MAKING TIME:
TOWARD A HISTORICAL MATERIALIST FASHION

A Thesis
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Master of Arts

by
Jennifer Rose Cohen
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the social significance of the abstract phenomenon of fashion, with reference to sartorial examples from the Fashion industry, using Walter Benjamin’s writing on surrealism and fashion as a theoretical model. Examples primarily come from “deconstructive” designers including Martin Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, and post-deconstruction designers such as Jun Takahashi and everyday wearers who make or remake their own garments at home. Benjamin’s arguments are presented in terms of his wider political project, demonstrating the continued relevance of his thought in understanding contemporary aesthetic, commercial and material practices. In addition, the thesis refers Georg Simmel and Ernst Bloch, as well as historian Pierre Nora, in order to define the relations between past and present, making and wearing, and production and consumption in “deconstructive” garments.

The thesis accompanies an exhibition of clothing, texts and images entitled “Made with Love: Fashion, Craft, and Other Beautiful Illusions,” which was held from May 21st to 27th, 2005 in an empty retail space in Ithaca, New York. Mounting the show and collecting feedback from it formed the concepts in the thesis, while the writing underpinned the ideas in the show. The simultaneous exploration both in writing and fashion gives the rhetorical argument immediate practical relevance, while providing the practice with a theoretical armature, already far more composed than is usual in fashion design. The interdisciplinary nature of this study links and expands the theoretical study of material culture and the practice of idea-led design.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Cohen graduated summa cum laude from Cornell with a B.A. in Comparative Literature in 2003. She studied Spanish literature, focusing on the relationship between Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca. Her interest in the work that represents the passage of surrealism into a style brought her to study fashion. She also designs clothes.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

[1.1] Fashion and surrealism

For better or worse, fashion has become the framework through which we understand the surrealist project. This is most immediately, if not most productively, seen in Fashion’s thematic quotations of surrealism, illustrating that at minimum the imagery is still compelling. Fashion monographs by Richard Martin (1987) and Francois Baudot (2002) reference a range of designers who have cited surrealist imagery quite literally, or, if obliquely, as the unabstracted application of a surrealist theme to a garment. 1 Images from surrealist art were cut-and-pasted onto garments, window displays, and Fashion editorials. Richard Martin declares, “Overtaking the fashion arts with zeal, Surrealism has never left … Surrealism remains fashion’s favorite art.” 2 However, when the avant-garde group of artists and intellectuals was operating in 1920s Paris, there was as yet no identifiable style to call “surreal,” the crucial –ism pointing to an ideology of living and working rather than an identifiable outcome. Surrealists had often shown particular interest in garments, but had usually found them so strange in and of themselves that they found little need to venture into design.

Some of the first designs that became associated with the movement were the products of collaboration between Salvador Dalí and Elsa Schiaparelli, an Italian aristocrat, both exiled in the United States.

1 Elizabeth Wilson (Adorned in Dreams, 2003), Caroline Evans (Fashion at the Edge, 2003) and Ulrich Lehmann (Tigersprung, 2000) also discuss surrealism in relation to fashion, if briefly, but Baudot and Martin make a predominantly visual comparison.
Schiaparelli’s lobster dress of 1937 provided evidence that surrealism had already been co-opted by the fashion system [Image 1]. Like many of Martin and Baudot’s examples, the dress exemplifies a literally superficial reference to the surrealist movement. Its surface design directly references an image from a work by Dalí, already losing any surreal “automaticity” in its duplication of an existing image. The translation of the lobster from telephone to dress is suggestive considering the aphrodisiac effects attributed to lobster (also noted by Dalí in his alternate title for the work, “Aphrodisiac Telephone” [Image 2]). However, the cut of the dress is no more oneiric, playful, automatic, delirious, or any other stereotypically “surreal” quality, than a dress worn to a debutante ball. Indeed, this collaboration followed Dalí’s expulsion from the movement for his consumerism and his “delirious” and resolute attraction to Hitler and Jesus Christ, representing two of surrealism’s three most loathed entities: family, church, and state. This characteristically Dalinian version of the “surreal” lives to this day in fashion’s apoliticism: window display, fashion editorial, and the runway show often resolutely set themselves apart from the world outside, which they cite in the mode of pastiche.

It is this distance inherent in quotation that leads me to question the validity of the proposed parallels between Fashion and the surrealist movement, and to ask if there might exist broader parallels that might suggest fashion can be more than a one-liner. Can the comparison between fashion/Fashion and surrealism be made conceptually? As will become clear, this question can only become political. It will quickly evolve into the matter of locating instances in which fashion/Fashion can be seen to be “revolutionary,” which I will define according to the surrealist understanding of the word.

For the purpose of this paper, I will use Fashion to mean the product
of the “Fashion industry,” which includes the design and sale of clothing that falls under the category of fashion, the forces and tendencies that cause change within many different “Fashion” industries, only one of which includes the production of clothes. Uncapitalized, fashion is an abstract phenomena that is not exclusive to clothing, but encompasses anything that could possibly define a self or a social body. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) states, “… to a discerning eye fashion is readily seen to operate in many diverse areas of human group life, especially so in modern times” and goes on to list areas in which fashion has been observed: the pure and applied arts, entertainment and amusement, medicine, “industry, especially that of business management,” mortuary practice, literature, the history of modern philosophy, political doctrine, and science.

[1.2] The academic study of fashion

According to fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson (1985), “Writings on fashion, other than purely descriptive, have found it hard to pin down the elusive double bluffs, the infinite regress in the mirror of the meanings of fashion.” Fashion resists unveiling; it is passé as soon as it is detected. It begins as a study of the present and slips continuously into history. Academic fashion studies has responded to the slippery nature of fashion with strict definitions and methodologies, many falling to extremes. The academic study of clothing can be divided relatively unambiguously into ways that “fashion”

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3 This notion is indebted to Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986-1993. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995: 279), who actually uses a gendered notion of Fashion to mean “the industry which is centered around the design of women’s clothes.”


is either reified or avoided by way of its difference from terms like “dress” and “apparel.”

The *dress* approach utilizes the definitions outlined by Joanne Eicher and Mary-Ellen Roach-Higgins (1992) in their article “Perspectives on Dress and Identity” where they claim to have developed “a definition of dress that is unambiguous, free of personal or social valuing or bias, usable in descriptions across national and cultural boundaries, and inclusive of all phenomena that can accurately be designated as dress,” which includes all body modifications and supplements. This research revolves around the Costume Society of America, which publishes the journal *Dress*. Members of this society are committed to historical preservation and are often affiliated with a costume collection or museum. They are interested in the cultural and historical context of “costume,” speaking of fashion changes as an evolution that can be exhaustively documented and described in retrospect. The word “fashion” does not enter into this research as it might refer to any number of “cultural products” other than dress, while missing types of dress that resist fashion change. Furthermore, it might subject particular styles to subjective value judgments, which might prevent an empirical “content analysis” of clothing.

The word “apparel” is used for much the same reasons in the work that comes out of the International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA), which publishes the *Clothing and Textile Research Journal*, and is a focal point of the academic study of clothing in the United States. Apparel excludes all of the “supplements” such as body modification and scent, and includes all of the clothing ostensibly omitted by the word “fashion,” such as uniforms

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and traditional dress. With strong alliances to the apparel industry, ITAA conferences are mainly concerned with new research and technologies in textiles, fit, wearability, manufacturing, retailing, and apparel (note, not “fashion”) design pedagogy, engaging in social analyses of dress only as they relate to the objectification or quantification of the design process. A descendant of the study of “home economics,” this line of inquiry rests mainly in non-art school apparel design programs across the United States. Perhaps as a sort of counterpoint to their history in homemaking, these apparel design programs have tended to characterize themselves as social or behavioral science.

Within the last decade, these distinctions have been blurring, with more collaborations occurring between American and European scholars of “apparel,” “dress,” and now “fashion.” Eicher, who first devised the universally-cited distinctions between the terms, is currently editing the “Dress, Body, Culture” series for Berg Press, a British publishing house. Other than that from the MIT Press, most of the recent work in cultural studies that has used the term “fashion” has come out of Berg Publishers, which began publishing in the early 1980s and is an important source of work in material culture of many types. Many of the published authors have also written papers for Valerie Steele’s journal Fashion Theory (also published by Berg). This field has remained interdisciplinary, spanning fields like sociology, anthropology, dress history, art history, literary theory, visual and cultural studies, and queer theory. In this way, it has been able to integrate the work of its founders, which has come from all of these fields, so that “fashion theory” can be seen as a discipline that has existed under many guises for a long time. The academic study of fashion accompanies a revival of the foundational
texts written by Carlyle, Baudelaire, Veblen, Simmel, Benjamin, Barthes, and others. A sociological interest in fashion, as a phenomenon with larger ramifications than solely the industry that manufactures and sells clothing, has existed at least since the beginning of the twentieth-century with Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen. Walter Benjamin portrayed modernity as the amplification of existing fashion processes in his Arcades Project, an unfinished attempt to write a philosophy of history with the ephemeral nature of fashion as its emblem. This large body of writing has only become available in English since 1999 and has therefore only recently become more widely used by fashion theorists such as Elizabeth Wilson, Ulrich Lehmann and Caroline Evans.

