

Anja Aronowsky Cronberg

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**Postmodernism**  
**and**  
**Fashion**  
**in the late**  
**twentieth century**

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**Imagined Nostalgia and**  
**False Memories**

THIS TEXT IS ABOUT

*The memory crisis · The connection between  
memory, knowledge and history · Marcel Proust's  
madeleines · The mind as a labyrinth · Nostalgia  
as an epidemic of the modern age · Fashion as  
an embodiment of modernity*



ACCORDING TO HISTORIAN Raphael Samuel, revivalism can be traced back to fifteenth century Italy<sup>1</sup>, a mere two centuries after fashion itself is said to have begun, when classical antiquity was rediscovered and subsequently came to inspire culture in all its forms. Similarly throughout history

the past has continued to fascinate and inspire the present aesthetic. Historical borrowing by dress makers and fashion designers has been as frequent as in other forms of culture, and likewise individuals making use of 'historical' sartorial styles is not a new phenomenon. We can see this in Biba resurrecting the glamour of Hollywood's golden era and in Marc Jacobs several decades later drawing inspiration from Biba. Yet another case in point might be the Grecian style of dress which has enjoyed countless revivals, in all from robes worn by the women attending Napoleon's 1804 coronation to Fortuny's classically based designs in the early twentieth century, a designer who himself enjoyed a revival in the 1980s. What is interesting here is that, as dress historian Barbara Burman Baines has noted, in fashion, revivals are a constant theme. Hence, as a style is revived to suit contemporary tastes, it has, as the many revivals and variations of the classical Grecian style have shown,

already a history of revivals behind its current one. So, when we yearn for a past, steeped in nostalgic emotion, we are 'looking back on people who were also looking back, longing for the golden age they supposed to have preceded them.'<sup>2</sup>

### RETRO CLOTHING AND THE 'MEMORY CRISIS'

The emphasis that we place on (material) memories and history, can be traced back to ancient Greece where the goddess Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was in addition also the goddess of wisdom, and the mother of Clio, the goddess of history. Hence the Greeks meant that in order for history to exist, we humans must be able to remember; in other words memory was seen as a prerequisite of human thought. This connection between memory, knowledge, and history is one that threads all the way through the discourses surrounding vintage clothing. Yet, the 'art of memory' (as Raphael Samuel terms it) has more in common with nostalgia as practised by the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century, than with the ancient Greek understanding of mnemonics. The Romantics understood human nature to be intrinsically dual, something which was expressed in their own longing for an impending utopia, or alternative reality, which ran alongside a feeling of strong discontent with the present as conveyed in their deep yearning for a past saturated with nostalgic sentiment. The ruins of time was seemingly one of the most important building blocks of the Romantic movement, which meant that memory was inevitably linked to a sense of loss. Here the act of remembering had more to do with the intuitive than the scientific. 'It pictured the mind not as a watchtower but as a labyrinth, a subterranean place full of contrived corridors and hidden passages'<sup>3</sup> So rather than pure anamnesis, memory here becomes something instinctual, as with Marcel Proust's nostalgic recollection of his childhood's beloved madeleines. Hence, the memory to which I am referring here is perhaps better explained by using the term *nostalgia*, which derives from Greek roots<sup>4</sup>, but was coined, not in ancient Greece, but by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss doctor, in 1688. This new disease was diagnosed as what Swiss expatriates suffered from when forced to leave their homeland to study, work or fight for their country on foreign shores. The longing for home could be aroused by anything

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# **The Dinner Club**

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**Martina  
Hoogland Ivanow**

from a smell to the sound of familiar music, much like memories are awakened for (post)modern nostalgics today, and the only way to completely cure this ruinous disease was a return home.

