Style, Death and Fetishism in Martin Margiela's "Deconstructionist" Fashion

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Abstract

Fashion commodities shape our experience of our embodiment and our relationships to other bodies. The discourse of fashion modifies bodies and helps to shape our responses to death, sexuality and loss. While fashion is used as a marker of personal individuality, its capacity to mediate complex and subtle shared meanings belie many of these same myths of individual identity, freedom and self-expression. It refers to an internal self, at the same time that it locates the self in a public realm mediated through consumer goods. The concepts that are often used to interpret these relationships between subjects and commodities, such as commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism, are classically defined in terms of loss, alienation or absence. However, drawing on Barthes, Derrida, Bataille and and Deleuze, I will argue for a more positive understanding of this terrain as one that can also generate active and generative becomings.

In recent decades, many designers and consumers have referenced the history of fashion as one way of suggesting stable and authentic, shared identities (even when the historical referent is fictional or received by way of popular culture). In contrast, Martin Margiela uses historical elements not to anchor a code of cultural meaning but as a way of addressing fashion as a discourse concerned with death, sexuality and loss. Martin Margiela's 'deconstructionist' fashion is a sophisticated response to modern consumer culture, and the intersection of a lived body with a world of cultural artefacts. I will use Margiela's fashion to challenge notions of the commodity as an artifice that either alienates consumers from themselves, or disguises or defers a true and authentic body.

Fashion and Margiela

Fashion commodities are more than coverings that code bodies socially, or even prostheses added to the body; they are forces that shape our experience of embodiment and our relationships to other bodies. Furthermore fashion modifies bodies and helps to shape our responses to death, sexuality and loss. The power of fashion as a luxury commodity, of costume as performed identity, or of specific materials (such as lace, shoes, leather or fur) as sexual fetishes, demonstrate the complexity with which we identify with, and invest in, fashion items.

In the following paper I will explore the ways that Martin Margiela's 'deconstructionist' fashion engages with modern consumer culture, and the intersection of a lived body with a rich world of cultural artefacts. I will use Margiela's fashion to challenge notions of the commodity as an artifice that either alienates consumers from themselves, or disguises or defers a true and authentic body. Rather than drawing on structures of meaning that are external to the logic and language of fashion, or deferring to a logic of sexuality and beauty that is assumed as 'natural' or *a priori* to fashion, I will argue that Margiela addresses the discourse of modern fashion itself.

Margiela, among similarly austere contemporary designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Rei Kawakubo and Ann Demeulemeester, is often described as 'avant-garde' or 'deconstructionist.' [1] The label "deconstruction" is often applied to designers (whether in architecture, graphics or fashion) who combine historical quotation with the transgression of underlying norms, rules and aesthetics in order to challenge the logic of a design discourse from within. [2] I will be expanding on the notion of deconstruction and addressing some Derridean themes, however I will also be exploring other ways that Margiela engages with fashion as an economy, a discourse and as a modern condition of the body. To analyse Margiela's engagement with fashion we cannot simply look to the history of fashion styles or to fashion's historical self-definition. We need to look at how Margiela unearths a group of discourses within fashion; discourses that remain, for the most part, written only in the language of clothing and consumption itself.

This paper represents the beginning of a larger project responding to contemporary fashion. As a conference paper, it is necessarily brief and many of the arguments here are speculative and incomplete. With this in mind, I would welcome any suggestions or comments.

The Fashion System

In his classic study of modern fashion, *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes argues for a distinction between real clothes (which are the products of a vast industrial system of farmers, textile weavers, sewers, and distributors), worn clothes (that are complex social signifiers used to warm, protect and communicate in an array of contexts), and the written and represented clothing of fashion magazines. [3] He argues that the "written clothing" and "image clothing" of fashion magazines are relatively disconnected from garments as they are manufactured or used, because they constitute a discourse that serves primarily to infer meaning into garments irrespective of where they exist or how they are produced. This

discourse serves to make us want clothing for reasons that have nothing to do with use value. Barthes defines the focus of his semiology of fashion as the study of a system of "purely intellective" images and codes that (in principle) need never be brought into actuality.[4]

Barthes suggests that the modern fashion industry is founded on the disparity, produced by the fashion system, between the consumer's and producer's consciousness. [5] He argues that the consumer must be convinced that her wardrobe needs to be replaced often, and for reasons that have little to do with 'dilapidation.' He argues that, to maintain itself, the fashion industry must create;

> …a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings. A mediate substance of an aperitive order must be elaborated; in short, a simulacrum of the real object must be created, substituting for the slow time of wear a sovereign time free to destroy itself by an annual potlatch. [6]

