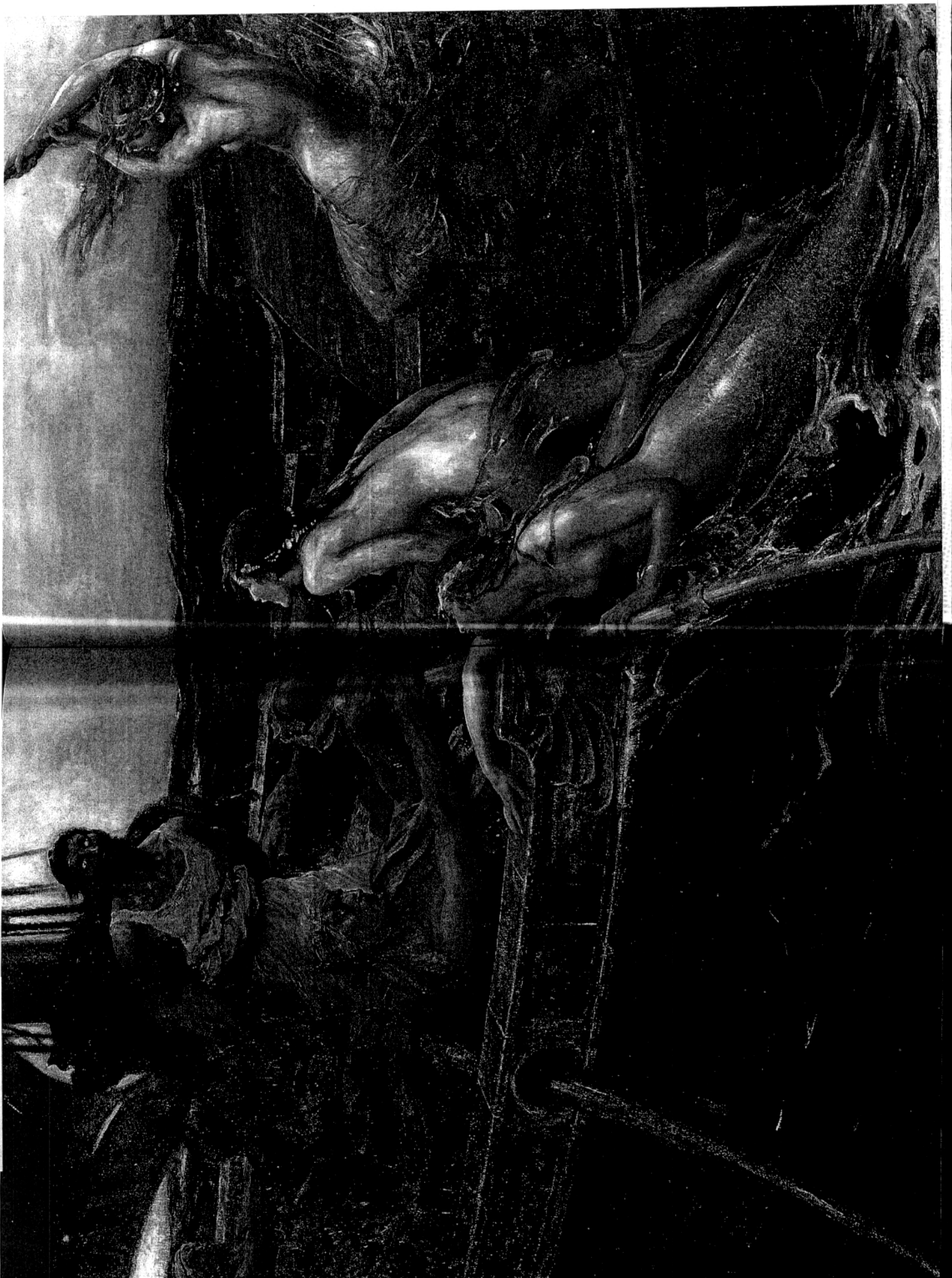
Page 157: Christian Dior Haute Couture, French (founded 1947) by John Galliano, British (born Gibraltar, 1960)

Ensemble, autumn/winter 2002–2003. Photograph: copyright © Chris Moore



9/28





273

193

The shape-shifting serpent known as *lamiae* appears in Egyptian texts and was adopted in Greek myth as the insidious siren. Popularized by the Odysseian tale of Ulysses's encounter with the Sirens, this malignant female spirit lounges on sea walls, rocks, and ledges, enticing ships to their wreckage. Appearing demure, even angelic, the siren becomes ravenous in attack, vengefully tearing the flesh of her suitor after seducing him with her breathtaking song. While the mythologies of Medusa, Lilith, and the Minoan Snake Goddess generally perpetuated the duality of the femme fatale, as all possessed the ability to simultaneously kill and regenerate man, the siren emerged in Greek fable as a pure fatale, with a facility for psychosexual manipulation of man's own weakness to satisfy her depraved and destructive yearnings. This totemic sea-creature image of the sexually charged female assailant has surfaced in twentieth-century designs such as the early sequin-scaled vamp gowns of Paul Poiret and the slinky mid-century "Mermaid" sheaths of Norman Norell.

Herbert Draper, a devoted follower of Lord Frederic Leighton's school of classicist painting, often celebrated the traditional dynamic of the male hero and the helpless ingénue in his works. In *Ulysses and the Sirens*, reproduced on pages 158-59, his subject is more complex. In addition to expertly conveying the narrative details of the famed myth, Draper has cleverly insinuated the ambivalence of contemporary society to the persisting notion of the Victorian femme fatale. In *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (2001) Alison Smith explained: "By representing two of the sirens as young women (devoid of the customary wings, claws, or tail), Draper would appear to suggest that the destructive allure of these sea-monsters is in fact a property of 'ordinary' women." The manifestation of the siren was a misogynist trope for the "uncontrollable" sexuality of the late nineteenth-century woman as perverse nymphomaniac, dominated by her sublimated hatred of men and her unbridled lust.