Interestingly, nostalgia shared certain elements with another disease common in the seventeenth century – melancholia. However, whereas melancholy was a disease that mainly affected the intellectual, its heaviness of the heart seemingly emerging as a direct by-product of critical reason, nostalgia was mainly found in soldiers, sailors and those who moved from rural areas to the cities in search of a better life. Svetlana Boym writes in *The Future of Nostalgia* that nostalgia in this sense was a more ‘democratic’ disease, which went beyond the ailment of the individual, turning into an endemic peril which revealed the ambiguity that many people felt when faced with modernity. In this sense nostalgia permits us to study the flip side of modernity and progress, and the disparity between scientific and technological advances and the seemingly slower human heart. Yet as much as nostalgia was problematic in the seventeenth century it also conveyed a commendable love for

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freedom and one’s motherland. However, as time wore on this type of homesickness lost its romantic qualities. In nineteenth century America nostalgia had become something shameful, a sign of weakness and regressive attitudes. Soldiers who were affected by the disease were, on doctor’s orders, subjected to hounding and ridicule by their fellow soldiers in the hope that this would make them more manly and less emotional. With the passing of time, however, nostalgia turned from a disease curable with a return to the homeland to an incurable yearning for something much less tangible. In the modern age this ‘hypochondria of the heart’<sup>5</sup>, can

be defined as the human capacity to grieve over times passed, in a manner much less concrete than the longing for an actual time or place that has ceased to be. Nostalgia, the ravages of longing for something beyond one's reach, has become an epidemic of the modern age.

Nineteenth century modernity was a time of great change. The continuous project of industrialisation was of course key to these changes, but equally, thinkers captivated by modernity such as Baudelaire, Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin saw the main transformation as being one of human consciousness. To them modernity could be distinguished as the appraisal of consciousness, as a 'force in its own right'<sup>6</sup>. Walter Benjamin, the, to this study, perhaps most pertinent critic of modernity, wrote at length about the complexities of modernity and its relationship to history and memory. Benjamin examines Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, the remembrance of his childhood that the unexpected confrontation with the madeleines brought about, and means that, as opposed to memory which is a conscious act, remembrance begins as something unconscious, before giving rise to experience. This unforeseen recollection of the past is habitually tinged with nostalgia, such as that which Proust experienced. And, just as those madeleines prompted Proust to remember times past, it could be argued that vintage, or even new vintage, clothing often does the same for us today, albeit in a slightly more complex and convoluted way. Benjamin writes, in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, that fashion is 'a tiger's leap into the past', a point that both Ulrich Lehmann and Caroline Evans have used as the basis of their respective explorations of the relationship between fashion and modernity<sup>7</sup> and one that Patrizia Calefato explores at length in this issue. However, paradoxically, at the same time as fashion 'stirs in the thickets of long ago'<sup>8</sup> Benjamin has acknowledged in the earlier *Arcades Project* that it is 'irreverent towards tradition'. In this dialectic it seems that Benjamin identifies the resemblance between fashion and modernity. Baudelaire's aphorism about modernity being the 'transitory, the fleeting and the contingent' could equally have been said about fashion, and this, it seems, is what has prompted philosophers such as Benjamin to see fashion as the embodiment of modernity. The notion that fashion constantly has to renew itself, that it is 'transitory, fleeting and contingent', is what makes this comparison so

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persuasive. Hence, as modernity pushes forward towards the future, never, even for a moment, standing still, fashion moves alongside it, the ephemerality of both equally infuriating and compelling. As fashion designers use the past as a muse, shaping it to fit the future (one must remember here that fashion designers today always design one season in advance, showing winter garments when the summer has yet to pass and vice versa), it could be said that they cause past and future to come together in the present moment. Benjamin calls this *Jetztzeit* – the presence of the now. In *jetztzeit* time stands still, it is the instance of absolute calm at the centre of ‘a past charged with the time of the now [...] blasted out of the continuum of history.’<sup>9</sup> For fashion, which is constantly looking towards the horizon of the future, whilst never letting go of the past, *jetztzeit* describes this dialectical relationship between thesis (past) and antithesis (future) well. Consequently, the result-

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ing synthesis is then the present, just one fleeting moment in time, blink and you will miss it. Benjamin saw history as embedded in modernity, meaning that the original object, produced in a fleeting moment of time, holds the prospect for reproduction within it. Perhaps then it is possible to see the constant reproduction of the past, of memory, as well as the (mass)reproduction of clothing, all integral parts of modernity, as an essential part of this Benjaminian interpretation of history. For sartorial style this would mean that vintage is a look that will never go out of fashion, since, as part of the collective aesthetic history, it will always be carried into the future through the present.

