

Rebecca Arnold

FASHION

A Very Short Introduction



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For Adrian

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Introduction

Malign Muses, Judith Clark's groundbreaking 2005 exhibition at the Mode Museum in Antwerp, brought together recent and historical dress in a spectacular series of tableaux. The setting was designed to look like a 19th-century fairground, with simple plain wooden structures that evoked carousels, and oversized black and white fashion drawings by Ruben Toledo, which added to the feeling of magic and showmanship. The exhibition emphasized fashion's excitement and spectacle. Intricate designs by John Galliano and Alexander McQueen mixed with interwar couture, including Elsa Schiaparelli's 'skeleton dress', a black sheath embellished with a padded bone structure. A dramatic 1950s Christian Dior evening dress in crisp silk, with a structured bodice and sweeping skirt, caught with a bow at the back, was shown, as was a delicate white muslin summer dress made in India in the late 19th century, and decorated with traditional chain stitch embroidery. Belgian designer Dries Van Noten's jewel-coloured prints and burnished sequins of the late 1990s stood next to a vibrantly hued Christian Lacroix ensemble of the 1980s. This extravagant combination of garments was rendered comprehensible by Clark's cleverly designed sets, which focused on the varied ways in which fashion uses historical references. The exhibition's theatrical staging connected to 18th-century Commedia del Arte shows and masquerades, and linked directly to



1. A tableau from the *Malign Muses* exhibition held at the Mode Museum in Antwerp in 2005, designed and curated by Judith Clark

contemporary designers' use of drama and visual excess in their seasonal catwalk shows.

Malign Muses was later staged at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where it was renamed as *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*. This new title expressed one of the contradictions at the heart of fashion. Fashion is obsessed with the new, yet it continually harks to the past. Clark deployed this central opposition to great effect, encouraging visitors to think about fashion's rich history, as well as to connect it to current issues in fashion. This was achieved through the juxtaposition of garments from different periods, which used similar techniques, design motifs, or thematic concerns. It was also the result of Clark's close collaboration with fashion historian and theorist Caroline Evans. By using Evans' important insights about fashion and history from her 2003 book *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*, Clark revealed fashion's hidden impulses. Evans shows how influences from the past haunt fashion, as they do the

wider culture. Such references can add validity to a new, radical design, and connect it to a hallowed earlier ideal. This was apparent in the fragile pleats of the Mme Grès dress included in the show, which looked to classical antiquity for inspiration. Fashion can even speak of our fears of death, in its constant search for youthfulness and the new, as evoked by Dutch duo Viktor and Rolf's all-black gothic-inspired gown.

Visitors could therefore not only see the visual and material aspects of fashion's uses of history, but through a series of playfully constructed vignettes, they were able to question the garments' deeper meanings. In a continuation of the exhibition's fairground theme, a series of carefully conceived optical illusions used mirrors to trick the viewer's eye. Dresses seemed to appear then disappear, were glimpsed through spy-holes, or were magnified or reduced in size. Thus, visitors had to engage with what they were looking at, and question what they thought they could see.

They were prompted to think about what fashion means. In contrast to clothing, which is usually defined as a more stable and functional form of dress that alters only gradually, fashion thrives on novelty and change. Its cyclical, seasonally shifting styles were evoked by Toledo's circular drawing of a never-ending parade of silhouettes, each different from the next. Fashion is often also seen as a 'value' added to clothes to make them desirable to consumers. The exhibition sets' glamour and theatricality reflected the ways that catwalk shows, advertising, and fashion photography seduce and tempt viewers by showing idealized visions of garments. Equally, fashion can be seen as homogenizing, encouraging everyone to dress in a certain way, but simultaneously about a search for individuality and expression. The contrast between couture's dictatorial approaches to fashion in the mid-20th century, embodied by outfits by Dior, for example, was contrasted with the diversity of 1990s fashions to emphasize this contradiction.

This led visitors to understand the different types of fashion that can exist at any one moment. Even in Dior's heyday, other kinds of fashionable clothing were available, whether in the form of Californian designers' simple ready-to-wear styles, or Teddy boys' confrontational fashions. Fashion can emanate from a variety of sources and can be manufactured by designers and magazines, or develop organically from street level. *Malign Muses* was therefore itself a significant moment in fashion history. It united seemingly disparate elements of past and present fashions, and presented them in such a way that visitors were entertained and enthralled by its sensual display, but led to understand that fashion is more than mere surface.

As the exhibition revealed, fashion thrives on contradiction. By some, it is seen as rarefied and elite, a luxury world of couture craftsmanship and high-end retailers. For others, it is fast and throwaway, available on every high street. It is increasingly global, with new 'fashion cities' evolving each year, yet can equally be local, a micro fashion specific to a small group. It inhabits intellectual texts and renowned museums, but can be seen in television makeover shows and dedicated websites. It is this very ambiguity that makes it fascinating, and which can also provoke hostility and disdain.

Fashions can occur in any field, from academic theory to furniture design to dance styles. However, it is generally taken, especially in its singular form, to refer to fashions in clothing, and in this *Very Short Introduction* I will explore the ways in which fashion functions, as an industry, and how it connects to wider cultural, social, and economic issues. Fashion's emergence since the 1960s as a subject of serious academic debate has prompted its analysis as image, object, and text. Since then it has been examined from a number of important perspectives. The interdisciplinary nature of its study reflects its connection to historical, social, political, and economic contexts, for example, as well as to more specific issues, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class.

Roland Barthes studied fashion in relation to the interplay of imagery and text in his semiotic analyses *The Fashion System* of 1967 and *The Language of Fashion*, which collected together texts from 1956 to 1969. Since the 1970s, cultural studies has become a platform from which to explore fashion and identity: Dick Hebdige's text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), for example, showed the ways in which street fashions evolved in relation to youth cultures. In 1985, Elizabeth Wilson's book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* represented an important assertion of fashion's cultural and social importance from a feminist perspective. Art history has been a significant methodology, which enables close analysis of the ways fashion interconnects with visual culture, as epitomized in the work of Anne Hollander and Aileen Ribeiro. A museum-based approach was taken by Janet Arnold, for example, who made close studies of the cut and construction of clothing by looking at garments in museum collections. Various historical approaches have been important to examine the fashion industry's nature and relationship to specific contextual issues. This area includes Beverly Lemire's work from a business perspective, and my own work, and that of Christopher Breward, in relation to cultural history. Since the 1990s, scholars from the social sciences have become particularly interested in fashion: Daniel Miller's and Joanne Entwistle's work are important examples of this trend. Caroline Evans' impressively interdisciplinary work, which crosses between these approaches, is also very significant. Fashion's study in colleges and universities has been equally diverse. It has been focused in art schools, as the academic component of design courses, but has spread to inhabit departments from art history to anthropology, as well as specialist courses at under- and postgraduate levels.

This academic interest extends to the myriad museums that house important fashion collections including the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Kyoto Museum. Curatorial study of