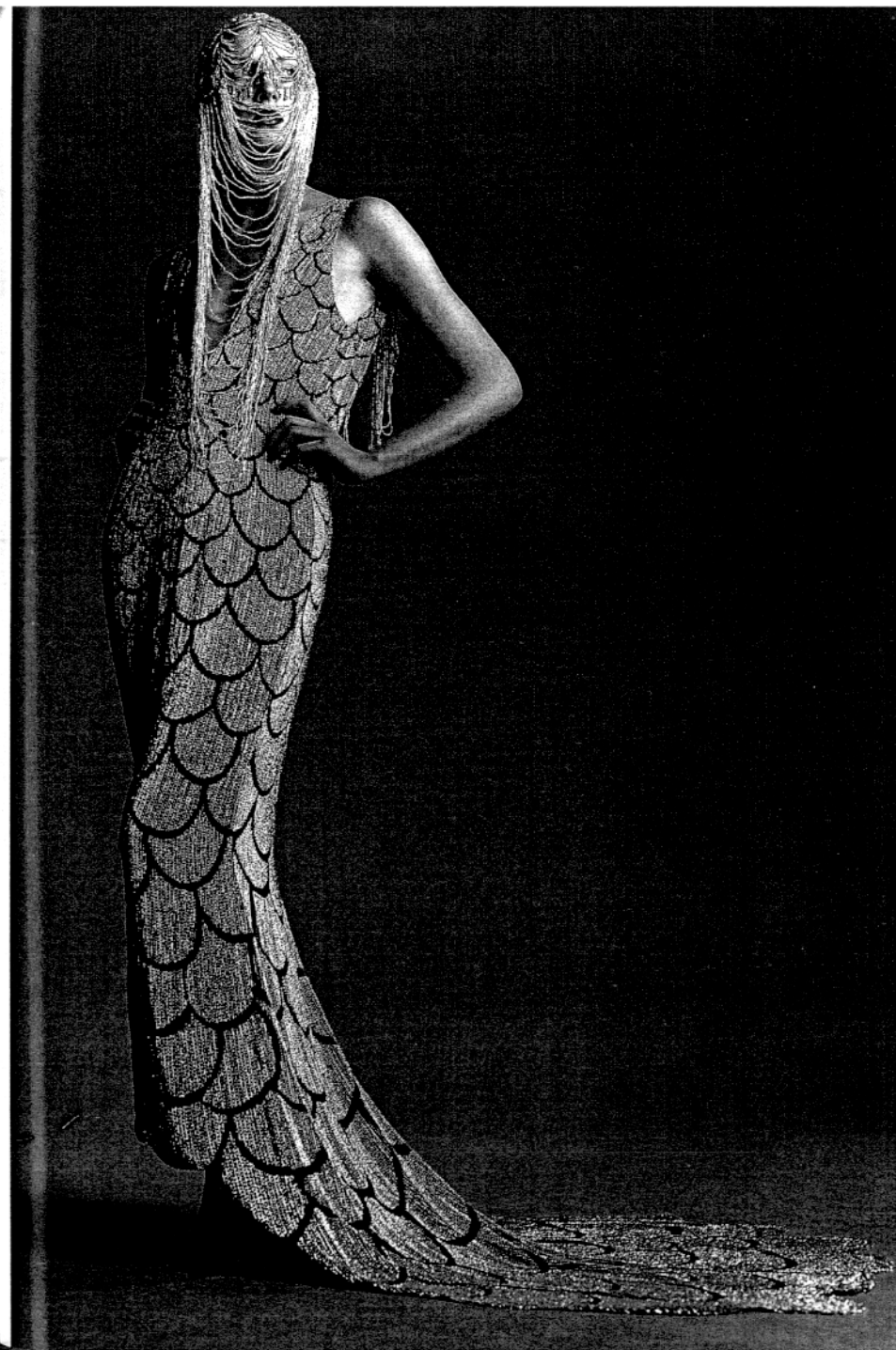
Through his sometimes-morbid manifestations of the huntress and the femme fatale, Alexander McQueen has continually advanced consciousness of the psychosexual power of women. In his 1998 collection for Givenchy Haute Couture, exemplified on page 161, the designer once again addressed the sexual identity of the contemporary woman, this time with a series of "Sirène" sheaths. In "Desire and Dread: Alexander McQueen and the Contemporary Femme Fatale," published in *Body Dressing* (2001), Caroline Evans examined the appeal of the Siren for the fashion créateur: "McQueen began to evidence a fascination with the dynamics of power, in particular with a dialectical relationship between predator and prey, between victim and aggressor." The "Sirène" dress masterfully arrests the eye with the reflective allure of its exquisite scale-like pavé of silver embroidery, its liquid, second-skin silhouette, and its torso-exposing décolleté neckline. McQueen also created the effect of a fish's tail in the form of an elaborate train. Photographer Steven Meisel exposed just a hint of the foot, capturing a moment of transformation from beautiful woman to seductive sea creature. Perhaps the most poetic detail of the ensemble is McQueen's headpiece, with its aureate-linked chains draped over the eyes like strands of wet seaweed. He constructed a webbed cage, a shimmering silver veil behind which lurks the true face of the sexual predator.

Pages 158-59: Herbert Draper, British (1864-1920). *Ulysses and the Sirens*, oil on canvas, 1909.

Courtesy of Ferens Art Gallery, Hull City Museums and Art Galleries, UK, and the Bridgeman Art Library

Page 161: Givenchy Haute Couture, French (founded 1952) by Alexander McQueen, British (born 1969).