Yet, for all of its prominence in the widely cited philosophical texts of modernity and its domination of the experience of everyday life, the discussion of the phenomenon of fashion has remained largely unheard within the fields of critical theory and material culture. The visual study of Fashion has remained largely immune to investigations by the “heavier” or “higher” fields of, say, art history or visual studies. When Fashion has attempted to take on theory, it has been met with less trust than has been afforded to “higher” expressive media. Hélène Cixous speaks of the appearance of deconstruction in Fashion as an unexpected and perhaps unwarranted derivation of Derrida’s thought:

Here, “deconstruction” (though does the woman who goes to buy a dress know what this is?) has become a term that adds a “commercial” mark, a surplus value of “modernism” to domains totally unforeseen by the author of the thinking of deconstruction. Here is a word derived

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7 Benjamin’s ideas on fashion are in large part indebted to Simmel. Simmel’s “Fashion” essay of 1911 is identified by Ulrich Lehmann as the most frequently quoted source in the entire Arcades Project.
from philosophical thinking, that of Derrida, which no longer resides in philosophy, but “launches” fashion products, bathroom items, sports equipment, political attitudes.  

This mistrust of Fashion can be detected even where it is taken seriously enough to be studied. Reverberations of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry can still be heard in cultural theory, where readings tend to stop at the repression of the consumer. For example, Jennifer Craik states, “In all cases, fashion systems establish technologies of self-formation through techniques of dress, decoration and gesture which attempt to regulate tensions, conflict and ambiguity.”  

Fashion’s policing of ambiguity overshadows all of the ways in which it promotes difference.

The rejection of fashion, in personal and professional spheres, reveals biases based on its association with irrationality, femininity, and superficiality; its volatility and lack of content make it unsuitable for deep thought. It also merges on the non-objective; an academic does not want to be seen as liable to make aesthetic judgments, as having any other mode of discrimination than a distant, “critical” reading. And if fashion trends have been seen in such apparently objective fields as medicine, how could a study of fashion itself remain unswayed by its powerful irrationality? Perhaps the precedent of so many fashion theorists having been seduced by their object of study is off-putting. Fashionability can fundamentally call a philosophical argument into question. For example, if one were to quote Benjamin because his ideas are fashionable rather than because his thought is crucial for the completion of a theoretical move, the philosophical significance of one’s argument

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might be weakened. The very posing of this question of motivation means that both good and bad uses of Benjamin’s thought may be mistrusted. For a philosopher, fashion kills; fashion is the surface to be pushed aside in search of meaning. Because fashion has often been viewed as superficial and trivializing, it has not been read in terms of the manner in which it might supplement the fields to which it is opposed: depth, tradition, thought, and philosophy.

[1.3] A practical comparative approach

To write about fashion, to discuss its impact and importance, always means to transform the fleeting and transitory into the statue-like and permanent, if only through black letters on a white sheet of paper.10

One of the dilemmas inherent in writing a thesis on fashion is the way that the work must necessarily be framed; it can be admitted only in chapters with prescribed font and spacing, finished and bound. Fashion theorist Ulrich Lehmann recognizes this problematic, concluding that the most interesting challenge that fashion presents to theorists is to “transpose transitoriness, also the hallmark of modernity, into a medium of high regard, while maintaining its distinct characteristics; to theorize and analyze, yet not to petrify.”11 By presenting my thesis in two forms, one finished and in readymade format and the other unfinished and presented as hybrid, I have attempted to avoid the sort of petrification that Lehmann speaks of while simultaneously circumventing an underlying assumption in fashion studies that if fashion is not to be marginalized it must be venerated, if it has been seen as “low” we should now strive to make it “high.”

This paper accompanies my thesis show entitled “Made with Love:

11 Ibid.
Fashion, Craft, and Other Beautiful Illusions,” which was held from May 21st to 27th, 2005 in an empty retail space in Ithaca, New York [Images 3-8]. The show was held during the research and writing process, when most of the ideas were still half-formed and in an uncertain relationship to each other. Interaction with the ideas was solicited through text and images on the walls, which was arranged to mirror the actual process of construction of the garments. Displaying my work in a format that invited feedback was one of the most fruitful effects of my thesis presentation. After a week of conversation with viewers about the work, I was able to return to writing with more knowledge about the way that my subject was practically perceived. When the writing and the making intersect, the show will be mentioned in italics. In this way, I hope to transmit both a sense of the simultaneity of processes and independence of the final products.

The process of writing coexists with the design of a line of garments, both of which explore the same questions. The clothing that I have designed results from the practical implications of theory that is based on readings (and readings on readings) of material objects. This simultaneous exploration both in writing and in the discipline that is the subject of my writing gives the rhetorical argument immediate practical relevance, while providing the practice with a theoretical armature, already far more composed than is usual in fashion design. The display of conceptual clothing that is also fashionable, in a gallery setting that is also an out-of-use retail store, was meant to reflect this tension, the ambiguous position of Fashion as commodity and fashion as intellectual pursuit. My hope is that the interdisciplinary nature of this study will link, and thereby expand, the theoretical study of material culture and the practice of idea-led design.
We can begin to see how different expressive media might generate qualitatively different ways of thinking by reading linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who showed how meaning is generated through the difference between linguistic terms and not by any inherent value in the signified itself:

In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system.\footnote{Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. C. Bally and A. Sechehay, trans. W. Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 120.}

According to Jonathan Culler, “The linguistic code is a theory of the world. Different languages divide up the world differently.”\footnote{Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 59.} Although fashion is not exactly a language, it is most definitely a mode of communication with its own unique lexicon (albeit one that changes much more quickly than any spoken or written language). Barthes was particularly good at describing the linguistic aspect of fashion in relation to its other manifestations, a “fashion system” of “codes” that produce *Fashion*. Real clothing is represented both visually and linguistically. Fashion is mediated by rhetoric, already contains written language; clothing becomes Fashion by way of its representation. It is the difference between the way that the idiom of critical theory and Fashion’s visual and linguistic codes “divide up the world” that will generate meaning here.

[1.4] *Surrealism, fashion, and revolution in Walter Benjamin*

In 1924, André Breton, known as the “pope” of surrealism, offered a dictionary-style definition of the movement:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one
proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.\textsuperscript{14}

Surrealism was not an aesthetic manifesto; it was research on how to live a more “real” life free from the repression of reason or the institutions based upon the ideal of reason. Commonly seen as playful automatism and known to some through its “games,” the movement was inherently politically committed. Surrealists based their philosophy in the unique ability of poetry to transmit an image, and to do so in a way that eradicated the boundaries placed on desire, one of which was class divisions. Contemporary Chicago surrealist Paul Garon (1975) characterizes surrealist poetry, citing the blues as exemplary: “Poetry, kindled by desire, is the light that can dispel the pallor of bourgeois civilization. It does this through its use of images, convulsive images, images of the fantastic and the marvelous, images of desire.”\textsuperscript{15}

Philosophically, the foundations of this movement were found in Freud, Marx, and Hegel: psychoanalysis—specifically the idea that the seemingly meaningless images of dreams might be an integral part of “reality”—the class struggle, and the philosophical concept of the “dialectic.” Hegelian dialectics involve the “synthesis” of two opposing ideas or forces called “theses” and “antitheses,” and the sense that this is a historical process.\textsuperscript{16} Reading Hegel via Marx, Breton had more in mind for the surrealist dialectic; he subscribed to the Hegelian conception of the dialectic as a historical process, without the same sense of “idealism”: linear progress and so-called achievement based in


\textsuperscript{15} Paul Garon, Blues and the Poetic Spirit (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), 7.

logic and rationality. Walter Benjamin, a philosopher whose work will frame this paper, observed in surrealism an open dialectic “stopped” in the form of an image. In this frozen image or “monad,” he saw a “critical constellation” of the past and present whose “goal is to bring to consciousness those repressed elements of the past (its realized barbarisms and its unrealized dreams) which ‘place the present in a critical position.’”