What distinguishes the general meanings and uses of clothing from fashion is the fact that the ultimate content of the fashion system is *fashion* itself. This is not social communication through clothing, but rather, the selling of *style* through authoritative publications, retail outlets, shows and other mechanisms. What Barthes studies in the pages of *Elle* and *Le Jardin des Modes* is the modern discourse of *style*, the purpose of which is to generate surplus cultural value in order to sell images and representations associated with clothing. [7]

Martin Margiela's 1998 and 1999 fashion shows are a direct response to the 'fashion system' and the universe of 'written fashion.' In these collections Margiela avoided the parade of models that are usually central to the glamour and voyeuristic pull of fashion's self presentation.[8] In his Spring/Summer 1998 show, Margiela replaced living models with projected footage of models wearing the collection, interspersed with descriptions of the garments in an 'objective' or technical language. In the Autumn/Winter show of 1999, living models were replaced with human-sized marionettes. And in the Spring/Summer 1999 show, models were replaced by men wearing sandwich boards printed with photographs and more 'technical' descriptions. In each case Margiela puts models at a degree of remove (in video, or as puppets) and replaces them with the figure of the "technician," stagehand or specialist.

Caroline Evans suggests that these shows can read as "*detournements,*" or gestures that turn the logic of the fashion spectacle "*back on itself.*" [9] If the society of the spectacle is one in which the accumulation of commercial spectacles replace real social and productive

relationships, and ultimately alienate us from authentic experience behind a web of images, then Evans is arguing that Margiela is neutralising the power of the spectacle by revealing its technical and theatrical underpinnings. [10]

We can make a similar argument in Barthes' terms; if the perceived value of fashion is dependent on a disparity of consciousness between producers and consumers, then the veil of fashion is dependant on the maintenance of these boundaries and the elimination of production and commercial processes from the minds of consumers. Therefore, Margiela appears to be introducing the "real garment," the garment that belongs to the world of production, into the world of "written" and "image" fashion. The disorientation that results of these collapsing discourses is symptomatic of the veil being ripped from the machinery of commodification.

Margiela's individual fashion designs often reveal even more of the manufacture behind the surface, especially when he produces garments that appear unfinished, where the hems have not been hidden, where the linings and facings of the garment are visible, or where the final product seems to be indistinguishable from a pattern or calico toile.

In the *Replica* Collections, second-hand or historical garments are sourced and remade in the Margiela signature palette of whites and browns. In this case the designer seems to be stripping fashion of its core myth of originality; replacing it with the idea of a workshop of tradespeople and expert cutters. Maison Martin Margiela appears to be remaking, but not truly redesigning, outmoded models. If the core of the fashion system is an authoritative, authorial and original style, then the shift towards quotation and repetition certainly presents a challenge to the commodification of the 'author,' and, by extension, the way the designer's individual style feeds into the identity of the fashion consumer. Rather than the intoxicating spectacle of new (and ever more surprising) compositions of feathers and fabric, our attention is drawn to a more studious appreciation of fashion's history, fashion's codes and, conversely, the willingness of the fashion industry to abandon and forget as quickly as it creates and innovates. We respond to these garments as comments on the history and language of fashion, or even as ready-mades in the Duchampian sense, that celebrate the craft of making in contrast to the fashion industry's frenzy of perpetual novelty.

By extending Evans' suggestion of a *detournement*, we would assume that all of this would strip Maison Martin Margiela of its mystique. It would leave bare the reality of manufacturing and cut through the spectacle of fashion with the consciousness of the producer, the knowledge of making, and of the work behind the scenes. Of course, if this interpretation

was true then Maison Margiela would not be a successful enterprise. It is. These clothes are still extremely expensive, and they still sell. But that may be because we are not really seeing below the surface here. These are ideal and fantastical, rather than real, images of the Margiela workshop. All these effects are a very marketable way of identifying Margiela with the myth of an artisanal, handmade, artistic, and implicitly non-alienated labour.

The scratches, the big printed numbers and the dress forms are pure theatre. We are not looking beneath the spectacle, but at a more sophisticated kind of spectacle. It is the suggestion of an insider's understanding, and it appeals because, in reality, the relationship between makers and consumers is not that of cheerful specialist tradespeople. The vast bulk of clothing is produced under labour conditions that (should they be forced to endure it) Margiela's clients would find unbearable. And, even if Margiela's *Artisanal* collections are not the product of sweatshop labour, that is only because his clients are so extraordinarily wealthy they can afford to pay for middleclass labour and a peaceful conscience.