Still remembrance associated with vintage, or new vin-

tage, clothing is a convoluted one. Whereas Proust's memory was involuntarily and unexpectedly triggered by his encounter with his youth's cherished madeleines, the wearing of vintage clothes seems to carry a resonance, made more complex by the fact that the clothes worn were never a part of the wearer's youth in the first place. Vintage and new vintage clothing instead seem to reverberate the same *imagined* nostalgia, or false memories. As the purchase and wearing of vintage clothing is a conscious act, one that requires the exclusion of other styles of dress, it is hard to assert that it is a strictly involuntary memory. At the same time, however, the wearer is not, in most cases, remembering something from their own past, but rather taking a step into the collective memory. Whether you don a dress that once belonged to your mother as a young girl, acquire a coat that, in its former life, was, say, part of the wardrobe of an unknown soldier fighting in the First World War or, as a

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young vintage fan wear a cardigan with an imagined Rockabilly past, you are equally stepping into a past that did not include you. Hence, you are not remembering your own past, but an imagined past, one that you were never part of, but, due to the constant reproduction of it, feel familiar with all the same.

Memory then, just as history, appears to be eternally amendable, subject to the dominant fervour of any one particular time. Rather than being fixed these concepts are fluid, metamorphosing according to the demands of the present. In fashion this seems evident in the period styles that contemporary designers choose to resurrect, whether it is Maison Martin Margiela replicating an unlabelled 1970s silk shirt in 2006, or Lanvin showing

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a plethora of 1940s style dresses and suits on the catwalk for autumn/winter 2009, these clothes speak to us about the concerns of the present.

### **THE DESIGNER AS HISTORIC MAGPIE; THE CONSUMER AS BRICOLEUR**

Just as for the Swiss expatriates in the seventeenth century nostalgia, imagined or real, still today serves as a sort of anchor, a way to keep us grounded in an ever-changing milieu. In terms of vintage clothing this would mean that the consumer might act on a subconscious impulse to remember a past that although one which he or she was never a part of, it nevertheless instigates 'fond memories'. Similarly, it could be argued that when, to make use of Caroline Evans' term, 'fashion turns back on itself'<sup>10</sup> it can simultaneously act to bring a further dimension to times gone by (meaning that the past acquires new implications based on new events in the present) as well as filtering contemporary concerns through the continuum that history represents. Hence, that the past is continuously re-evaluated because of the constant changes taking place in the present, is a perception that makes much sense when looking at past fashions being interpreted and reinterpreted in the present. If we return to the previously mentioned silk shirt by Martin Margiela one might argue that as an exact replica of an actual 1970s shirt, which has the original decade, country of origin and object description plainly stated on its label which also makes clear that this garment is, in fact, a replica, this would fulfil the portrayal of fashion designers as historic magpies. However, it is questionable whether the actual material used is an exact copy of the original (as fabric production has become evermore sophisticated with the development of technology), and even how accurate the term 'replica' in fact is when, to be sold in a contemporary setting, the garment has been graded to fit modern-day bodies, and is subsequently sold in both small, medium and large sizes. Nevertheless, granted that a garment designed in the image of a vintage piece but produced in a society that requires mass-production will never be an exact replica of its original, the issues mentioned above seem no less relevant.

Getting a vintage garment to fit a modern body can, as all modern vintage fans know all too well, be a feat awash with frustration, and although contemporary designers might attempt to

adjust the fit of a vintage garment when reproducing it for contemporary use, this is not always successful. Nevertheless, Martin Margiela's 2006 take on the original 1970s shirt is also a poignant example of fashion turning back on itself, as much as it shows the democratising effect of new vintage clothing. A shirt that began its life as a mass-produced garment in the early 1970s, and entered its second cycle of life an unique piece found by the Margiela designers in a flea market or vintage shop, has, in its contemporary, new vintage adaptation, been resurrected, under a different alias, yet again as a mass-produced garment (albeit still a relatively expensive one), available in size 8-12. And so, through the metamorphosis from random mass-produced garment to exclusive designer piece, one silk shirt ceases to be the remnant of times past and is

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brought back to life as a garment to be enjoyed by all those who can afford its £345 price tag.