Garon’s notion of a powerful and revealing “light” cast through the image reflects the adaptation of the movement towards revolution; by 1930 Breton writes in his “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” “I really fail to see … why we should refrain from supporting the Revolution, provided we view the problems of love, dreams, madness, art, and religion from the same angle they do.” Just one year before, Benjamin had said it more forcefully: “To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” is surrealism’s “most particular task.” Breton’s philosophy of revolution was in line with Leon Trotsky’s ideal of “permanent revolution,” and was embodied by an image with which he ends Nadja, a book describing his encounters with a beautiful woman:

Beauty is like a train that ceaselessly roars out of the Gare de Lyon and which I know will never leave, which has not left. It consists of jolts and shocks, many of which do not have much importance, but which we know are destined to produce one Shock, which does. … Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.

Here Breton links the idea of continual revolution, of the always new, to

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18 Breton, *Manifestoes*, 140.
beauty, and thus to convulsivity. We begin to see revolution as a kind of madness, where the old and already-seen are subject to the paroxysms of a “convulsive” mind. He describes an image that Nadja herself discovers:

We are in front of a fountain, whose jet she seems to be watching. “Those are your thoughts and mine. Look where they all start from, how high they reach, and then how it’s still prettier when they fall back. And then they dissolve immediately, driven back up with the same strength, then there’s that broken spurt again, that fall … and so on indefinitely.”

Breton’s conception of the new is one of continuous leaps from the past, propelling the present into the future. This critical use of the past was where Benjamin placed surrealism’s revolutionary potential in his “Surrealism” essay, and also the principle on which he based his Arcades Project. An illumination, a sudden insight containing the possibility of change, results from the tension of the dialectic between the outmoded and the present of mechanized modernity.

Benjamin witnessed the first Paris arcades, which he had seen at the height of their fashion, in decline. In the now passé, “antiaphrodisiacal” commodities from the 19th century for sale in these prior utopias of modern capitalism, Benjamin identified collective dream images that could be interpreted as an individual might do upon awakening, in this case, in the early 20th century. The concept of “awakening” became important to his philosophy and the pedagogical dissemination of it, in which the dream image was to be interpreted dialectically, or from two opposing perspectives at the same time. In the moment of awakening, upon the realization that one has been dreaming and is now awake, the image can be considered

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21 Ibid, 86.
22 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing.
simultaneously from the standpoint of the dream and of waking life. This was of course also the realm of consciousness that the surrealists found most interesting. This concurrence of perspectives is what Susan Buck-Morss (1991) calls a “critical constellation” of images; the past image does not illuminate the present, or vice versa, but together the images trace a relationship that had been previously hidden.²²

For Benjamin, striving for this “threshold experience”²³ of the present was part of his historical materialist ethic, which looked back to fragments of the past in order to anticipate fragments of the future. Historical materialism reads Marx in relation to a sense historical development that is distinctly opposed to historicism. It makes the past an issue of concern for the present as opposed to describing a “once upon a time.” For Benjamin, history is not a progression through what he calls “homogeneous, empty time,” but constitutes “time filled by the presence of the now.”²⁴ History becomes a collection of nows. Because memory changes both the present in which it occurs and the past that it references, but is presented as “the way it really was,” history often becomes “a tool of the ruling classes.”²⁵ Historians are likely to empathize with the victors of history, in their appreciation of cultural treasures, what Benjamin calls “documents of barbarism,” which “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have

²³ “Rites de passage … In modern life, these transitions are becoming ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience. We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us (But together with this, there is also waking up.)” Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland, et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 494.
²⁵ Ibid., 255.
created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries.”

Seeing history as the archival of power, historical materialism looks for lacunae in any supposedly continuous tradition in order to propose “new beginnings.”

In his description of the “angel of history,” inspired by Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* [Image 9], Benjamin opposes this notion of history to the usual historicist model: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”

The past is seen in a collection of single images, conceived as a stop-action photograph. Instead of writing history as a linear chain of progressive events, ambiguity becomes the ideal: “Ambiguity is the visual appearance of dialectics, the law of dialectics in standstill. This standstill is utopian and the dialectical image thus an oneiric one.”

For Benjamin, this “dialectical image” is epitomized by fashion, always a site of ambiguity. Artist and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe identifies this quality of fashion as inherently surrealistic:

... fashion, which is and always has been a language of concealment as revelation, covering as display, the external as an intensification of what it begins to obscure, is an essentially surrealist operation to begin with, a surreal activity both *avant* and *après le lettre*.

The coexistence of theses and antitheses is indeed omnipresent not only the character of fashion, but in the Fashion industry as well. The practice of juxtaposition and montage, so integral to the surrealist automatic practice, is involved in every stage of Fashion production from design to advertising;

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26 Ibid., 256.
people express their individuality by dressing alike; and clothing is made to last forever (at least in high Fashion) that will be discarded after only one wearing. If fashion’s dialectic can be surrealist, critical and even revolutionary, “dialectically,” it is also trivial, regressive, anti-revolutionary. Sasha Baron Cohen illustrates this point in one of his satirical interviews, where he takes on the persona of a Fashion reporter in order to discuss a line of clothing with its designer, “Hushi”:

COHEN: What I loved about the show was that it had no humor at all, which was just so powerful.
HUSHI: Well, it was dead serious. It was super serious. 
[...]
C: How did you keep the show humorous all the way along?
H: Using pop icons. 
[...]
C: Why was the show all about the individual?
H: Because that’s what we are, and that’s what we prefer everyone to be.
[...]
C: It’s amazing because this show was at its essence all about other people. Why?
H: Because when you’re an artist, you look at other people, and that’s how you become an artist is you observe.
[...]
C: Do you think consistency is important?
H: No.

This sort of flightiness and frivolity is one reason why fashion is often dismissed as anti-intellectual, incapable of inspiring significant thought or criticism. Yet, in terms of the surrealist dialectic, Hushi’s dismissal of consistency can be read as incredibly transgressive and expressive of desire. A collection has the ability to transmit humor and gravity, individuality and collectivity at one time. Fashion openly endorses both sides of opposites; in representation, a person can be both masculine and feminine, sexual and demure, etc. This potential in fashion has been put to use in modes of
dressing that question Manichean notions of subjectivity. For example, cross-dressing and even more conventional examples like the 80s “power suit” push traditional gender boundaries.

However, I would like to concentrate here on fashion’s role in a temporal dialectic that works in the service of the historical materialist project, in the undoing of the “bourgeois historical-literary apparatus” by way of its status as a *dialectical image*. Like the historical materialist concept of historical development, fashion looks backward in order to move forward through time, observing its own ruins. Benjamin describes “juxtapositions of past and present” as bringing to consciousness the disappointing nature of the fetish, or the ephemerality of the seemingly permanent value of each season’s new fashion, the new as always-the-same:

> [they] undercut the contemporary phantasmagoria, bringing to consciousness the rapid half-life of the utopian element in commodities and the relentless repetition of their form of betrayal: the same promise, the same disappointment.31

Because fashion tends to hide its fetishistic qualities at its height, when it *wanes* the image is experienced as itself perhaps for the first time. Benjamin made notes on this development in terms of the arcades: “First dialectical stage: the arcade changes from a place of splendor to a place of decay; Second dialectical stage: the arcade changes from an unconscious experience to something consciously penetrated.”32 For Blumer too, fashion is invisible at its height: “The fashion which we can now detect in the past history of philosophy, medicine, science, technological use and industrial practice did not appear as fashions in those who shared in them.”33 But those fashions

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do appear as such to us now. In 1937, James Laver visualized this process of realization in a list of adjectives naming the experience of style that goes through the “fashion cycle,” the process of introduction, adoption, and decline of individual instances of what is considered “fashionable”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indecent</td>
<td>10 yrs before its time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shameless</td>
<td>5 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outré (daring)</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowdy</td>
<td>1 yr after its time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hideous</td>
<td>10 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridiculous</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusing</td>
<td>30 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaint</td>
<td>50 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charming</td>
<td>70 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>100 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>150 yrs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the time intervals are anachronistic, the progression of fashion still holds. “Hideous,” “Ridiculous,” “Shameless, and “Indecent,” descriptors for the just out-of-style or almost in-style, are more intense, more “imbued with experience,” than either those used for the immediately fashionable, or the long out-of-style. The just out-of-style is the point at which fashion becomes conscious, the (prior) wearer wakes from the dream. The realization of the past image makes one question the status of the present image. Because fashion moves through time in much the same way as Benjamin’s “angel of history,” it produces images of the past, images that appear to the present. For Benjamin, this is how fashion makes historical knowledge available to present practice:

> And this dialectical penetration and actualization of former contexts puts the truth of all present action to the test. Or rather, it serves to

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ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been (the authentic figure of which is fashion). To approach, in this way, “what has been” means to treat it not historiographically, as heretofore, but politically, in political categories.\textsuperscript{35}

At one time Benjamin views fashion as false revolution, or the “new as the always-the-same”\textsuperscript{36} as the emblem of modernity’s experience of time, and as the rupture of this illusion. Might it be possible to identify images in Fashion that appear as Breton’s version of the dialectic, one tied integrally to revolution, rather than innocuous revolutions?\textsuperscript{37} In Benjamin’s terms, when is fashion new, and when is it the “new as always-the-same”? We can begin to approach an answer to these questions by viewing fashion’s complex relationship to the present. Fashion recovers fragments of the past in ways that both ameliorate a sense of lostness in time, bringing the wearer to a present that feels continuous with the past, and reorient the wearer to a present where the past becomes the condition of a utopian future, which is anything but soothing.