The reality of the garment industry is troublesome to anyone who cares to think about it, and, in terms of spectacle, the fantasy of an artisan fashion studio only glosses the reality of gross inequality. A cynic could easily reject this style as one that charms us in much the way the fantasy of Aunt Jemima charmed white middleclass consumers by papering over their knowledge of the brutality of slavery and segregation with a myth of happy servitude. However, there is more to Margiela's response to the fashion system than simply revealing the struts and guy-ropes beneath the fantasy of fashion, or of offering a witty glimpse 'behind the scenes.'

Margiela incorporates reflection on the material and cultural conditions of production of fashion as 'style,' whether as a foregrounding of the processes of manufacturing or in the form of an academic or historical reflection of the discourse of fashion. I don't mean to suggest that the designer is being disingenuous or false. Rather, that the dualism that separates '*style'* from manufacturing, of reflection from making, or even of marketable fictions from the cold truth of modern industry, is itself challenged by this work. More strongly, I would argue that, in order to better understand the implication of Fashion in economic and social inequalities, we need to think beyond the opposition of industrial reality versus stylisation that underlies both Barthes' 'fashion system' and Evan's use of Debord.

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Retro

Margiela is one of a number of contemporary designers who reflect on the language of fashion. The most obvious manifestation of this tendency is the rehashing or quotation of historical styles that appears as a key element in most contemporary fashion, art and design. Our culture is increasingly one of quotation, pastiche and retro. What was heralded in the 1970s and '80s as a "post-modern condition," or even a critical strategy, has evolved into a familiar pattern of nostalgic consumption. While quotation has been a feature of modern commodity culture since the development of mass production, in recent decades it has become so ubiquitous that it may be impossible to identify any cultural expressions that are not inflected by this sensibility.

Retro style is paradoxically related to the other contemporary shift toward the 'conceptual,' because the depersonalisation of style and its removal from the notion of authorial intention challenges the marketing of individual stylistic expression. It replaces style as an expression of a unique time, personality or lifestyle, with an ironic or impersonal exploration of the structures and codes that shape individual moments of style. [11]

Margiela highlights this connection between retro and stylelessness, not only by quoting the language of historical fashions but by reconstructing old garments with negligible stylistic intervention and by making garments out of old, remaindered and discarded pieces of clothing (such as hats, gloves and socks). This is, in part, the negation of the role of the author as the unique origin of style; turning the designer into a curator or keeper of an archive.[12]

Kaja Silverman in "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse" champions retro as a mode of consumption that resists the passivity induced by modern fashion.[13] The fashion system demands that last season's style be negated, or disavowed, in order to create value for this season's. It also demands that today's look, today's silhouette, seem more *natural* than yesterday's. Retro pastiche, on the other hand, jars with the underpinnings of fashion. It engages with the desire for "splendour" and "style," but only through an outmoded language of style. [14]Thus, Silverman argues that retro enables consumers to give styles new meanings or inflections. It gives the wearer an "ironic distance" from fashionability, and destabilises the norms of style by recombining looks that do not properly belong. She also suggests the analogy of a masquerade, in which the wearers, or *pasticheurs,* of retro style utilise a language drawn from places other than the authorities of fashion. Sites like novels, films, plays, photographs and films. She argues that it "*…inserts its wearer into a complex network of cultural and historical references.*" [15]

While Silverman's argument is useful, she is writing from the perspective of the mid-eighties and her claim that retro is "*fundamentally irreconcilable with fashion,*" is dated. [16] Since the 1990's retro has become the norm of fashion from *haute couture* to mass-market street-wear. Nevertheless, I would still agree with Silverman's suggestion that retro is based on a sartorial language of film and popular culture, and that it has shifted the way fashion style can be sold. What retro represents is not only nostalgia, but a sense that fashion functions increasingly as a realm of fiction, fantasy and play.

The point that comes to the fore with this retro mode of consumption is that fashion images engage consumers, not with displays of formal sophistication or luxury, but through a deeply embedded mix of languages drawn from film, television and popular experience. This nostalgia is not one of historical memory but of cinematic and popular quotation, and the pleasure it offers is the pleasure of group fantasy. [17] Distressed jeans, old-school funk shirts, aviator sunglasses, or Margiela's *Replicas* are not likely to be mistaken for old items. They are still very contemporary, but they play with the fragments of history and storytelling; expanding the language of fashion via the trope of the relic, the antique or the historical.