Dress, spring/summer 1998. Photograph: Steven Meisel/Art + Commerce Anthology

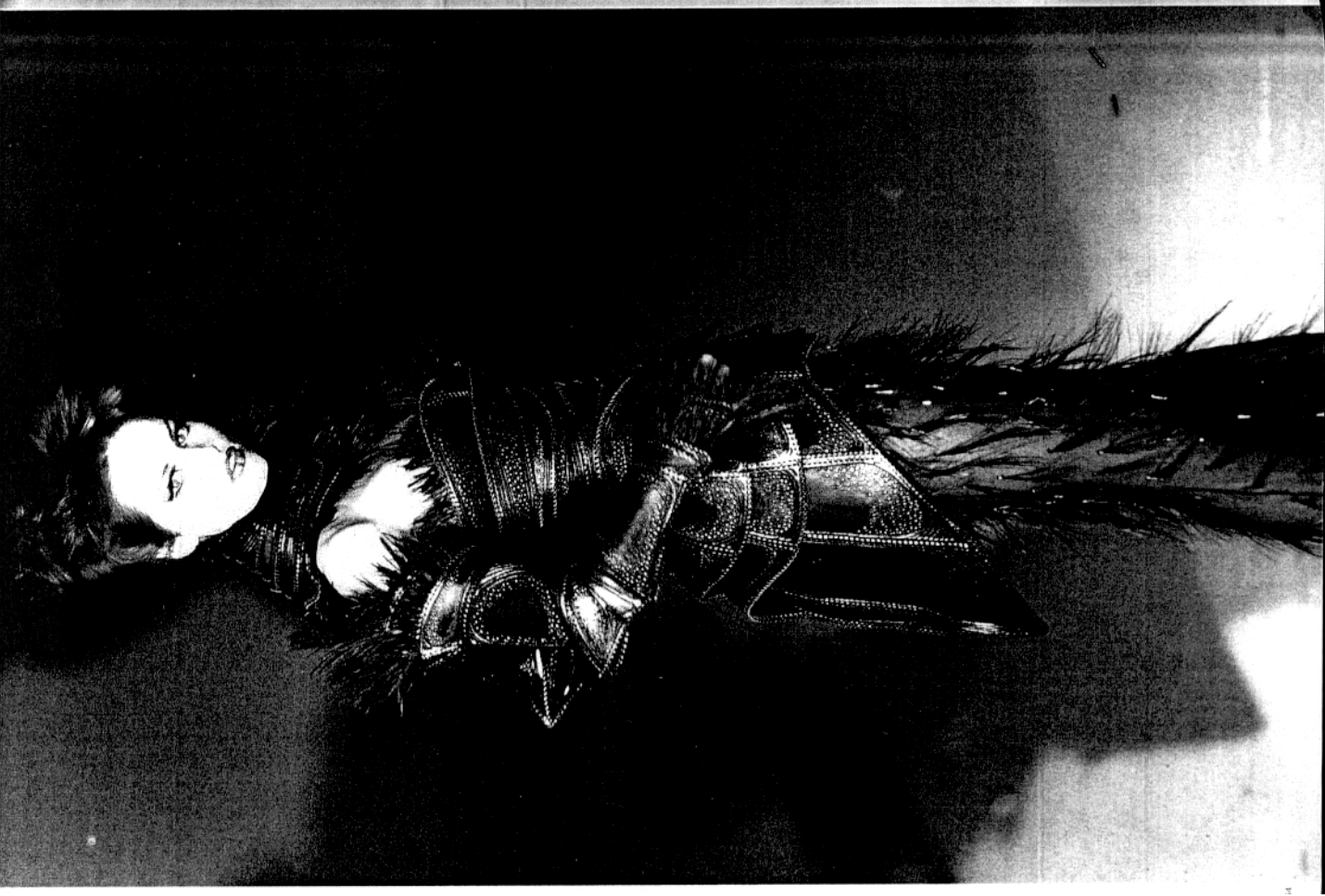
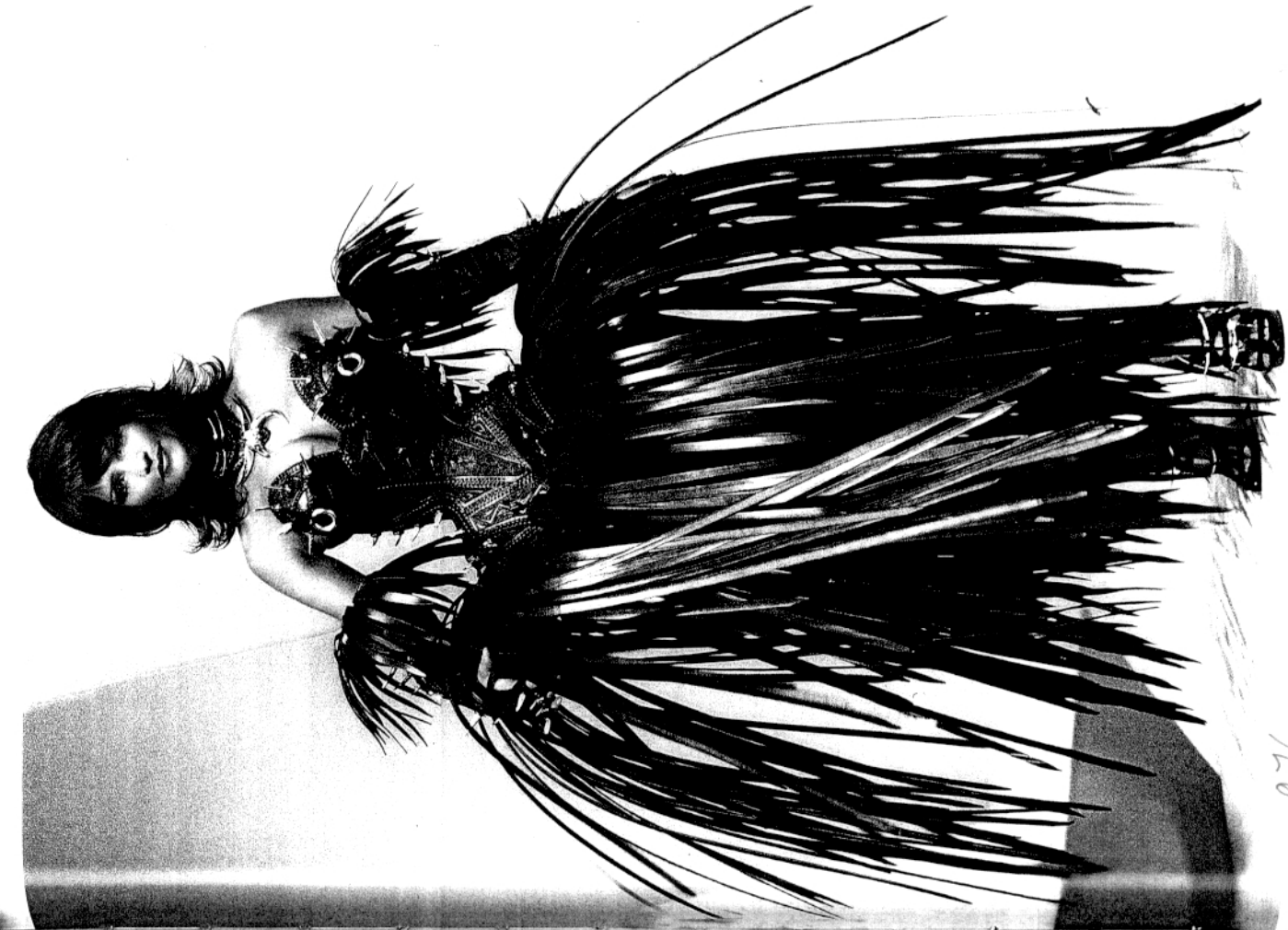