I started the project by imagining how a linear progression of time might be inscribed on a length of fabric, which would then be cut apart and rearranged. New arrangements of time would create a new concept of our experience of time as mediated by fashion. This gesture can also be seen in the fit and construction of each garment, each element which dialectically juxtaposes two distinct moments. I used dressmaking muslin in order to convey a history of fashion construction, and natural dyes so that the forward progress of time would appear most “natural.” I contact dyed the lengths of muslin repeatedly, using the same amount of berries, bark, or leaves on a smaller

\textsuperscript{35} Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 392.
\textsuperscript{36} Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 293.
portion of the fabric each time [Images 10–19]. This resulted in surface design as a
time-line of the dyeing process, from start to finish [20-23]. I embroidered one of the
lengths with the date and time of my act of embroidering every day to form a circular
time-line, in order to imbue this act of making with all the importance of a birth, death,
or marriage, the most commonly embroidered dates [Image 24].
[2.1] *Fashion as the modern eternal*

In his characterization of “the storyteller,” Benjamin describes a sort of premodern environment in which the story could still be transmitted from generation to generation, an age before the proliferation of information, forgotten as soon as it is recorded and archived. Historian Pierre Nora describes the fractured experience of continuous time, represented by a turn toward the writing of histories and the collection of memories:

An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear—these indicate a rupture of equilibrium. The remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility.\(^{38}\)

According to Nora, we now experience history in *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, which are infused with an “aura” of past events and initiate a will to remember. From an interior lack of memory, an exterior drive to remember is literally materialized in the fetish-object: in the monument, the archive, and the museum. The appearance of *lieux de mémoire*, or “illusions of eternity,” indicates a phenomenon that sounds remarkably like fashion: “the rituals of a society without ritual,” one “deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past.”\(^{39}\) For Nora, as we move ever farther from this premodern condition of the *milieu de mémoire*, a state of unity between

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 12.
memory and history, innovation is increasingly valued over tradition. The association of fashion with a break from the past is familiar, and perhaps most aptly featured by Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi in the early 19th century in his dialogue between Fashion and Death, cited by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. Leopardi paints them as siblings, both born of Decay, and therefore the “chief enemy of Memory.” This is because, as Fashion says to Death, “we both equally profit by the incessant change and destruction of things here below … our common nature and custom is to incessantly renew the world.”

This conversation between renewal and deterioration is what allows fashion to be. The more fashion destroys, the more it lives: “This is why fashion changes so quickly: she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her.” Fashion sacrifices itself in order to become new again. Making the most recent past seem ridiculous, it proposes the radically new as if it were a definitive break with past, which is then discarded for a fresh departure next season. “Fashion … makes its appearance as though it intended to live forever.” It is an ostensibly eternal cycle in which what is most transient and discontinuous persists, and becomes a constant.

Georg Simmel recognized the paradoxical quality of fashion as the source of its socio-psychological weight: “The fact that change itself does not change … endows each of the objects which it affects with a psychological appearance of duration.” Looking back in his 1980 essay, “Modernity—An

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41 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 556.
Incomplete Project,” Jürgen Habermas still identified the “elusive and the ephemeral” as creating this sense of “duration” that had existed before modernity:

The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present.” ... The “stable present” must appear as a version of the subject’s desire to create an individual durée in order to oppose the transitoriness in modern culture.45

The eternal ephemeral has replaced the marble permanence of the monument, which has been exposed as transitory and unreliable. The importance of fashion in modernity is perhaps what brought Benjamin to say, “the eternal is in every case far more the ruffle on a dress than an idea.”46 This frequently reiterated phrase not only identifies Fashion’s supplantation of ideals of truth and beauty as an enduring quality of modern life, but also gestures toward the fetish. Benjamin gestures towards the fetish in his early notes for The Arcades Project when he speaks of the child’s encounter with his mother’s skirts: “What the child (and, through faint reminiscence, the man) discovers in the pleats of the old material to which it clings while trailing at its mother’s skirts—that’s what these pages should contain.”47 In the Freudian sense, the child’s fetishization of the ruffles on his mother’s dress stops him in the present moment, both bringing him toward a nostalgic past and forward in the hope for a more comfortable future. Benjamin makes this individual experience collective when he looks at the Paris arcades:

Corresponding in the collective consciousness to the forms of the new means of production, which at first were still dominated by the old (Marx), are images in which the new is intermingled with the

46 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 463.
old. These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production.48

This peculiar mixture of the old and the new in an image brings us directly into the present. Benjamin speaks of fashion as a special case of forgetting built-in to the present moment,49 comparing it to the waters of the river Lethe, which are drunk by the dead in order to erase the memory of their past lives. Simmel first attributed fashion’s prominence to this modern “turn” to the present and loss of faith in tradition:

We can discover one of the reasons why in these latter days fashion exercises such a powerful influence on our consciousness in the circumstance that the great, permanent, unquestionable convictions are continually losing strength, as a consequence of which the transitory and vacillating elements of life acquire more room for the display of their activity. The break with the past, which, for more than a century, civilized mankind has been laboring unceasingly to bring about, makes the consciousness turn more and more to the present. 50

Simmel’s sense of the present as “vacillating” or “in transit” points to the dialectical nature of the present, which contains fragments of both the past and the future. He sees the duality of past and future as maintained in the present moment, and mediated by fashion:

Fashion always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present, at least while it is at its height, than most other phenomena. What we call the present is usually nothing more than a combination of a fragment of the past with a fragment of the future.51

The present, “threshold experience,” is inhabited and mediated by fashion, the connecting thread between the past and the future. This peculiar experience

49 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 393. “Fashion, like architecture, inheres in the darkness of the lived moment, belongs to the dream consciousness of the collective.”
50 Simmel, “Fashion,” 548.
51 Ibid., 547.
of the “present” in modernity is characterized by what Benjamin calls *Jetzteit* (now-time or “the now”) and utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch’s concept of the “Now.” Here, the sense of one’s place in the continuum of time is imparted through fashion, where past time is fragmented and rearranged, oriented towards the future. Paradoxically, the “presentness” imparted by fashion can be seen to be a result of its “leap” into the past, generating collisions between differing versions of different points in time: “Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past.”52 Through this process, “history” is extracted from its linear, inevitably progressive narrative and reordered; lost or forgotten moments are placed beside newer ones, changing the aspect of both. As Benjamin demonstrates in *The Arcades Project*, objects from the past, which have been somehow outlived, when recovered in the present, have the “revolutionary energy” for “antipathy and transformation”53 necessary to awaken the present from its “dream,” false utopian values or self-sustaining ideological constructs. Benjamin sees these objects as instances of the recurrence of the “outmoded.”

*In order to tie the garments to the history of historians, what Benjamin calls the “once upon a time,” I cut the finished fabrics into five classic pieces of Western fashion, which perhaps every person and certainly every woman would have in their closet: a white t-shirt, a blazer, a pair of jeans, an oxford, and a little black dress. The shapes were “found,” constructed from pieces that I thought to be as “classic” and “traditional” as possible, and then changed subtly in order to work as “Fashion” or feel “present.” Every pattern piece was then finished in itself so that the seams

were enclosed within two sides of treated muslin. The pieces were laid out and photographed as if found in an archeological dig or in an instructional diagram for garment construction [Images 25-29]. Fashion had fragmented my progressive histories, and the question remained how these fragments would be brought together.

2.2. The return of the démodé

Art historian Hal Foster classifies three aspects of Benjamin’s outmoded (or veraltet, sometimes translated as “obsolete”): the truly archaic, magically old, and just out-of-style. To varying effects and degrees, depending on the sort of outmoded invoked, a “critical reinscription of old images and structures of feeling into the present” provides the revolutionary impetus for change, new nows. The elimination of a “fiction” or coherent narrative of history drains objects of prescribed meanings and generates a junk heap of fragments. It is this “junk” that Benjamin speaks of as creating the shocking realization that these moments within their prior context were a dream, which impels one to interpret the motivations for this previous false contextualization.