'Material memories' in their various shapes and forms have had an impact on clothing design throughout history, although what I here have termed 'vintage style' began to take a more prominent role in the fashion system in the second half of the twentieth century. However, despite the recurrent historical borrowings by designers such as Biba or Bill Gibb, it isn't until we examine how fashion design has developed since the 1980s that we can fathom the true extent of this trend. With designers like John Galliano and Vivienne Westwood it would seem as if this magpie aesthetic has, after having percolated on the peripheries of design for decades, at long last properly permeated the threads of the entire aesthetic order. Dick Hebdige writes how:

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‘The past is played and replayed as an amusing range of styles, genres, signifying practises to be combined and recombined at will. The then (and the there) are subsumed in the now. The only history that exists here is the history of the signifier and that is no history at all...’<sup>11</sup>

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Caroline Evans means that this ‘bricolage aesthetic [...] becomes an emblem of modernity itself.’<sup>12</sup> Westwood’s brazen borrowings from the seventeenth century landsknechte, and Galliano’s equally audacious scavenging of the turn-of-the-century femme fatale prove that, at least on the face of it, fashion suffers from the kind of ‘nostalgia mode’ that Fredric Jameson diagnosed in the same decade<sup>13</sup>.

However, I would argue that fashion is instead more like a kaleidoscope, with a complex set of causes which make for an equally complex set of effects. Rather than being an empty simulation of a past robbed of its meaning, the bold historical borrowings of designers like Westwood and Galliano appear to have more in common with Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘dialectical images’ and it’s comparison with the cinematic technique of montage – the juxtaposition of two images, creating a third, wholly new, meaning. Hence what could be perceived as historical pastiche instead acquires a meaning that aspires to go further than the mere upgrading of a vision from the past. Here the bygone and the contemporary moves beyond being a comparison of the two and instead takes the shape of a continual mirroring of past and present, with similar themes simultaneously moving through the two. In accordance then with what Caroline Evans argues, the past is therefore never fully behind us but moves alongside our present, taking on

new meanings and interpretations as we move forward in time. Neither the past nor the present is fixed, instead both move in and out of each other fluidly, and when juxtaposed as in contemporary sartorial style the ‘flash of recognition’<sup>14</sup> created by the past in the present creates a transitory sense of veracity, or truth, albeit an ephemeral one. This ‘truth’ can be found in the third image,

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the one formed by the union of the past with the present. Similar to how the Dadaists and Surrealists created extraordinary and often bizarre cinematic montages in the 1930s, Evans has noted how contemporary DJs seem to employ a similar technique when mixing in records from the past with new-fangled tunes to create innovative and original music. In other words, this technique is in no way exclusive to fashion designers, instead it appears as if it is an ‘emblem of (post)modernity itself’, to rehash Evans’ phrase in a slightly modified form. However, just as postmodern artists often act as collectors of cultural debris, so consumers have adopted a similar aesthetic. Whereas the utilisation of our sartorial past previously has seemed restricted to subcultural style, in postmodernity all consumers are exposed to this type of ‘urban ragpicking’<sup>15</sup>, to use Caroline Evans’ evocative expression.