Inspired by the transient gypsy, John Galliano created willowy sheaths and lavish rags accompanied by intricate amulets for his spring/summer 1997 collection, "Russian Gypsy named O'Flanneghan" (see page 163). Perhaps the most telling design of the show, his webbed tulle "Spider" dress aptly conveys the gypsy's ability to enchant those around her capturing their hearts while snagging their wallets. The spider sheath first appeared in fashion in the early twentieth century, when the newly liberated flapper became associated with the carnal yearnings of the femme fatale. Designers produced layered webbed dresses that mimicked the deadly trap of one of nature's most feared female predators, the black widow. The poisonous black widow spider attacks those snared in her silken web. When she mates, she injects a powerful toxin into her partner and then devours him. In an article in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* titled "Spider Phobias and Spider Fantasies" (1971), it is noted that "the spider is a powerful latent symbol embedded in the subconscious mind. . . . It reflects a form of defense produced by some personal, domestic problem more acute than any actual threat from, or fear of, spiders." When the early twentieth-century woman entered the workplace and eventually attained voting privileges, the spider and her web emerged as symbols that repudiated the conventional notions of female sexual passivity. The spider-woman was thought to overpower the male with her dangerous beauty, elaborate stratagems, and deadly traps. In the popular imagination, the black widow's accessory par excellence was her poison ring, a grandiose stone that concealed small doses of arsenic to be dropped into a suitor's drink. This stealthy assault was a nostalgic nod to the perceived sociopathology of the Victorian *empoisonneuse*. The poisonous femme fatale was also aided by the illusory fragility of her web. A 1919 issue of *Vogue* recalled an exquisite "diamond noir, delicate as fairy cobwebs." Barely visible in its open construction but structurally fortified, the web presents a mirage of delicate silver fibers that capture prey with their sticky surface. With translucent threads that both attract and confound the onlooker with their kaleidoscope construction, the web trap has precipitated periods of tarantism (fear of spiders, specifically tarantulas) throughout history. Women in spider-web gowns infested the dancehalls of 1920s Paris, perplexing and thereby dominating their male admirers. Just as the siren serenaded her hapless victims with her seductive song, these arachnophilic flappers sought to weave webs of inescapable enticement. Galliano's "Spider" dress, photographed on a model amid the ominous and looming cacti and endless desert expanse of the black widow's habitat, suggests an *empoisonneuse* who is at home in the solitary life she has created. Her black webbed sheath overlays a silk shift in lavender, the color of mourning. It recalls the spidery costumes of the 1920s to evoke the noxious lure of the black widow. The scene also suggests the film-noir conceit of the shallow desert grave, the bleak terminus of a fatal attraction.

Page 163: John Galliano, British (born Gibraltar, 1960). Dress, spring/summer 1997. Photograph: copyright © Ellen von Unwerth/Art + Commerce Anthology



275



While the tough armor of black leather has dominated fetish aesthetics since the late nineteenth century, the prudish eye of high fashion only timidly introduced leather as accessories and trimming in the mid-twentieth century. In 1960 Yves Saint Laurent precipitated a couture trend for exotic leather ensembles when he sent his "Chicago" ensemble of mink-trimmed varnished crocodile down the runway at Christian Dior. Saint Laurent's early conflation of leather fetish and high-end luxury introduced the conservative clients of the haute couture to the tough-chic possibilities of a savage second skin. Thierry Mugler, who was among the first couturiers to explore the erotic connotations of leather animism in women's dress, combined the black leather sheath of the dominatrix with that of the black shrouded femme fatale. Beginning in the 1980s Mugler imprinted leather with the markings of insects, serpents, and other beasts, creating iconic representations of vampish femininity in garments that are physically constraining yet visually empowering and intimidating. Mugler's autumn/winter 1997–1998 collection included insectoid armor composed of embossed leather and feathers (see page 164). He referenced the fragmented, sculptural exoskeleton of the beetle without sacrificing the inherently fetishist associations to the uniform of the dominatrix and the female "hard body." With equally provocative intention, Mugler juxtaposed a sheer black chiffon and feather-tufted skirt to emphasize a soft, vulnerable core.