Margiela reveals the complexity of retro culture as, not merely a pastiche of styles, but one response to a widespread crisis of faith in the notion of the free, creative subject and all that implies. We are not merely faced with a habit or fad for quotation, but many responses to a key problematic in our culture now. Retro is a generative, mobile and ambivalent game of repetition, re-enactment and re-assemblage. I would characterise this as a *mannerism* of culture and thought, which the narrow focus on post-modernity as a culture of quotation and pastiche fails to properly account for. This is a shift in the way we conceptualise culture from one based on the division of appearances and realities, to one in which the revelatory is experienced in motion and in passing; in the interplay between languages of expression, style or truth.

Retro is not just the play of quotation and imitation. It emphasises the shifting nature of fashion *as language*; denaturalising the body of fashion and highlighting the power of clothing to recode fluid and unstable boundaries. I am arguing that Margiela's retro draws attention to the way clothing forms and gives shape to a social body. This engagement with the logic of clothing opens the fashion system to other planes of desire and becoming. These fashions are not closed, in the way that Barthes' studies of fashion might suggest, but trigger new kinds of lived and social bodies.

A Halter-Top Made of Gloves

In 2001, Margiela produced a halter top stitched together from leather evening gloves. In 2004 he produced, in a similar vein, a cape made of men's fedora hats. Both items represent the *Artisanal* line as well as the established Margiela look; a reduced palette of greys, creams and pale browns; an unusual approach to cut, texture and materials within a familiar, classic, garment; a clear use of historical reference, both in the choice of cut and in its intersection with an old fashion style (i.e. evening gloves and fedora hats); an obvious, undisguised structure that suggests impersonal or industrial methods; and, of course, the allusion to androgyny in the blending of female garments with either male hats or the square, a-sexual form of '50s evening gloves.

More exciting perhaps is the frisson of sexuality, and even threat, implied by a woman's torso covered completely in softly moulded hands, or the accumulation of crushed male hats gathered across an ideally bare pair of female shoulders. Hats which should cup, hold and protect a male head, are now emptied and flattened against a woman's back, shoulders and breast. In both garments we have analogies for a male sexuality—grasping hands or hats (which, since the surrealists, have been associated with phallic aggression, fetishism and castration)—now softened and crushed against a female form. More to the point, these damaged signs of male desire and fantasy are thrown into the machinery of high fashion to be photographed, to be looked at, and to be the object of a vast public and probing gaze.

These garments also pose a challenge to the logic of manufacture and marketing. They are clearly made out of the contents of second-hand clothing shops or bins of discarded and unfashionable clothing. They are worn, aged, and redundant. Second-hand clothing offers a great deal of appeal, but it also has a power to horrify or to revolt. Clothes shape the body of their wearer, but they are also shaped and moulded by that body. A second-hand garment carries the memories and form of old users. They have a smell, they often have stains, and they carry the marks, the sloughed off skin and the memories of anonymous wearers. The *intimacy* of clothes, that make them such potent containers of memory, also make them difficult to subsume into a new identity or a new wardrobe.

Margiela's *Artisanal* garments are hand-made. They are unique, singular and skilfully crafted. On one level this is another celebration of tailoring and craft, of the history and language of fashion. But it also edges onto the repressed level of fashion; the horror or abject power of clothes as bodily fragments that the fashion system struggles to deny. [18]

These items highlight the fetishistic treatment of details that is consistent across Margiela's many collections, especially in the way elements of tailoring and cut are isolated and recombined in a way that denaturalises familiar or historical motifs. While Margiela's cerebral approach might seem to remove the body from the fashion show and dilute fashion's long-standing appeal to sexuality and flirtation, this is simply a shift of focus from one kind of body to another. The body is not absent; rather the corporeality of the garments themselves is revealed by de-emphasising the body of the wearer.

Alison Gill argues that Margiela's 'deconstruction' consists of a reflection on "*the nexus of making, wearing, thinking and dwelling*" in fashion, and a concern with fashion's seams; the seams that constitute this dwelling and this embodiment. By drawing attention to the historical as well as literal seams that render fashion, she argues that Margiela opens the seamless body of fashion to a new negotiation.

