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Assessed Essay

**The American and British reception and representation of Japanese fashion designers in
the early 1980s**

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The American and British reception and representation of Japanese fashion designers in the early 1980s

Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto shocked the Paris fashion world with their daring collections which were characterised by austere, minimal design, monochromatic colours, architectural shapes, uneven hemlines and deliberate rips or holes in the fabric. Their designs were the antithesis of high fashion's exclusive luxury, with its emphasis on bright, body-conscious clothes, and Western critics responded with discomfort. The American and British reception and representation constructed Japanese identity through an Orientalising gaze which drew on kimonos, Japanese aesthetics, Zen Buddhism - even the atomic bomb. The media's use of war rhetoric - 'invasion', 'takeover', 'juggernaut', 'muscled in', 'jolt', 'clash', 'challenge' - suggests this was a propagandist tool to reinforce Western opinion, political perspectives and a national *misunderstanding* of the 'Other' in response to Japan's burgeoning sartorial and economic threat.¹ Commentators have pointed out the complexity of the Japanese arrival in Paris, and a more nuanced understanding can be reached by drawing on Mary-Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone'. Paris can be seen to function as a 'contact zone', a space in which two cultures, geographically separated, came into contact with one another and established ongoing relations, which were characterised by conquest and domination.² The effects of 'contact' were disseminated through Paris to the American and British press, where the documentation of and distancing from the subjects it sought to control were expressed in a

¹ For the use of these descriptions, see for instance: 'The Japanese Invasion', *American Vogue*, July (1983), pp. 62-71; 'The Jolt of the Japanese', *The New York Times FASHIONS OF THE TIMES*, 28 August 1983, p. SMA213; B. Polan, 'Champagne and Saki: a Japanese Challenge to French Fashion', *The Guardian*, 21 October 1982, p. 11; B. Morris, 'The Japanese Challenge to French Fashion', *The New York Times*, 21 March 1983, p. B7; S. Mower, 'The Kimono with added cut and thrust', *The Guardian*, 6 March 1986, p. 11; S. Brampton, 'Tokyo Clothes: Sally Brampton on Japanese Designers', *The Observer*, 16 May 1982, p. A29; S. McCoid, 'Rag and Beune collection: Japanese style puts glamour in the shade', *The Guardian*, 24 March 1983, p. 12

² M. Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Ways of Reading*, eds., Bartholomae, D and Petrosky, A, (Boston: Bedford's/St Martins, 1999), p. 2

portrayal of Japan as exotic, far-off and traditional. What we come into 'contact' with in Western discourses of fashion journalists, editors and scholars, are not sites of dialogue between two equal cultures but between a self-affirming European culture and its contrived projections of the 'Other'. The designers' clothes were in fact hybrid creations that combined Western style and elements of their indigenous culture, subverting both European and Japanese sartorial conventions. Their work can be seen as a documentation of the exchanges between cultures that met as a result of 'contact' with the West – beginning with the opening up of Japan by 1854 and continuing through to the American Occupation of Japan, post World War Two.³ The concepts of the Japanese designers *as a 'contact zone'* and their place *in* the 'contact zone' of Paris are inextricably linked, as the creative products of Western cultural, economic and military dominance in Japan act both as witness to, and abettor in, political and cultural exchange. In examining aspects of the 'contact zone', this essay will discuss the perceived dominance of Paris, the American and British reaction to the Japanese designers, and the importance of Kawakubo and Yamamoto's hybrid designs.