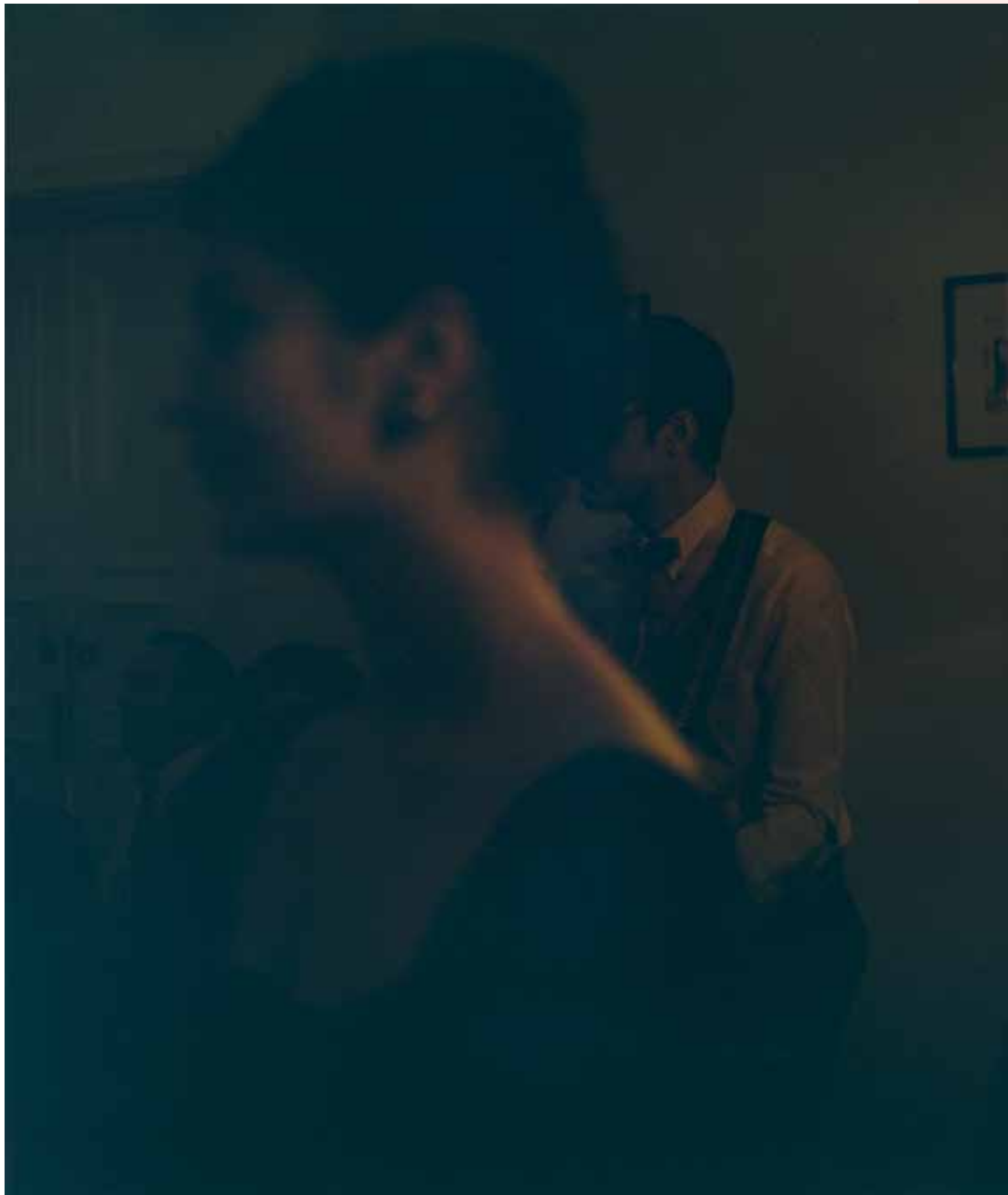
Bricolage, a term adapted from the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, has been used by Dick Hebdige to describe the subcultural implementation of this pick-and-mix aesthetic. Whereas Levi-Strauss coined the expression to describe how primitive people make use of magic to instil logic into their world, as it allows for an infinite number of interpretations that can be eternally developed to include new meanings, a later anthropological definition describes how:

[Bricolage] ‘refers to the means by which the non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the

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world around him. [...] The structures, ‘improvised’ or made up (these are rough translations of the process of bricolage) as ad hoc responses to an environment, then serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily ‘explain’ the world and make it able to be lived in.<sup>17</sup>

Now, the type of bricolage that we are interested in here, is not what primitive people use to make sense of their surroundings, but instead the same technique translated into use within the cityscape. John Clarke defines metropolitan bricolage thus:

‘Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed.’<sup>18</sup>

This type of urban bricolage has been used to describe how subcultures adapt objects in their immediate surrounding to fit into their lifestyle, and in the process giving familiar objects new meanings. In their new surrounding these objects/signs come to signify something completely other to what we have come to expect, thus moving the object/sign into an unexpected direction that requires the onlooker to revalue what has become common knowledge. In this sense, the old parkas that mods wore over their spanking new Italian mohair suits in the 1960s was an early example of stylistic bricolage, and, equally, it can be argued that the old clothes that contemporary sartorial stylists put in a new context form part of the same discourse. A man’s second-hand lumber-jack shirt tied coquettishly, Marilyn Monroe-style, in the waist of a petite girl, and combined with a mini tutu and high stack-heeled pumps, or a 1950s delicately beaded cardigan worn with a pair of battered jeans and sneakers are transformed by the innovative styling of their wearers. Here, two distinctly gendered garments are made ambiguous by their new owners, as is the context in which they are now being worn. Just as the artist and poet Pierre Reverdy wrote in 1918, the ‘juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities’ brought about a ‘new surreality’.<sup>19</sup> Today this expression seems equally suggestive, and in a sartorial context it seems particularly

pertinent to use this curious and often bizarre juxtaposition of two realities. Magazines in the 1980s such as the Face, Blitz and i-D scrupulously employed this aesthetic of the urban bricoleur, and the magpie visuals adopted in their fashion shoots helped make this late twentieth century style popular, with i-D in particular, with their introduction of the consumer-bricoleur in their now-famous ‘straight-up’ style photographs, acting as an influence on a host of more mainstream publications.<sup>20</sup>

For the great majority of vintage consumers the juxtaposition of old and new clothes is an instinctive way to relate to fashion. Mixing something old with something new then acts as a way to separate ‘fashion’ from ‘style’. For vintage enthusiasts who perceive themselves to be at the forefront of fashion, but who are

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equally conscious of appearing ‘too fashionable’, a sartorial style comprising both vintage and new offers the prospect of keeping the precarious balance between the two just right. It could be speculated that, along with conferring a message of ‘style’, rather than ‘fashion’, vintage enthusiasts also find a certain security or familiarity in holding onto contemporary brand names. Just like the shoppers on London’s Portobello Market who enjoy their Starbucks Macchiato with semi-skimmed milk whilst browsing the market traders’ wares, or the consumer who revels in the convenience of picking and mixing old with new, the contemporary consumer bricoleur can rest assured that whether she decides on an old dress from the 1960s or a new blouse from Lanvin’s autumn/winter 2009 collection, both garments will equally affirm her position as a style leader. For, whereas vintage clothes have the ability to bestow values such as authenticity and cool on their wearer, for many an entire wardrobe of old clothes still carries connotations of

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economic scarcity. Hence, for the mainly middle class consumers who shop vintage for style, the combination of old and new constitutes what Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe term ‘knowing chic’.<sup>21</sup> Through donning a vintage military-style jacket with a new pair of jeans (notwithstanding a pair that have been bestowed with an artificial patina), the ‘temporal archaeologies associated with second-hand [...] and all of the style and taste associations which go with this’ are added to the ‘stylistic safety net [that] the brand confers’<sup>22</sup>.

Although the often carefree manner in which the consumer bricoleur relates to historical styles has resulted in accusations of a ‘supermarket of style’ approach<sup>23</sup> to dress, this is not to say that this sartorial style is devoid of meaning. Although it appears to fit in neatly with Fredric Jameson or Jean Baudrillard’s account of

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postmodernity as an era of ‘anything goes’, this gung ho attitude to style might suggest an attitude more akin to what Alexandra Palmer has termed ‘an informed, avant-garde fashion connoisseur’.<sup>24</sup> The urban ragpicker could then be seen to be not so much nostalgic as more than willing, stains and all, to recognise that what he or she is wearing exists in the here and now, rather than in a far off sepia-tinted past. Consequently, an alternative reading of Proust’s wistful longing for his long lost madeleines, might be seen as a converse of nostalgia. Seen like this, the childhood memories triggered by Proust’s encounter with his madeleines can be seen to have acted as the release needed to move both the author and his fictional doppelganger forward into the future. For our consumer bricoleurs the fusion of old and new might similarly act as the link between looking backwards and looking forwards, between a yearning for the past and a hunger for the future.