However, both Benjamin and Bloch refine their respective notions of the revolutionary potential of “the energies of an outlived world of things” by stipulating the form in which the old must return in order to retain its potency. For Benjamin, the allure of the “dream” from which society needs to awaken deteriorates over time: “The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part.”

Bloch has a similar inclination, in a different guise, saying, “Where much is falling, some things are caught

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54 Ibid., xiv.
hanging crookedly... Even familiar things lie crooked, then look disturbing."

As opposed to the benign transport from the present to the past involved in a sentimental remembrance of the objects that populated one’s childhood, the transferal of the past to the present with its “demonic guise” or distortion from having been so long packed away results in the revolutionary animation of the outmoded. This is analogous to the process of “repression” and recurrence as identified by Freud.

The term “repression” has been defined by Charles Rycroft as “the process (defense mechanism) by which an unacceptable impulse or idea is rendered unconscious.” Although we have “surmounted” our belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and with the return of the dead ... we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation.

This “confirmation” takes the form of a “recurrence” or repetition of an event that appears to verify the outlived belief. It takes advantage of an intellectual uncertainty, however minute, as to whether the proxy belief is indeed true, “after we have reached a stage at which, in our judgment, we have abandoned such beliefs.” The feeling that arises is unmistakable; it is the “uncanny.”

The word “uncanny” [unheimlich] has a dual aspect. Unheimlich, unhome-like or unhomey, is the opposite of heimlich, or what is familiar, comfortable, and homey. The word heimlich may also signify what is hidden or out of view, in which case unheimlich would signify that which has been

58 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 217n1.
released from hiding and brought to sight. Therefore, there is a sense in which the “uncanny” was something “homey” that had been hidden, and recovered with an “unhomey” aspect, when something which was familiar has become “alienated” by repression: “... something which ought to have remained hidden has come to light.” The persistence of what has been long concealed is the source of the uneasy or fearful response to the uncanny. For as Freud articulates:

If ... every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs.

Hal Foster attributes this “frightening element,” this “demonic guise,” to the damage or distortions caused by the reappearance of the repressed as uncanny. In Freudian thought, this repetition, though involuntary or coincidental, is reminiscent of the “compulsion to repeat.” What would otherwise be dismissed as coincidence resonates on a more profound level in the individual (unless, as Freud remarks, “a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition”):

... it is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of chance.

This “involuntary repetition” which can well become the compulsion to repeat works, according to Benjamin, not only on the individual psychic level but also in the collective, which experiences objects from its history (rather than

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61 Ibid., 199-200.
62 Ibid., 217.
63 Ibid.
64 Foster, Compulsive Beauty, 163-4.
66 Ibid., 213.
Caroline Evans locates these uncanny returns in fashion in literal historicism, where particular moments in history are brought back in a way that avoids “costume” status in its removal from its original context. Why should Alexander McQueen’s image of the Romanov children on a jacket [Image 30] be anything more than the “aestheticization” of the political, an impulse Benjamin aligned with fascism? Without this “dust” or unsettling aspect, we might never awake from the dream. An advertisement for Saks Fifth Avenue [Image 31] demonstrates this quite clearly. In black and white, a woman in a twenties-era inspired dress and her school-uniformed daughter roller skate around a marble mansion under a crystal chandelier. Her daughter holds the hands of the uniformed servant. “Saks loves reinventing the wheel.” The woman and her daughter are white, the servant is black. The way things are and the way things have “always been” are reinforced. The twenties return, but not for the present. We revert to the twenties. For Saks, the past is only “reinvented” insofar as any antagonist to the “ruling class” has been forgotten or made safe by distance.

The source of both this danger of the dream and the possibility of “awakening” is located in a tension identified by Hal Foster within the outmoded between “mode” as fashion and “mode” as production, noting that the reappearance of the démodé has different implications than that of either the “truly archaic” or “magically old.” The appearance of an out-of-style garment simply carries a different affect than the experience of either archeological ruins or objects from childhood. What separates the return of the démodé is precisely its link with “mode” as fashion, which for Foster has the potential either to single out “the cultural detritus of past moments residual in
capitalism against the socioeconomic complacency of its present moment,”67 or on the other hand, to become useless kitsch. The “démodé” may become once again “à la mode,” becoming part of a system of production and no longer defining itself in opposition to the commodity, but rather as the commodity. The apotropaic use of kitsch, amounts to a refusal to confront the uncanny and, therefore, is more an act of “repression” than “abreaction.”

2.3 Fashion, topically applied

Benjamin highlighted fashion’s fragility, the fact that it can inspire the kind of change that Marx would advocate, or not. Fashion’s “flair for the topical,” its “tiger’s leap into the past,” “takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution.”68 Benjamin makes only a tentative connection between fashion and revolution. Fashion refers to the topical [Aktuell] when it looks to the past, like the headline news reporting a historical event. But this can remain “in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands” or out of it. How does this quotation become a dialectical leap, entering “the open air of history”? Benjamin gives the example of Robespierre and the French Revolution:

Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past.69

Here, the past is “reincarnated,” it is brought to life by the present, in a way that undermines existing power relations. The past is topical as immediate, as if a headline on the morning news. But there is another sense of the word

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67 Foster, Compulsive Beauty,159.
69 Ibid.
“topical” that Benjamin suggests is particularly bourgeois, the sense in which “Fashions are a collective medicament for the ravages of oblivion.” In an age of oblivion, or forgetting, fashion medicates, but only “topically,” superficially, through its nostalgic interest in the past.

The appearance of the “outmoded” in fashion always walks this thin line between the sort of “medicament” that numbs and the type that reveals the “truth” of history. Benjamin warns us of the fine line between the revolutionary recurrence of the outmoded and its apotropaic adoption by reminding us of how difficult it is to wake up in the morning:

… to work through all this by way of the dialectics of awakening, and not to be lulled, through exhaustion, into “dream” or “mythology.” What are the sounds of the awakening morning we have drawn into our dreams? “Ugliness,” the “old-fashioned” are merely distorted morning voices that talk of our childhood.

The outmoded, the “sleeping” or unconscious object that is being awakened, becomes tangled with the conscious, just as “morning voices” incorporate vague and distorted versions of themselves into a just-waking dream. Being “lulled, through exhaustion,” back to sleep amounts to an admission of defeat. Fashion can make use of “commodities, places, and styles whose own fashion has waned,” which have been “ruined” by the commodity economy, as “material for construction” in order to make “their relation to the slumbering collective more visibly tense.” But at the very moment the outmoded is “dusted off,” or reclaimed by its opposite, the result is kitsch,

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71 Ibid., 908.
72 Ibid. Emphasis is mine.
which for Benjamin is the aspect of the outmoded that sends us back to sleep:

“The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch.”

CHAPTER THREE
FASHION CONSTRUCTION

1.1 Madeness

In the examples that I will describe here, a Benjaminian “shock” results from the juxtaposition of two moments within the life of the same garment. Because the garment is worn, one of these moments is the “present,” or the finished article, which is then juxtaposed with a moment from the process of construction, deterioration, or the garment’s previous incarnation or iteration. Such a garment juxtaposes moments from the production process, or moments from a u/dystopic future, with the finished present. Dialectically, the return of the outmoded transforms clothing’s mode of production, into the production of the body and the subject. Fashion is exposed as not only a mode of communication, but as constitutive of what is “beneath” the surface, what is apparently being communicated: the “real” self and the contours of the body. The “seamlessness” of a garment, and therefore of the image it portrays, is denaturalized by way of the “seams.”

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing today, designers like Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo (for Comme de Garçons), Jun Takahashi (for Undercover), and many others have undermined the supposedly direct relationship between the “center” of self and body and the “surface” of fashion. Methods such as exposing seams, pushing proportions to the extreme, and rearranging traditional methods of patterning draw attention to the “madeness” of garments, fragmenting clothes into their constitutive parts, or in Benjamin’s terms, establishing “material for construction.” Off the runway, the use of thrift store clothing, vintage, and the DIY look of
cut and resewn used clothing has increasingly defined street fashion. The term “deconstruction” has proliferated in Fashion journalism, coming to signify garments that are undone, unfinished, or refinished, an aesthetic that has survived season after season on the street and on the runway.\textsuperscript{75} Deconstruction fashion ends up playing into the historical materialist project by anchoring one side of the dialectic in the immediate present “as the moment of revolutionary possibility.”\textsuperscript{76} For Susan Buck-Morss, the image of the present within the dialectical image as “now-time” maintains the course of the historical materialist project: “Without its power of alignment, the possibilities for reconstructing the past are infinite and arbitrary.”\textsuperscript{77} Hand-crafted and home-altered clothing often accomplishes the same gesture as high-priced, unreachably intellectual deconstruction fashion. Whether in tediously composed seams or their ripped-out counterparts, clothing that draws attention to its own quality of having been made exposes making as a process that continues as the garment is worn. It reconfigures the body and the self as it is itself made and remade.