Another Mugler creation with a full skirt of layered leather strips features a corset of exquisite leatherwork reminiscent of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *cordouans*, upholstery leathers from Cordoba, Spain that were engraved with exquisite foliate motifs (see page 165). Clearly based on the Roman breastplate, the ornament of the bodice does not obscure its earlier historical precedent or utilitarian intention. Of stiffened leather, the corset is faceted to deflect an adversary's blows. However, the whip-thin leather straps sprouting from the shoulder and hip lines, metal spikes like an animal's protective quills lining the bodice, and cotton rope "fur" tufting the skirt present this *conquérante* as both gladiator and beast. The very inflation of the skirt is like the bristling of fur or feathers seen in animals aroused by passion or aggression. While this design is more blatantly fetishistic in its employment of such punk signifiers as nipple rings and a choker, both of Mugler's works champion the fetishist's obsession with texture and the conflicting personas of sexual gentility and ferocity.

Page 164: Thierry Mugler (French, born 1948). Ensemble, autumn/winter 1997–1998. Photograph: copyright ©

Chris Moore

Page 165: Thierry Mugler, French (born 1948). Ensemble, spring/summer 1989. Photograph: copyright ©

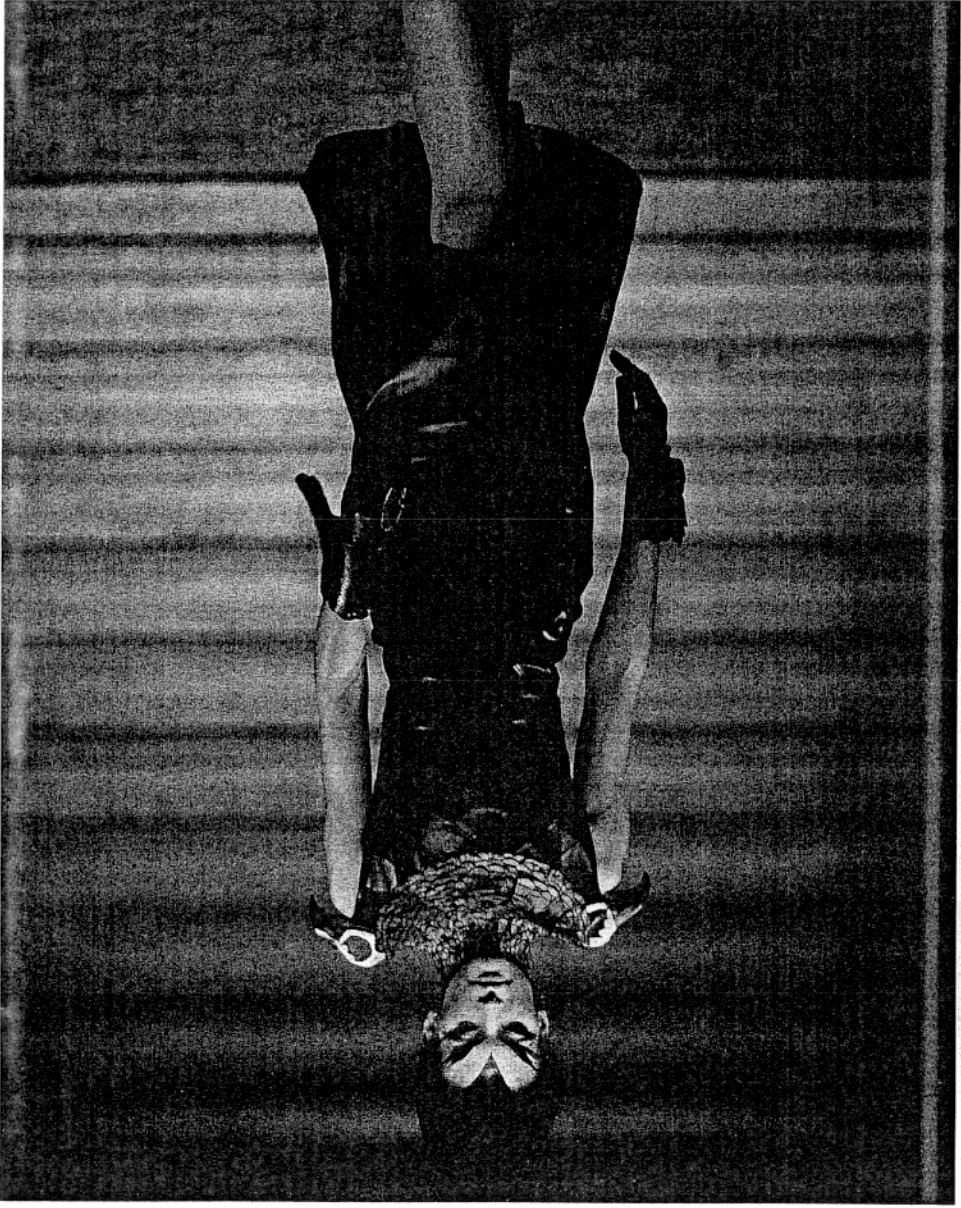
MCV Maria Valentino

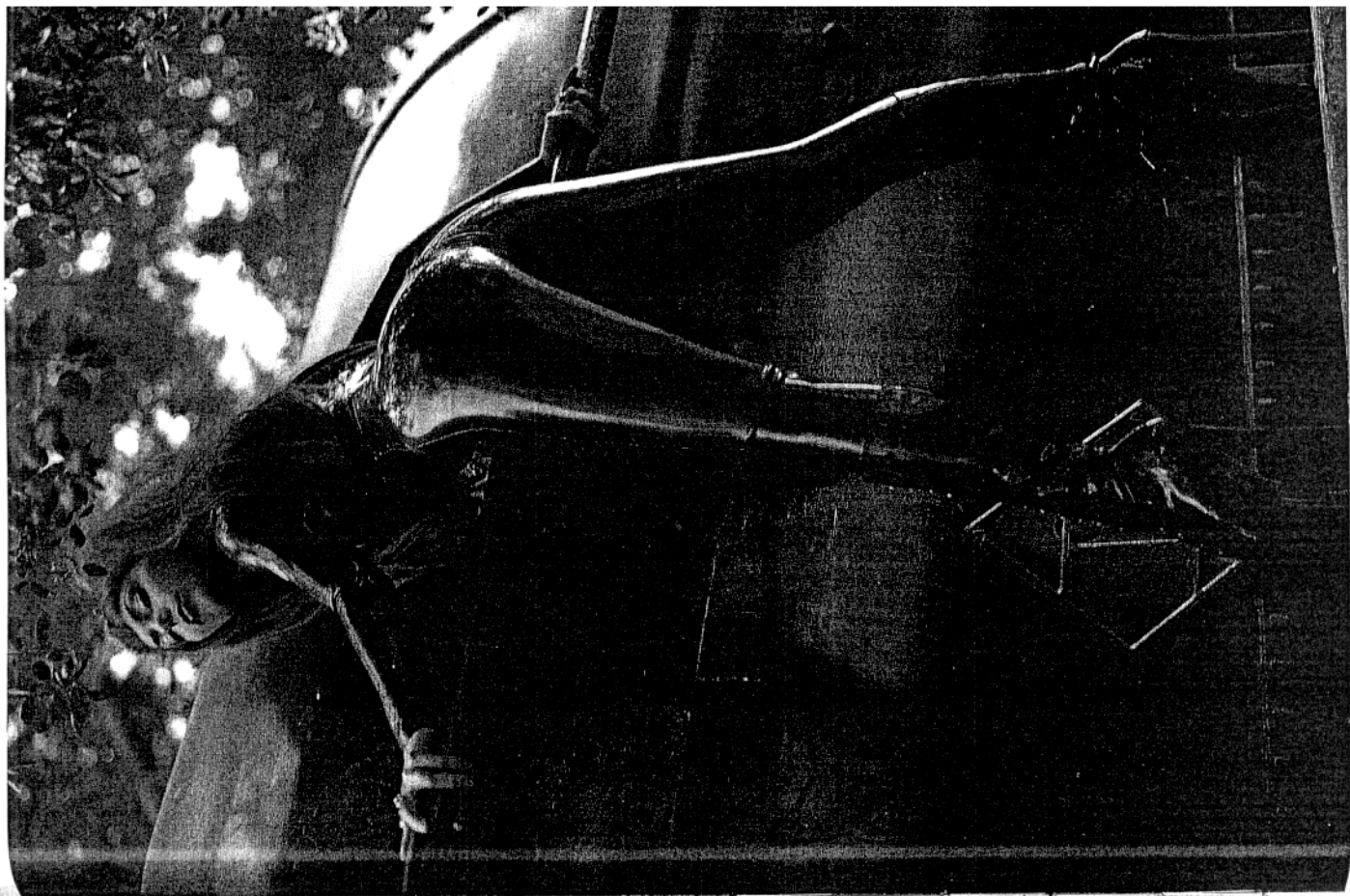