## NOSTALGIA COMMODIFICATION

### – WHY HAS RETRO BECOME A STYLE STATEMENT?

This text began by looking at ways in which nostalgia has taken root in contemporary consumption of clothing, and will end by examining the argument, as proposed by various philosophers and cultural commentators since the 1980s, that nostalgia has become a commodified part of our culture, thus reducing retro clothing to nothing but surface, a mere style statement. Reading nostalgia commodification as a symptom of a culture that has lost its connection with its authentic past is an element of postmodernism, that influential term that, rising from its unassuming beginnings as a literary-critical term in the 1950s, has become commonplace parlance in all from the arts to literature, theory and even science.

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Surmounting the paradoxical nature of the term – if modern is the term used to describe the present, how can anything still in the present be postmodern? – it seems as if the expression is here to stay (at least for the moment).<sup>25</sup>

For all the endemic use of the term postmodern, it is a deeply ambiguous term. In relation to modernism it can either be seen as a way to carry the modernist principles further than the modernists themselves managed to do, or, alternatively, as a complete rejection of modernism. What both these strands of postmodernism have in common, however, is the desire to go beyond what has with hindsight been perceived as the restrictions of modernism. Whereas modernism sought the absolute truth, or supreme autonomy and unconditional transparency, which often ultimately led to marginal voices being forgotten or ignored, postmodernity appears to be made up of these alternative realities. Similarly in fashion the familiar recounting of the influence of postmodernism





proposes that The Fashion, i.e. the one line or trend that everybody from the girl next door to your auntie followed slavishly was replaced in the 1970s by various, parallel, Fashions, which supposedly gave increased freedom to consumers, allowing them to play

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with the notion of a rigid constitution of character. Although this is perhaps a somewhat simplified version of events, there is something here to be said for the changing relationship between identity and style. Elizabeth Wilson, in *Fashion and the Postmodern Body*, means that in a postmodern culture style runs the risk of becoming a substitute for identity, the flexibility of postmodern fashions perhaps acting as a way to offer an alternative to the idea of identity as fixed.<sup>26</sup>

Also, postmodernism breaks away from the modernist view that culture is something determined by production, be it directly or indirectly. Instead, in postmodernism culture is shaped by itself, and its representations have replaced the former emphasis on production. As a result the history of cultural signs and representations, and of what is perceived as *the Other*, has become an area of scholarly and artistic interest, leading to a renewed interest in the past as an agent employed to elucidate the present. The type of sartorial style that has come to be called postmodern, could then, as we have seen, be a case in point where the past is used to illuminate the present. In addition it appears to have more in common with the understanding of postmodernism that sees the movement as a rupture, rather than a continuation, from the modern, albeit one that seems to exist alongside the latter. Gilles Lipovetsky has, alongside Lehmann and Evans, spun Benjamin's perception

of fashion being the embodiment of modernity further, its continuous transformations and constant changes, acting as a sort of reminder of the ephemeral nature of things. If understood like this the contemporary proclivity for vintage and retro fashion, whether second hand or newly produced, could be argued to be an example of postmodernity, with its random cultural borrowing, running parallel to modernity. Nostalgia in dress then gets fused with the present-day emphasis on authenticity although according to post-modern philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson the authenticity at stake here is one that is opaque, rather than transparent. It feigns a past free of discolouring marks, a romantic ideal past where everyone and everything was 'real'. This is the imagined, aestheticized, past that Jameson terms 'nostalgia mode'. Along with Baudrillard he maintains that contemporary culture is permeated by simulacra, making this 'nostalgia mode' a carefully constructed simulacrum of the past, existing in order for us to create the illusion of 'pastness', a past that is nothing more than a pastiche of the actual, historical past. Accordingly retro clothing, newly produced or 'authentic', then becomes another layer in the miasma that is postmodern culture, an anarchic form of nostalgia in a society struggling to cover its lack of genuine zeitgeist. Heike Jenß argues that this lack of originality is due to the fact that:

'The pictorial world, generated through the multiplication of images like record covers, movies, television or fashion photographs that provide a pool of historic body appearances and bits of fashion-time, forms the constitutive basis for the consumption and bodily performance of history. [...] Due to this reproducibility of images that make 'history' eternally present, historic styles get separated from their original context, 'the real' history behind them is blurred.'<sup>27</sup>

However, Jenß is also adamant that not all consumers of retro clothing succumb to this separation from historic value. For many the wearing of vintage garments is a very focused decision full of relevance and meaning. Rather than ignoring the history of the preferred style, these consumers instead found immense pleasure in gaining knowledge about the period. In fact, it seems as if this knowledge is what separates the consumers who perceive themselves as 'authentic' or true vintage enthusiasts, from the 'fashion victims'. This type of vintage aficionado, as Jenß observes,

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often use images from album covers as well as old photographs as their stylistic starting point, but rather than using a bricolage aesthetic, they instead attempt to mimic these images. Hence, the reverse of Jenß's earlier citation appears to be at work. By reconnecting the 'original context' to the 'historic style', here we have

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**»Our world is not one of  
boundless innovation, but rather  
one where nostalgia ties us firmly  
into place.«**

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consumers who see themselves as engaging in a constant learning process, their knowledge of their chosen period getting evermore thorough and meaningful with each new jumper bought or band discovered. Whereas the 'fashion victims' are only interested in vintage because of its current fashionability, substituting vintage for the next trend at the drop of a hat, enthusiasts such as these perceive their own interest to be a lasting one, and one often already in full swing in their childhood or early teenage years. The pursuit of vintage garments here has more in common with a collector's approach than with the average shopping experience, and a thorough knowledge of period clothing is vital. The consumption of the past is here, contrary to what Jameson or Baudrillard might argue, not in any way extraneous. These consumers often tend to feel more 'at home' with one particular decade, and along with the style comes the knowledge of the period. For this type of vintage user, knowingness is key. Rather than being a straight celebration of the past, or a mere yearning for a slower paced world, vintage clothing is a way to 'indicate knowledges to knowing audiences'<sup>28</sup>. Michel Foucault famously argued that knowledge equals power<sup>29</sup> and it seems as if, in the instance of 'vintage aficionados' versus 'fashion victims', this dictum holds true.

### CONCLUSION

We have seen how the vintage aesthetic can be employed in order to reconnect with bygone times, how it can be seen as a way to hold

onto the past, whilst simultaneously remolding it in the image of the future. In new vintage clothing past, present and future seem to converge in a manner which incarnates each element in equal measure, whilst concurrently not embodying any of them. Just as fashion is supposed to represent the absolute present, although it is made several months before this present has come into being, in new vintage clothing this already convoluted logic gets even further abstracted. Here the past is reinterpreted to fit with a present that is, in fact, not the present at all, but rather the future. We have seen how this penchant for nostalgia in contemporary culture has been accused of moving so far from historicity that it risks losing all meaning and instead becoming an empty gesture, a mere simulacra, of what it seeks to represent. We have also seen how the vintage aesthetic can have nothing to do with these issues at all, but instead address matters such as distinction and knowledge, functioning as a tool to set the knowing apart from the ignorant. Yet another way to grasp the vintage phenomenon might be through Nietzsche's principle of the eternal recurrence. Although Nietzsche never made an explicit connection to art or culture here, it is an alluring concept seemingly open to reinterpretation in this context. To paraphrase this enigmatic component of Nietzsche's philosophy, if the world is a game of dice, then the outcome is bound to be repeated. Perhaps similarly we are bound to endlessly reiterate the same aesthetics, new vintage then being the proof that our world is not one of boundless innovation, but rather one where nostalgia ties us firmly in place in a world of inevitable and constant flux, albeit one that turns in circles. •

Postmodernism  
and Fashion

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