Like Benjamin’s historical materialist project, Jacques Derrida’s practice of “Deconstruction” uses an arrested form of dialectics, in this case binaries, to create a sort of awakening. Pointing out that there is usually one term in a binary that is assumed to be “higher” than the other, which is thought to be “supplementary” or secondary (such as nature/culture, presence/absence), Derrida argues that because what is complete in itself could never be supplemented, the terms are not independent, and in fact the “lower” term is

\textsuperscript{75} Alison Gill, “Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes,” \textit{Fashion Theory} 2, no. 1 (March 1998), 27.
\textsuperscript{76} Susan Buck-Morss, \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}, 339.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 338-339
constitutive of the “higher.” The second term exists because of an “originary lack” in the first. In particular, Derrida points to the hierarchy of speech over writing in Western philosophy, seeing the existence of writing as evidence of speech’s difference from thought. Philosophy has often held writing in suspicion because of its distance from the author, from spoken revisions and clarifications. Writing is supposedly separate from content, while speech is its direct communication. Writing threatens to obscure pure thought through style and delivery: “… linguistic signs might arrest the gaze and, by interposing their material form, affect or infect the thought.”\(^{78}\) The rejection of writing is a rejection of what Culler calls “the machinations of words and their contingent relationships”\(^{79}\) in favor of pure presence. This is, of course, unsustainable if one considers philosophy’s dependence on writing and style in the crafting of an argument. Writing and fashion, as styling, bring thought into being, allowing it to be disseminated, and simultaneously bring the purity of thought into question. Culler’s work on puns illustrates this point:

> Puns present the disquieting spectacle of a functioning of language where boundaries—between sounds, sound and letter, between meanings—count for less than one might imagine … the relations perceived by speakers affect meanings and thus the linguistic system, which must be taken to include the constant remotivation produced by impressions of connection or similarity.\(^{80}\)

The fact that the sound and appearance of language is arbitrary, and does not result from anything inherent in the signified, allows for a certain fluidity in language, and therefore meaning. Thought and the way in which it is disseminated are not so clearly or easily separated. Arbitrary relations

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\(^{79}\) Ibid., 92.

between the way words sound or look can change meaning; the way that
we communicate affects what we are attempting to say, whether planned
or not. The notion of the utilization of the pen (stylo, in French) as a sort
of styling as thought, evokes Heidegger’s “assumption” that “thinking is
craft.” It is not difficult to imagine this line of thought applied to other forms
of communication, as in the design of one’s subjectivity through clothing.
Characterizing someone forms them through their description in a code,
“composes” them by their differences from all other examples in the code.

The work Belgian designer Martin Margiela has come to exemplify
deconstruction Fashion. His fall/winter 1997 line, where he showed finished
garments frozen in various stages of the dressmaking process, is an example
of a very literal translation of a deconstructive rhetorical move into clothing.
Here, he poses the process of wearing clothes, traditionally seen as a mode
of communication through consumption or selection, as a practice of making
much like the production of the dressmaker. Margiela fitted models with linen
bodices cut and printed to resemble a dressmaker’s dummy so that the model,
the prototypical wearer, became the dress form, the site of making. Fixed
on the bodices were fragments of a process of draping and patternmaking.
A half-draped dress [Image 32] or a set of flat-pattern pieces [Image 33]
anticipated a putative final design. Other garments were worn in the form of
a pinned together flat-pattern, a stage in the design process used to anticipate
fit problems before a muslin version of the garment is sewn [Image 34]. The
wearer, as the site of fashion production, shares in its state of being-in-process.
Is she a legible person until the drape is turned into a pattern, until the fabric

Row, 1975), 18.
is cut and sewn into the final garment? Is she a definable self until she can be
known as a complete, finished image?

While the clothes appeared unfinished, they were carefully sewn, ready
to be sold and worn. The paradox of finished garments still “in process”
reveals that all “seamless” finished garments were at one point unseamed,
that “seamlessness” is made. The wearing of garments “in progress” exposes
fashion as a literal fashioning, a process of construction that simultaneously
builds and is built by concepts of body and self. By exposing the “fashioned”
subject as made, Margiela’s clothes point to the absence of an embodied
subject in its very creation, undermining the concept of fashion as pure
communication of this subject. To the extent that the wearer becomes the
site of the garment’s production, what is usually viewed as consumption
becomes creative. The hierarchy of depth/surface is undone through attention
to process, to the inevitable crafting of depth by surface. The styling of the
signified through the signifier exposes the “center,” which did not previously
exist as such, as production.

A deconstructive reading is already literally cited in the design of the
clothing. The equivalence of production and consumption can also be
reached in terms of Marxian dialectics, and Benjamin adds to this the concept
of sleep and waking, the idea that this “truth” can be veiled during the
dream and realized during waking life. Rupture, a moment of “awakening,”
is required to see what we thought to be natural as constructed. This
interruption can be compared to the break that occurs when a dream becomes
too absurd too pass for waking life any longer. It is the same “shock” of the
“dialectical image,” when a fragment of the past is snatched from history and
becomes available to the present. For Benjamin, the dialectical image is like
Breton’s little “shocks” that add up to produce the one “Shock” which changes everything. It is a premonition of a collective awakening from the dream of history, and image of hope. Margiela’s garments can be read as an instance of this interruption, stopped in the past of the production process and propelled into the present as runway garments, proposed as immediately wearable. The dressmaker’s tools become available to the wearer in the present of wearing, and she suddenly has the resources to reproduce her own image for others.

For Comme des Garçons, Rei Kawakubo also identified fashion as productive of the female body. Her spring/summer 1997 line themed “Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body,” also known as the “lump” collection [image 35], posited the woman as both site and subject of fashion production. The horizontal and vertical stripes of a knit gingham made these clothes a topographical map of the body, which it formed through “lumps,” padding that must have seemed all the more shocking in the context of body-conscious clothing and fitness obsession that characterized 90s fashion. The association of gingham with Western culture, specifically in its most empire building incarnation, made the clothes historical, and therefore political. Gingham is stereotypically used in “colonial” or “country” type interiors and garments (think of Dorothy’s blue gingham smock from the *Wizard of Oz*) because, first produced in India and exported,82 it was an easily woven fabric, commonly made at home. Kawakubo’s image-constellation of runway, colonial fabric, and body formation suggests that not only does the supposed “veneer” of fashion fundamentally alter what is underneath, but that this is a colonialization of the body. Gingham, usually associated with the “cute” and the purity of country life, comes to define the shape of the malignant

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body, both sexual and grotesque, whose growth is not dictated by the usual standards of beauty. An image from the past becomes conscious, allows us to imagine a future. At the same time, it changes the consciousness of the present. For instance, next to the “lump” dresses, Ralph Lauren’s use of gingham on the bias to reveal the curves of the body while suggesting Western-bourgeois lineage comes to look grotesque [image 36]. The model’s body is denaturalized, having been formed as much by the garment as the body fills out the fabric.

However, the anticipation of awakening leaves theory and enters practice more clearly in reconstruction, where designers and everyday wearers use materials and garments that have already been used to make recycled pieces, because of the inherent utopianism in the negation of the Fashion industry’s ingrained “planned obsolescence” and its social and environmental consequences. In reconstruction, like deconstruction, the “finished” moment of the previously existing garment is juxtaposed with a new moment of completion, opening up the act of wearing as a process. The irregularities in surface design and the nuances of construction draw attention to the individual crafter’s particular process of selecting design details and creating the garment, a process that is continual, as the garment is changed and rearranged to fit the taste of the wearer. What many of these designs have in common is a homemade “look” reminiscent of the hand-crafting of clothing at home, a task historically completed by women. Traces of the “love,” or time spent laboring over an item, persist on the made object.

The seams were constructed using joins that were derived from five different stereotypical “home” crafts: knitting, crocheting, cross-stitching, embroidery, and quilting [Images 37-41]. Linear time was laid over the curves of the fashioned body,
interrupted by folds and seams [Images 42-46]. Fashion and craft were proposed to be forces that both bring fragmented histories back together, and do so in a shocking way, one that offers new arrangements of time.