The black leather cat suit evolved from the confluence of the motorist, aviator, and fetish costumes of the early twentieth century. By the 1960s it came to embody the active, sexually liberated woman. Her apparent self-sufficiency and her independence from the patriarchal male were often expressed, whether in fashion or popular culture, through the exaggerated sexually aggressive imagery of the dominatrix. Emma Peel, played by Diana Rigg contributed a cutting-edge model of impressive physical and intellectual competence to the British television series *The Avengers* (see page 168). She was trained in martial arts as a combatant of the 'forces of evil' with her partner John Steed, played by Patrick Macnee. Significantly, Peel's better-than-any-man persona did not compromise her feminine allure, emphasized by her working wardrobe of cat suits with fetishistic overtones. Peel's cat suit takes cues from Yves Saint Laurent's full leather ensemble of 1960, reinterpreting the zippered pockets and skin-tight fit of the motorcyclist's suit, with its impenetrable prophylactic quality and ready-for-action functionalism. As such, the costume served as a symbol of Peel's psychosexual authority over her adversaries, her handsome partner, and for that matter, her male audience. The character of Peel manifested certain aspects of the emerging liberating identity of the 1960s "Single Girl" described by Hilary Radner (*Body Dressing*, 2001). Rigg's character rejected infantilizing baby doll dresses and romantic Victorian revival smocks in favor of futuristic Andre Courrèges-style miniskirts and black armored cat suits that suggested a contemporary sexuality disengaged from the past. More than a "Single Girl," Peel was a "Single Woman," equal to rather than dependent on the men who surrounded her.