> Ultimately, Margiela reproduces the seamlessness of fashion, the idealised form, by the literal production of seams: seamlessness through seams… As such, these seams, by being the "traces" of both history and innovation, are the condition of the impossibility of seamlessness as a fixed objective ideal. This making of seamlessness as always seamed must be considered as an embodied phenomenon, because clothes are "figured," literally animated, as a presencing of body. [19]

It is this surfacing of the structure of the clothed body, rendering its seams visible, decentred and transparent, that establishes the terrain of Margiela's deconstructive game. Seams and fastenings that precisely follow the line of the body, and are normally invisible to reflect a logic of bodily functionality and ideality, are now made visible, displaced or mobile. It is this opening of the fixed form of the body, via stitches, details, textures, broken surfaces and slippages, that suggests an underlying game of fetishism and masochism. [20]

Masochism and Fetishism

Among design discourses, fashion is the one that most significantly intersects with the terrain of modern fetishism and masochism. The shoe, the fur, the lace petticoat, stockings, hats and bags; these all function as classic sexual fetishes but they are also key markers of identity and status within the code of modern bourgeois consumption. Freudian fetishes are also often commodity fetishes in the Marxist sense. That is, objects falsely invested with sentiment to compensate for the absence of social value and communication in modern life.[21]

Sexual and commodity fetishism is ruled by the same fascination with materials and details. Leather (and the stitching that reveals its strength, thickness, suppleness and tension), chrome (that gleams and accentuates curves and angles), paint surfaces, colours, or even sounds, vibrations, special mechanisms and useless complexifications can all add to an object's power to inspire fetishistic investment. The chrome on a Harley Davidson; the iridescent paint on a Holden HSV; the complex movement within a Patek Phillipe: these are all transitional effects or furtive qualities not unlike Freud's "*Glanz auf der Nase.*" And like the 'shine on the nose' they capture, or gather up, a transitional sensory effect.

Against classic Marxist and Freudian theories of fetish I would argue that these are not representations or substitutes for an absent transcendental power; they are sensory fragments defined by their lack of a fixed objectivity or weight. They may speak of something elusive or lost, but they are also embodied events that reflect away from the world of fixed objects towards a zone of unstable perception and sensation. Fetishism as it derives from anthropology (which is also the origin of Marx's and Freud's use of the term) refers to ritual objects. Classically they are made of animal remains (blood, hair, claws and nails) assembled into new inhuman and spiritual bodies. This kind of fetish suggests the creation of new bodily unities or embodied powers. Modern fetishes are not so different. They are also composed of liminal substances and bodily fragments. They open onto the mutable body of myth and ritual, and especially to becomings animal. [22]

Kristeva's theorisation of abject materials is remarkably resonant with the characteristics of fashion's fetish materials.[23] These materials—lace and satin, leather and furs—are fleshy and change their meaning on different bodies. Leather is, insistently and no matter how we try to avoid the fact, skin. It is skin, stripped from an animal and often shaved to better resemble our own skin. Equally the luxury of fur is still closely connected to the history and symbolism noble privilege; or the power to claim the spoils of the hunt, the remains of slaughtered animals, and the bounty of the natural world. In the cosmos of masochistic fantasy fur is the mark of both hunter and prey. [24] A fur that is rich and sensuous on one body, is an awful fragment torn cruelly from another.

This terrain of intimacy, exchange and abjection is more familiar when it comes to petticoats and lace. Because lingerie is soft, because it wears so easily and because it is designed to reflect the fragility and freshness of an ideal femininity, it also evinces every push, contact and deformation of the body. These garments trap sweat, they protect both clothes and skin from wear, and they wear faster than other garments, to become the permeable, transitional

limit of the body; experienced as both body and garment, as protected flesh and protecting shell. [25]

Fashion and Death

It is no new observation that clothing and adornment modifies and shapes our embodiment. This is especially evident in fashion's negotiation or denial of death, aging and decay. Images of death and decay recur in the theatre of fashion from Schiaparelli to McQueen, but of course, most fashion responds to death and ageing by denying it; insisting on very young models, glossy surfaces and the eternally new look offered by the latest season.[26] The cycle of the fashion trade functions by denying and expelling the previous season's look; even to the point of abject horror (for some) at appearing imperfectly or incompletely fashionable. It is easy to infer that the fashion system functions primarily to negate or defy the forces of death, decay and ageing, and to impose a break between the lived or living body, and the projected, fashionable body. Fashion codes the body, but it also attempts to resist or hide it. It refuses the body that ages, or that lurches outside of the limits of the correct and appropriate form of fashion. [27] However, even as it does so, Fashion includes or embraces another kind of death. It offsets slow aging with a constant act of sacrifice; the seasonal death of the fashionable body, which is also the cyclical death of whatever the fashionable woman was last season.