Jun Takahashi, a protégé of Kawakubo who now designs his own line under the name “Undercover,” engages in this sort of construction and reconstruction that is conscious of itself as part of a tradition of crafting. The image of an oversized pair of scissors as fashion accessory [Image 47] functioning as a sort of emblem for his practice, Takahashi creates an image of found clothing, taken apart and put back together. Large hand-stitching and virtuosic “sloppy” construction of classic shapes contribute to clothing that is clearly “made.” Disproportions and subtle exaggerations result in a dream-like image of the “classics.” The look is one of aiming for the appearance of the readymade, clichéd image and failing. He works within the lexicon readily available to fashion, accumulated through history, and makes crucial mistakes. The subtle dissymmetries promote a questioning of time-honored traditions of fashion production. Takahashi visualizes the practice of (re)construction as a political ethic. In the finale to his fall 2004 collection, the models appeared as a collective on the runway, mobilized by their clothing [Image 48]. This image recurred in the fall 2005 collection, when every model emerged dressed in black, grey, and tan military uniforms [Image 49]. Here, the image of the enlarged sewing scissors as accessory or perhaps tool for wearing as making, comes to look like a weapon, or a can of spray paint. In figuring his use of the “code” of fashion, the history of fashion-making, as political, Takahashi attempts to use the topicality of fashion as “Aktuell” rather than as a surface salve. Classic shapes and traditional practices reemerge for the present. Signals cross and shock the viewer, moving the image into an
Image 46
anticipated future that is somehow better than the past. As the models seem to rise up against the audience, the old is new, not the nostalgic, safe emergence of the “new as always-the-same.”

A home-sewn dress circa 1920 found in the Cornell Costume Collection [Image 50] is a more democratic example of reconstruction. It is decorated with hand-embroidered flowers, borders, and hand-faggotting around the apron-like front. The sleeves were altered later, with a different stitch length and thread color, also at home, to fit the taste of the wearer. The added ruche to the sleeves portrays the same configurability and fluidity of the finished image. Rather than the mass “deconstruction” calling attention to the surface of the commercial garments I described above, when the wearer is literally the maker, divisions between consumption and production, inner self and outer portrayal, are blurred in a more radically “deconstructive” way. The image of the fashion fetish as past image and hope for the future is amplified as the maker/wearer experiences the folds of the skirt perhaps even more intimately than the young (male) child.

The accompanying garments were made from reclaimed twill pants or knit undershirts [Images 42-46]. Besides providing concrete inspiration for a more “sustainable” way to wear fashionable clothing, the appearance of pant details in unexpected places brought attention to the way the clothes were made. In the more traditionally made garments, many viewers commented that this was the first time they had noticed the location of the seams. For instance, the two-piece construction of the collar of the blazer and the oxford is a “classic” tailoring technique that was unknown to many, perhaps because the seam is hidden under the fold of the collar. Viewers noticed unconventional seaming and pattern cutting techniques as laughably absurd.
3.2 The intelligibility of madness

But craft, like fashion, can cover for a perceived loss of continuity with the past. Also like fashion, the “tiger’s leap” of craft into the present often functions in the realm of the bourgeoisie. The conception of feminine handcraft changed considerably after a distinct change in feminine ideals at the beginning of the 1920s, after World War I and at the outset of modernity, when the home changed from a place of production to consumption. According to Beverly Gordon,

There was a new profile... of the concerns and roles of the American woman in the modern home. She was far more involved with the backstage labor of cooking, cleaning, and washing than her Victorian fore-mother, and she was busy with a new kind of rather frivolous afternoon activity—serving as a personal hostess.83

The ideal role of the woman had changed very quickly from that of the moral support to the family, the overseer of the private world, to hostess, and the ideal of woman as “homemaker,” in which “home” tasks such as cooking and cleaning came to signify not work but femininity, had been constructed. The role of craft was therefore not only one of leisure or “spare time,” but in the perpetuation of the illusion of the “good old days” in which such activities constituted the feminine ideal, rather than the less glamorous work involved in maintaining a home without help. In many ways, this association of craft with an idealized, simpler past has persisted into the present time. Although it is less common for “women’s work” to be associated with the home, women still turn to craft in search of simplicity and a sense of family-togetherness. The sense of monotony in work for its own sake provides comfort: “The

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rhythmic movement of the needle and yarn through the canvas becomes a soothing thing.”

It becomes a wish-image of a mythologized time before “spare time,” when time was continuous and not-yet fragmented by the effects of modernity and consumerism. The idealized representation of craft is clearly seen in the branding of “Project Alabama,” Natalie Chanin’s line of clothing almost entirely constructed with the handwork of women living in Alabama, at home. Here, the clothing gains its value through its putative painstaking laboriousness, and subsequent sense of social responsibility by way of the avoidance of sweatshop labor and the investment in a dying local textile industry. In its idealization of time-worn hand techniques, an environment of work before alienation when the crafter herself and her family wore the fruits of her labor, the fact that the mode of production remains the same is hidden. It is about making as idealized work more than making as the hand’s way of revealing. The worker is still universally female, still alienated, and the extent to which this is hidden is highlighted in an advertising campaign linked with the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Initiative where Alabamian homemakers and their families are pictured wearing the clothes in their own houses, telling the stories behind their family recipes [Images 51-53]. The irony of an Alabamian woman wearing a jacket that she might have made but could never own, which retails for $2,999, is lost insofar as it remains hidden that the 100 hours of work on that jacket is only worth about $900, before tax. It is not only the labor and humble materials that add value, but herself as image, where the wearer puts on the idealized maker. In this use of highly crafted garments, binaries are not deconstructed and established class structures are reinforced. In Nora’s terms, it becomes a lieu de mémoire, standing in for a pre-

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"I remember we ate a lot of vegetables because my grandmother would buy things by the bushel. We'd all sit on the front porch and we'd just shell peas or pick greens. My great, great-grandmother lived down in Oakland and I used to go down there—she lived on a farm. We would just go down there and there was brains and eggs for breakfast and stuff like that."

Image 51

Image 52

Image 53
industrial *milieu de mémoire* in which the necessity of handcraft accompanied an environment of storytelling and continuous history. It presents a “seamless” image of a timeless work ethic.

The recent proliferation of denim as an invisible piece of clothing, one which “matches” everything and is almost universally appropriate, demonstrates the idealization of work, not as a return to traditional values, but as progress. Consumers pay to embody the worker/producer, and pay more as the “look” of work accomplished in the jeans increases. The traces of labor mask the mode of production, whether authentic or contrived. By contrast, the almost stereotypical punk style of chaining the legs together poses consumption as the root of production as enslavement. A bought piece of clothing visualized the bondage placed on the individual by society, picturing consumption as a history of forced labor [Image 54]. At the same time, the clothing prevented much physical work from occurring, which was a part of the punk nihilist creed anyway.

It is important that the referral to the “made” aspect of clothing is not misunderstood as craft itself, the act of making rather than the fact of madeness. The fetishization of “industry” and the reification of work is, in Benjamin’s terms, a discourse of sleep. When fashion contains “revolutionary energies,” it “brings forth” rather than soothing, it reveals as made rather than making. Attention is given to what is revealed by creation rather than act of creation itself.

The “being made” promotes awakening when it does not confuse work/industriousness with a mythologized past or historical progress, but brings the fact of work to sight. Craft walks a very fine line in this respect. It is deconstructive insofar as it points to all production as problematic, fetishized.
In my conversations with viewers, I was interested to know if the clothing was working both as fashion and as incitement for thought, without either intention eclipsing the other. I wanted the garments to be exciting and desirable while inspiring conceptual connections. At the most basic level I was looking for responses that would tell me whether a Benjamingan “awakening” had occurred. The soothing quality of craft was what most people noticed first. One woman remembered using her family’s treadle sewing machine as meditative and calming. Artist book comments revolved around the craft: “Great mix of excellent craft (wo)manship and handmade/personal quality”; “Way to express your fetish”; “I really appreciate your work and craft mentality … It’s time for craft to re-enter the art scene as a viable fine art sculptural medium”; “… it really resonates with me as someone who lived for many years with a grandmother who taught me all sorts of handcrafts.” In the process of construction, I had been seduced by the craft, its “soothing” nature, and this had clearly come across in the clothes. Hearing viewers speak about the “energy” that existed in the clothing because of the hand labor, and the soothing nature of the clothing (one viewer compared them to a “baby’s blanket), reminded me of Benjamin’s analogy of the difficulty of the historical materialist project with the struggle to wake up in the morning. The “morning voices” of the outmoded were incorporated into my waking dream, but I was still not awake. Instead of allowing the “madeness” of my garments to speak critically about underlying constructions, I was in love with the “making” of them.