Many of Ms. Rigg's costumes were created by black leather fetishist and designer John Sutcliffe, whose "AtomAge" line of leather and rubber catsuits, corsets, and gasmasks dressed the fetish subculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The black-leather enthusiast is characteristically aroused by the taut quality of the material, which in effect acts as a fetishistic surrogate for the wearer's own skin. This second skin becomes a shield for the dominatrix's soft body underneath and denotes her ability to control her own sexuality as well as dictate the sexuality of others. By the 1970s, the synthetic cat suit achieved widespread popularity in the sadomasochistic underground. The fetishist's yearning for the smells and tactile sensuality of black leather was supplanted by the use of materials like black rubber, latex, and PVC. The latter projects an abrasive and scratchy noise as the wearer moves, which to some fetishists suggests a fierce felid growl. The synthetic cat suit has achieved cult status as the contemporary costume of the taunting sado-masochistic temptress. As seen on page 169, Pigalle wears a full latex cat suit of her own creation in Steve Goedde's provocative depiction of the dominatrix fatale. Perched atop the metal step of an eighteen-wheel truck, Pigalle simultaneously beckons and challenges the viewer. Her coy backward glance is less "come hither" than "look but don't touch." While visually provocative, she is protected by her second skin and is therefore ultimately inaccessible and unattainable.

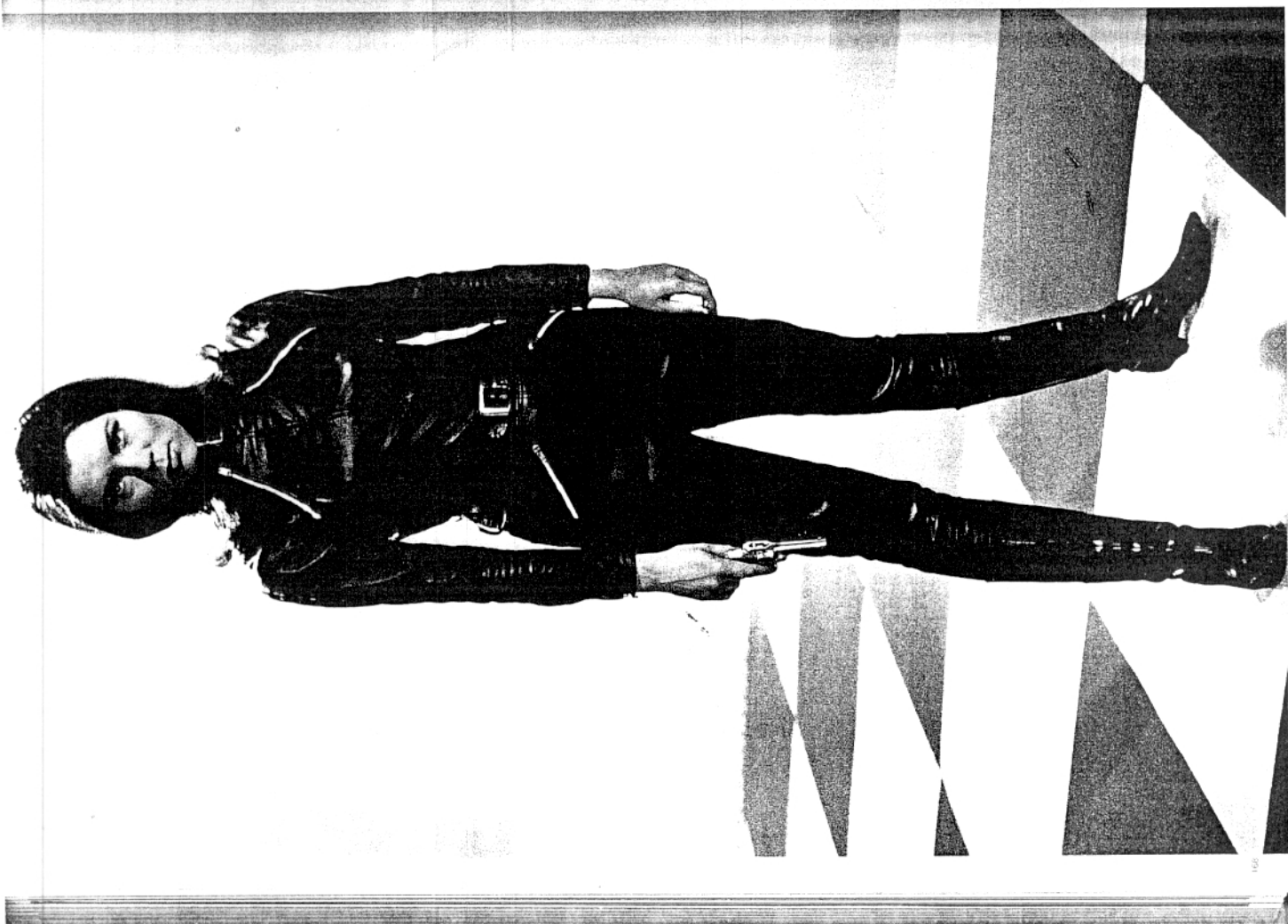
Page 168: Diana Rigg in *The Avengers*, television still, 1965–67. Courtesy of Photofest

Page 169: Steve Diet Goedde. American (born 1965). *Pigalle*, Hollywood, 2000. Photograph: Steve Diet Goedde





279



In *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, and Psychoanalysis* (1991), Mary Ann Doane documented the emergence of the femme fatale in films of the 1930s, as represented most dynamically by the seductresses played by Jean Harlow, Joan Crawford, and especially Marlene Dietrich, who was often adorned with the feathers or stuffed head of the black bird. Doane explained: "Her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable." As Shanghai Lily in director Josef von Sternberg's film *Shanghai Express* (1932), Dietrich, veiled in black leather, feathers, and silk net from head to toe, embodied this cryptic fatale (see page 170). Her character was promiscuous yet emotionally unattached—manifestly sexual yet barely physically identifiable. Sternberg emphasized Lily's elusivity by erecting several layers of screening between Dietrich and the camera lens. He employed these translucent barriers to distance her from her audience, yet in nearly every other scene he exploited the close-up shot of Dietrich's face behind the markings of the screen. Dietrich and Sternberg helped perpetuate the femme fatale as a construct of femininity that could neither be fully appropriated and codified nor marginalized and dismissed by the audience. The actress's black feathered capes and collars, made to tremble and shiver under her breath, were ostensibly the simple, if luxurious, trappings of beauty. In fact, the weightless flutter of the fragile plumage suggests a state of erotic arousal even as it camouflages the predatory intentions of the sexual raptor.