I have already discussed how the calendar of fashion shows, seasonal collections, and the judgments of magazine editors are mechanisms to produce rapid stylistic obsolescence. They serve the industry by devaluing garments well before they can wear out; substantially eliminating the second-hand market, minimising competition from other markets or unfashionable 'low end' imitators, and thus (ultimately) accelerating of the process of consumption. Barthes refers to this seasonal 'renewal' of styles as "*an act of annual potlatch*" because it ensures that the most expensive wardrobe of one season is relegated to the sales bins or garbage bins of the following. [28]

Margiela plays on this consciousness of death, melancholy and sacrifice by repeating and rehashing old garments, playing with the signs of decay and reconstruction, and by reassembling discarded fragments of fashion, such as gloves, hats and socks. His exhibition *9/4/1615* at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen was a pointed exploration of modern fashion very much in the spirit of a *vanitas* still life.[29] On a row of tailor's dummies, Margiela exhibited garments from eighteen previous collections—already rich with historical reference, lace and fur—that had been soaked in nutrient solution and cultures. Over a period of 4 days, the white clothes were allowed to turn murky greys, pinks, greens and yellows under a rich

layer of moulds, yeasts and bacteria. The new, but already old and already remade, clothes were then exhibited over a period of months while the mouldy fabrics continued to age, fade and alter under the weather.

Barthes suggests that fashion's cycle of sacrifice and re-creation is founded on a delusion or irrationality in consumers, and that this delusion is created to serve the economic interests of the fashion industry. While this mechanism clearly serves to perpetuate the system, I would argue against the notion that fashion producers are the masters of this process, or that consumers are oblivious to their own irrationality. Rather, this sacrificial logic is part of fashion's negotiation of the body, of death and of the social.

Barthes used the term potlatch in a context where it was already well known from the work of Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille, particularly as a point of comparison with modern capitalism and conspicuous consumption.[30] This is not the place to elaborate on these complex uses of the term; however it is worth highlighting the fact that for Mauss potlatch was a way of building community and for Bataille sacrifice opens onto a zone of *communication*, or alterity.

Potlatch is the term used to describe a number of gift-giving practices among indigenous American communities and other non-western societies. According to the cycle of potlatch, social status is attained through the giving of elaborate gifts, but these gifts must, in turn, be both reciprocated and exceeded by the receivers. As each tribe or family struggles to outdo the last, the result is a social order based on wasteful competition. This is sacrificial, because it destroys wealth rather than creates it.

A sacrificial order, in the Bataillean sense, requires no disparity of consciousness between producers and consumers but is a shared act of destruction. By wastefully contradicting the logic of utility, preservation and thrift, sacrifice creates a sacred space of intimacy and community.

> Communication, through death, with our beyond (essentially in sacrifice)—not with nothingness, still less with a supernatural being, but with an indefinite reality (which I sometimes call the impossible, that is: what can't be grasped [begreift] in any way, what we can't reach without dissolving ourselves, what's slavishly called God).[31]

For Bataille the extreme expression of luxury is human sacrifice and war, but this same zone of madness, laughter and death is crucial to the pleasure offered by fashion. In opposition to Barthes' argument, *potlatch* suggests that the fashion system is not simply a veil of simulacra, but a space for the exploration of a different, if destructive, form of intimacy and social exchange.

My intention in this paper has been to explore the ways that Margiela engages with the logic of fashion, to highlight the body, the alterity, and the desire that animate fashion. I have argued that Margiela's many inventions at the surfaces, seams and unseemly underbelly of the fashion economy does not truly contradict the 'system' of the fashion industry, but it does take us beyond a simple logic of commodity fetishism or social alienation. I haven't had the time here to do justice to Margiela's response to the history and economy of fashion. However I have attempted to outline a number of theoretical lines of inquiry and to highlight the possibility of an open and vital fashion that is not reducible to a commodity spectacle, a consumer's alienated passivity or a frustrated desire for an original human presence.

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Endnotes

[1] See Alison Gill, March 1998, 'Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes,' *Fashion Theory*, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 25. Gill describes deconstruction in fashion as synonymous with "Le Destroy" or an aesthetic of the '"unfinished," "coming apart," "recycled," "transparent" or "grunge."' She names Rei Kawakubo, Karl Lagerfeld, Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester and Dries Van Noten as key exponents.

[2] These terms are borrowed from art and philosophy and tend to be applied very loosely in fashion, however they do suggest something about the way these designers position themselves in a complex relationship to the fashion industry. They are at once critical of many aspects of fashion's marketing and glamour but also effectively use it; marketing their work on the basis of a connoisseur's insider knowledge. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of deconstruction in fashion see Alison Gill's useful article "Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-assembled Clothes," 25-49. While my concerns here are different to Gill's, she also takes Margiela as exemplary of deconstruction. She addresses the concept of deconstruction, and the way that Margiela exposes the structure of clothing, cut and structure, in more depth that I am able to here.