3.3 Awakening recouped for the dream?

Benjamin asks, “From what are the phenomena rescued? […] not so much from the discredit and disregard into which they fall, as from the catastrophe of how a particular form of tradition so often represents them,
their “appreciation as heritage.” The designers I have discussed created images that I have described as new, or revolutionary, potentially outside of what Benjamin speaks of as “the arena of the ruling class.” However, what are the consequences when fashion theorists such as Richard Martin and Harold Koda are able to applaud “deconstructive luxe”? An efficient way to stave off a shocking image is to fetishize it, to freeze it in space and time, for example, in a museum. Here, deconstructive statements become nostalgic, the past is crystallized in itself rather than emerging for the present. For example, Martin and Koda describe the aesthetic of poverty, sometimes seen in Kawakubo’s work, as an example of deconstruction in clothing, saying,

> Fashion designers in the 1990s may not be exacting social justice, but they are realizing the ceaseless role of imagination in and upon the economic order. Fashion can still make a prince or a princess into a pauper and vice versa.

The re-expression of poverty is far from a social equalizer, and the luxury of dressing up in this manner only works to hide the fact that princes and paupers are no more interchangeable now than they were in the age of sumptuary laws. A rich man dressed as a poor man is still rich, demonstrating that the poor can dress as they like, but they will always be—safely—poor. Caroline Evans describes Margiela’s 1997 retrospective show at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam entitled (9/4/1615) in much the same way. Pieces from all of his previous collections were placed outdoors treated with agar, mould, yeast, and bacteria [Images 55-56] and left over a period of months. Evans describes the show in glowing terms as “rags” positioned “at

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the top of a hierarchy of prestige.”

For her, this recuperation is a rescue for capital, placing ambiguous rags back into commodity status. This is based on a misreading of Benjamin on the status of the ragpicker. She quotes:

Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed under foot, he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum (stockpile) of waste. He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the Goddess of Industry.

Reading the “Goddess of Industry” as the Fashion industry, Evans demonstrates her seduction by these “jaws.” Benjamin saw the ragpicker as more of an abject figure than a sarcastic “postmodern pasticheur,” creating capital out of junk. This misunderstanding is most clearly seen in her reading of the installation by Christian Boltanski entitled Take Me (I’m Yours) (1995), where the viewer could select clothing from a pile on the floor and take it with them in a purchased bag. For Evans, this viewer is ragpicker, the quintessential modern artist, who creates value from trash. She misses Benjamin’s melancholy tone, which a perceptive experience of Boltanski’s work would have highlighted. The similarity of Take Me (I’m Yours) to the installation Réserve: Lac des morts (1990) [Image 57] in which viewers walked on wooden boards over a corresponding pile of used clothing, and Réserve: Canada (1988)—a wall hung with used clothing—cannot be overlooked. “Canada” was the room in Auschwitz where stolen clothing was sorted and sent for use elsewhere, and the phrase “lake of the dead” shows us the importance Boltanski gives to abandoned clothing as a signifier of absence. Here, the ragpicker is shown to be a thief, an agent of forgetting who claims

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88 Ibid.
ownership of what cannot be owned. No answer is proposed. In fact, most of Boltanski’s work concerns the ways that any effort to remember “correctly” or “ethically” is continually frustrated.

In (9/4/1615), Margiela questions this sort of recuperation by the museum. As each of his ensembles appears here for the second time, they each risk slipping into the past along with the museum’s artifacts, and the decay visualizes this process more each day. Speaking of Benjamin’s formulation of fashion as “the bitter, whispered tête-à-tête with decay,” Evans says,

Margiela undoes these harsh associations, and brings the dress back to life in the form of a gentle ghost, reviving dead materials and lost traces, giving new life to old cloth, rewriting its history, and adding a benign twist to bleak associations. Here is decay without revulsion, a second chance, perhaps, for Miss Haversham [sic].

While Margiela demonstrates the slipping into the past of the “new,” Evans reads nostalgia as new, the “new as always-the-same.” For her, the “gentle ghost” of Miss Havisham returns. This is not Benjamin’s ideal of awareness by way of dialectical “shock,” but “deconstruction luxe” as object fetish, as withdrawn from society as Miss Havisham in her decaying wedding dress.

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90 Ibid., 92.
I have proposed a reading of Benjamin with respect to fashion that takes into account his wider project, the hastening of a material revolution in which “freedom,” and a classless society would emerge. If there are hauntings, uncanny returns, that preview or precipitate such a revolution, they are never gentle. Makers and wearers can use fashion’s dialectic in order to shock or to soothe. Shocking images transmit a haunting from the past in the present into the knowledge that the future is already being haunted by the present. Nadja, Breton’s figure of “convulsive beauty,” demonstrates that making oneself into a shocking image is not safe, often coming at the expense of one’s life. When it is safe, it is nostalgic, the madness of Miss Havisham for whom time has stopped in the past. Both Nadja and Miss Havisham’s state of half-dress makes them ghosts, living partly in this world, and partly in another.

In Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham has been living suspended in her dressing-room ever since her heart was broken on her wedding day. Her clocks are stopped at the moment that she discovered that her wedding would not be happening, after which there was no reason to put on her second shoe and finish arranging her veil. It is precisely this sense of interruption that causes Pip to imagine her as the living dead:

> Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud. … I have often thought since that she must have looked as
if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust.91

Likewise, Nadja’s unfinished, interrupted makeup was part of her own sense of haunting the world. A self-declared “soul in limbo,”92 she defies convention, while Miss Havisham has stopped her life because of a disrupted tradition. Nadja was “suddenly” noticed by André Breton, as distinctly set apart from those who would not yet “be ready to create the Revolution”: “She was curiously made up, as though beginning with her eyes, she had not had time to finish, though the rims of her eyes were dark for a blonde, the rims only, and not the lids.”93 For Miss Havisham, present time will always be for the past; passing time accrues in the instant at which things a convention should have been honored. This exertion of control over time, the preservation of the familiar, is an expression of the new as always-the-same. On the other hand, Nadja is “free of any earthly tie,” and “cares so little, but so marvelously, for life.”94 She is sudden, irrational, and mercurial, qualities that contradict power to the extent that she is committed to a psychiatric institution. This is the only kind of beauty that Breton finds interesting, and it is also the aspect of fashion that Benjamin finds to be anticipatory of revolution.

For Roland Barthes, the context of capitalism precludes the new as anything other than commodity: “Fashion doubtless belongs to all the phenomena of neomania which probably appeared in our civilization with the birth of capitalism: in an entirely institutional manner, the new is a purchased value.”95 Fashion’s domestication of the new leaves no room for

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92 Breton, *Nadja*, 71.
93 Ibid., 64.
94 Ibid., 90.
utopian anticipation; when the new can be bought and sold, it is no longer shocking, but routinized and familiar. And doesn’t the runway show fit entirely within this box? Nadja was found on the street, not the runway. Are Jun Takahashi’s shocks still only images? Is revolution on the runway ever a feasible proposition? For Benjamin’s contemporary, Theodor Adorno, the image of utopian anticipation cannot be crystallized until the condition of capitalism is removed, and a just society is in place. However, Benjamin witnessed gaps emerging in the ghosts of the Paris arcades; he saw the new in what fashion had left behind. When the out-of-style was suddenly made available for the present through new use and fresh interpretation, new hope, new life, appeared outside of the market. But as in the deconstructive and reconstructive examples above, the new can momentarily appear, but can have no strict aesthetic definable material aspect. Like nostalgia for crystallized fragments of the past, once fragments of the future can be imagined, they can be reproduced, bought and sold, made exclusive, irreconcilable with freedom.

Accordingly, reading fashion with Benjamin is never to suggest that an inherently revolutionary form can somehow be stitched into a garment, but that some garments open themselves to better ways of reading, encouraging the same interpretive stance in other encounters with other garments. In this way, the inevitable change of context around any shocking gesture in Fashion, its slipping into the past, does not diminish its first statement. A garment that calls attention to its own madness, brings this same attention to all garments. Fashion that produces awareness of itself as fashioning, as making, is revolutionary in that it awakens wearers to the soporific quality of all fashion, extending beyond itself, so that wearing becomes a process much like making, constructing, stitching, and seaming.
By designing fashion that pertained to concepts, I was able to speak with experience on the relationship between the idea and its material stylization through words and cloth. In writing about clothing as both produced and productive, it was helpful to actually make. The clothes indicated, perhaps more effectively than the “finished” writing, their own productive context, calling attention to the work of the producer as a consumption of time, and capacity as producing, their status as made and making.
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