Alexander McQueen's volatile autumn/winter 1997–1998 "Ecclect Dissect" collection for Givenchy alludes to the more dangerous perimeters of sexual expression and fantasy, evoking the designer's interest in the link between eroticism and death. As seen on page 171, his model is swathed tautly in a supple black leather sheath, crowned at each shoulder with the preserved heads of vultures and accessorized with clinical fetishist's gloves. The image is a synthesis of the visual markings of avian predator and dominatrix. The haunting gargoyle-like vulture heads, with eye sockets empty, inspire a talismanic association to their carrion feeding practice. Longtime McQueen art director Simon Costin showed the designer the sixteenth-century engravings of famed anatomist Andreas Vesalius, who studied animals to understand the functions and structures of the human body. A revolutionary, Vesalius depicted the human form with figures flayed, trailing lines of disconnected muscle and placed in incongruous natural settings. The imagery of dissection correlates with the behavior of the necrophilic vulture, who tears apart its lifeless prey. McQueen's model squints with demonic red-rimmed eyes from beneath a hardened helmet of night-black hair. Her narrowed gaze is both sexually provocative and ominously sinister. McQueen's feathered femme fatale is a hybrid—part bird, part woman. Simultaneously attractive and repulsive, she resembles the avian archetypes described in oppositional terms by historian and archaeologist Edward Allworthy Armstrong in *The Folklore of Birds* (1970) as "soft feathers, sharp beak, songs and shrieks, amorousness and cruelty, devotion and fickleness."

Page 170 Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*, film still, 1932. Courtesy of Photofest

Page 171 Givenchy Haute Couture, French (founded 1952) by Alexander McQueen, British (born 1969)

Ensemble, autumn/winter 1997–1998. Photograph copyright © MCV/Maria Valentino

Contemporary fashion has been inspired by a variety of historical femme fatales, but perhaps the most frequently cited is the late nineteenth-century model, a harbinger of subsequent advances in women's rights. In *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art* (1996), Alison Smith described the newfound role of women in British society as both "purchasers" and "objects of consumption." As images of the nude female body became more widely popularized, an increase in the objectification and commodification of the sexualized female form inevitably occurred. On the other hand, the Victorian period also saw the emergence of a number of utopian and suffrage movements. This provocative "feminism" was widely perceived as the beginning of a widespread "immorality" resulting from the destabilized roles of men and women. The socially and economically prominent woman soon became associated with the promiscuous deviant. In *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects* (revised 1870) William Acton insisted that during the early Victorian period, both the ethics and actions of the prostitute crept into the aristocratic classes, in effect resulting in a contamination of the prudish wife and matriarch. The catalyst for this assimilation was the femme fatale. While she was likely to be highly educated and enjoyed the accoutrements of wealth and social standing, she was also a libertine, bridling under the misogynist constraints of Victorian sexual practice. John Galliano, in his autumn/winter 1999–2000 collection for Christian Dior, merged the Victorian femme fatale with the empowered fashionista au courant (page 175). The tightly cinched waistline and deathly pallor of the early Edwardian vamp, as exemplified on page 174, underscored her reputation for barrenness; she was the social adverse of the married and child-bearing matron. Galliano's creation parodies the notoriety of this sterile character: the "internal corsetry" implicit in his model's waifish form exemplifies our contemporaneous acceptance and celebration of the childless woman.

The hyperbolic avian headdress was a prominent accessory of the Victorian and Edwardian beauty. The exploitative rage for exotic plumage, single feathers, and full carcasses, which began in the mid-nineteenth century, was responsible for the extinction of several bird species. Excessive, extravagant plumage is therefore an especially apt metaphor for the femme fatale as a threatening predator with ravenous material desire. In his designs for Dior, milliner Stephen Jones channeled the opulence and decadent consumption of that era. More constructions than confections, his hats incorporate boldly placed taxidermy birds and fur pelts. As seen on page 175, Jones added a veil to the historic design, thereby referencing the mystery and guile of the femme fatale. The deathly complexions of both Galliano's mannequin and the Edwardian beauty speak to the psychoanalytic description of the femme fatale as a societal poison or disease. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century femme fatale, as both a social contaminant and a sexualized commodity, embodied the threat of the wild, rabid beast, unpredictable and uncontrollable. She symbolized the societal fear of the empowered woman and inspired in art and literature innumerable comparisons to the haunting predator, the mythical sexual aggressor. Juxtaposing the impeccably tailored double-belted coat and walking boots of the Edwardian English hunt with the astonishing bird-trimmed hat of the period's *demimondaine*, Galliano rendered a postmodern construct of empowered femininity, an athletic huntress and sexual adventuress, a sovereign *femme fatale moderne*.

Page 174 Rara Avis of the Edwardian Period, photograph, ca. 1908. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library

Page 175 Christian Dior Haute Couture, French (founded 1947) by John Galliano, British (born Gibraltar, 1960)

Ensemble, autumn/winter 1999–2000. Hat by Stephen Jones, British (born 1957). Photograph copyright ©

MCV/Maria Valentino