[3] Roland Barthes, 1983 (1967) "Written Clothing," *The Fashion System*, trans. Mathew Ward and Richard Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, pp. 3-18.

[4] Barthes 1983 (1967), 9-10

[5] Roland Barthes, 1983 (1967), "Foreword," p. xi

[6] Barthes, 1983 (1967) "Foreword," pp. xi-xii

[7] My focus here is the relationship of Maison Martin Margiela (as represented in fashion shows, collections and magazines) to the fashion system. However, against Barthes, I will argue that this system is not fixed or sealed, and that fashion can exist in a critical relationship to the fashion system. Margiela constitutes both a functional part of the fashion system—with his own collections, his own shows, his own fashion spreads—and a reflection on this system. I will argue that Margiela's designs are more than a commentary on fashion; they are an active engagement with the fashion system, opening it up to new constellations of desire and new terrains of becoming. Margiela engages with the ways that the economic and structural system underlying the language of fashion impinges upon its expression. This is more than the obvious use of quotation and stylistic reference (although this is clearly happening too). I will argue that quotation is only one part of a broader response to the logic of fashion and the mechanisms by which fashion generates value.

[8] Caroline Evans discusses these shows in, Caroline Evans 2003, *Fashion at the Edge*, Yale UP, New haven & London, pp. 80, 81 & 181

[9] Evans, 2003, p. 81

[10] Guy Debord, 2005, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, London: Rebel, pp. 112-114

[11] According to Allison Gill (1998) "*Margiela's work could perhaps be seen as both a critique of fashion's impossibility, against its own rhetoric, to be 'innovative,'… Margiela deconstructs the aura of the designer garment, and by extension the industry that upholds the myth of innovation, by messing with its integrity and innovation, by stitching a dialogue with the past into its future.*"

[12] In *Post-Modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism,* Frederick Jameson sets the terms for a recurring critique of retro. He argues against the fad for retro and vintage as a shallow stylistic effect, and suggests that the consumption of historical styles is a market driven process that evacuates artefacts of their social meanings or capacity to resist market capitalism. While I have sympathy for Jameson's critique of empty stylistic quotation, 'retro culture' includes a more complex range of strategies than Jameson identifies. Rather I would suggest that retro consumption is one symptom of a contemporary, market driven culture, and that the diversity of retro strategies constitute a contemporary sensibility born of a broad cultural problematic. This is not merely the product of a

failure of historical understanding, authenticity or contemporary invention. It is a discourse that engages in different ways with the very same *aporias* and impossibilities that academic theorists recognise in the cultural legacy of idealism, subjectivity and authenticity.

[13] Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," *On Fashion*, ed. Shari Benstock & Suzanne Ferriss, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP. 183-196

[14] Silverman, 194

[15] Silverman, 195

[16] Silverman, 194

[17] I would suggest that we need to see fashion increasingly as an extension of popular fiction and story telling. This is not only evident in mass market clothing, but in high-end consumption where the nuance of story telling or the grammar of meaning become the primary source of added authority and value. High fashion, like literature, art and elite culture generally, is marketed on the basis of a connoisseurs' appreciation of difficulty.

[18] In "The Golden Dustman" (1998) Caroline Evans refers to these second-hand and recycled materials as 'abject' and compares Margiela with Baudelaire's figure of the rag-picker, who filters and gathers the refuse of the modern city. She quotes Baudelaire from "The Ragpickers' Wine:" "*Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects*."

[19] Gill also highlights the way Margiela repeats designs and motifs with minor modifications, across collections, thereby drawing attention to the notion of repetition, un-sewing and re-sewing, that is crucial for her treatment of 'the seam' as a trace, and locus of tradition and innovation. Gill, 1998, 47-49.

[20] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, pp.149-151.
Deleuze describes the Body without Organs as the mobile body of desire; a voided field cut across by rhythms and intensities, rather than the singular and seamless, organised body. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze presents masochism as a paradigmatic way to reach the Body without Organs; reconfiguring the body's organs, orifices and surfaces by sewing up the skin.

[21] In its modern usage Fetishism has generally been theorised in terms of loss or absence. The anthropological conception of fetish is inherently euro-centric and interprets fetish as the outcome of false, fragmentary or incomplete cosmology; the fetish is a primitive ritual object imbued with magical powers in a society that does not understand the true nature of cause and effect. The Marxist conception of commodity fetishism is also based on ignorance (now of the processes of manufacture) and an unrealistic investment of human meaning in an ordinary manufactured object. Commodity fetishism is a symptom of modern alienation, produced by a disconnection between production and consumption in a specialised modern economy. The Freudian model of fetish is now the most well known, and has proven a very rich locus for cultural experiment, but it also defines the fetish as an arbitrary object that stands in for the absent phallus. It is a substitute for the true and transcendent origin of meaning.

[22] See Deleuze on spirit as becoming animal. Deleuze, Gilles, 2003, 'Body Meat and Spirit,' *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Continuum, London & New York, pp. 20 – 26

[23] Julia Kristeva, 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP., New York

[24] Sacher-Masoch describes Wanda dressed in furs, but also acting out a hunt with her male victim dressed as a bear. For a more detailed discussion of these themes by Sacher-Masoch, see Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 1991, *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil, Zone Books, New York, pp. 177 – 181

[25] Modern dress is one of the key elements that shape a modern subject and give form to our embodiment. It renders the body sociable and communicative. This is not to suggest that the naked body is not communicative, but merely that the elaboration of human language corresponds to the elaboration and coding of the body through dress. While clothing participates in the process of subjectification in general, Fashion is a more specific phenomenon. It translates the embodied and clothed subject into the realm of a modern experience of the self, embedded a world of commodities, ideologies and social values. It shapes the modern self in the language of modern commercial and urban realities, and it renders us as commodities within a network of commodities.

The reality that all clothes frame, shape and reveal the bodies they clothe is all the more evident in undergarments. These materials become inseparable from the body itself, whether we are discussing a supple young body, mirrored and revealed by gleaming satin underwear, or an aged body that is as wrinkled as a yellowed petticoat and as frayed and saggy as old lace. They even age in parallel with the 'natural' body. These materials give and receive life from the bodies that wear them. This is not an accident of their materials, but an intrinsic part of their social function as markers of intimacy. Our society is clothed; our subjectivities are clothed, and no matter how naked we may be, our bodies are framed and experienced as clothed bodies. Because of this, we have clothes that clothe our nakedness; that reveal and give us our nakedness. As we all know, a man in socks is more naked than a man without socks.

[26] For a further discussion of the interrelation of death in fashion, see Evans, 2003 p. 183-187
The denial of ageing is fundamental to the dynamic of the fashion system; especially the biannual need to replace and renew an entire wardrobe. The regular flirtations of fashion with images of death (such as heroine chic, glamorous violence, or dead celebrities) is like the frisson offered by ultra skinny models in a world always under the shadow of anorexia and drug abuse; it is a romantic refusal of death by attempting to fix it in the form of a still and always beautiful corpse.

[27] Fashion imposes a system of discipline that is often cruel and arbitrary; demanding not only conformity to the silhouettes of new garments, but also to constantly changing images of the fashionable body or the fashionable physique. There is no distinction, really, between skinny leg jeans and the skinny legs that go into them. Fashion is the fashion of a body image, and thus of a total discipline and a performance of the body. But mediated through magazines and advertisements, it is a body that is necessarily elsewhere, fictional and unattainable. No one can actually be all these bodies at once, or change their physique every season. Of course, if it was attainable it would lose its appeal. The arbiters of the fashion system are not those that conform to these bodies, but those who look and judge behind their sunglasses and magazine by-lines.

Part of the ambivalence of fashion's relationship to death and ageing stems from the fact that fashion also marks out, gives structure to, our ageing. It signposts our distance from its ideal, and it gives us a series of temporal markers that trace our experience of time as a loss of our-selves; we lose track of the self we once were, that was styled in a certain way, that had a certain cut of hair, and a certain body. The deal that the fashionista makes to remain fashionable by updating her image, and sacrificing the style she once owned so absolutely, is a deal that denies her any internal, psychic consistency. She is never outdated, never daggy, never *passé*, but she is caught in the rift between her fashionable self and her private self. She can never be fully adequate to the image she projects. Like the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, the public self is perpetually renewed but, in so doing it, marks a constant departure from whatever private self remains in its' shadow.

[28] Barthes, 1983*,* "Foreword," p. xii

[29] For a more extended discussion of *0/4/1615* see, Caroline Evans, March 1998, pp. 73-93; and Evans, *2003*, p. 187

[30] Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss; Georges Bataille, 1997, "The Gift of Rivalry: Potlatch," *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 199-209.

[31] Georges Bataille, 1997, "Laughter," *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 59