Paris as a 'contact zone'

Paris's position since the mid-nineteenth century as the capital of high fashion – with its own institutionalised system of designers, manufacturers, media organisers and state regulators – is central to our understanding of its function as a 'contact zone'. To refine the term 'contact zone', it is useful to cite the definition provided by Mary Louise Pratt as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often

³ Y. Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*, (Oxford and London: Berg Publishers, 2004), p. 93

in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'.⁴ Inherent within this space of colonial encounters are notions of friction and conflict played out in a militant area, or amorphous zone, in which the spatial and temporal presence of two previously separated groups, in this case Japan and the West, can be seen to intersect. Paris has long been seen as the fashion capital of the world, having sought to position itself as a centre for the dissemination of International fashion, both couture and ready-to-wear, whilst attracting business and investment worldwide.⁵ Paris is torn between fulfilling the interests of its established French couturiers and designers, and making room for foreign talents to showcase their collections and satisfy an international demand for non-Western Otherness. Homi Bhaba points to the instabilities in the binaries and characteristics of colonial identity in which there is a split between demands for cultural tradition on the one hand and the political need to negate this homogeneity in negotiation with new cultural demands on the other.⁶ The position of Paris is constantly shifting and renewing in a complex process which relies on contact with the Japanese designers in order to strengthen the French fashion system through innovative designs, even as Parisian Haute Couture remains strictly regulated under rigid rules. Central to Pratt's understanding of the contact zone is the tendency of the imperial metropolis to 'blind itself' to the ways in which cultures on the periphery are determining the metropolis.⁷ It is this sense of blindness through which we can start to understand 'contact' between Paris and the Japanese designers as an intricate and malign cultural exchange, which reasserts Paris' *perceived* dominance by suppressing and Othering the Japanese. Whilst the Japanese designers are dependent on Paris to earn social, economic and symbolic capital which will differentiate them from other designers in Japan, Paris is equally reliant on

⁴ Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', p. 2

⁵ V. Steele, *Paris Fashion: a cultural history*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 130

⁶ H. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004)

⁷ M. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6

foreign designers in order to secure its international status and, by extension, Western hegemony of fashion.⁸

Pratt's use of the term 'zone' ensures that such contact has few easily defined spatial boundaries, but instead ripples through the attitudes and cultural constructs of those groups involved, speaking to wider geographical and economic issues. The international attention which the Japanese designers attracted in the early 1980s was not unrelated to Japan's recent role as a newly industrialised nation on the world political stage. As Deyan Sudjic notes, the designers played a role 'as important as that of Japan's engineers, industrialists and bankers' in establishing the country's international reputation.⁹ Japan was the first capitalist and democratic non-Western country to question the habitual identification of modernity with the West, proving to be innovators in the world of business models, money and technology, and therefore a cause for concern.¹⁰ Viewing the designers through the lens of 'Japaneseness' was not so much an expedient misunderstanding of difference - disseminated through contact in Paris to American and British journalism - than an attempt to quash recognition of a higher level in the fashion world. The significance of the global geopolitical relations are pointed out by Dorinne Kondo who notes that 'Japan-Europe', 'Japan-US' and 'East-West' are 'historically sedimented terms' unearthed through fear and admiration in the Japanese fashion industry.¹¹ It is through this initial fear of the Other that American and British discourses attempted to silence the threat, and in order to reach this silence, projected notions of primitive or ancient qualities specific to Japanese culture, which allowed the West to maintain dominance in the face of contest. Japan

⁸ Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*, p. 164

⁹ D. Sudjic, *Rei Kawakubo and Comme des Garçons*, (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2005), p. 40

¹⁰ L. Skov, 'Fashion trends, Japonisme and Postmodernism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 13: 3(1996), p. 134

¹¹ D. Kondo, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Japanese Identity in the Fashion Industry', in ed. Tobin, Joseph, *Re-made in Japan: Everyday life and consumer taste in a changing society*, (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1992), p. 195

became silenced and spoken *for* through the West's consistent and graduated removal of identity from the described Other, which can be seen as a countermove against the larger economic threat posed by the Japanese designers.

American and British Orientalism of Japanese Fashion

Western discourses of fashion journalists, editors and scholars provide a crucial site of such silencing because they can depict, through forceful rhetoric, motifs we associate with the Other, a subject that can be seen to occupy an ancient and feminised culture. Some of the news titles demonstrate this – ‘Champagne and Saki: a Japanese Challenge to French Fashion’, ‘The kimono with added cut and thrust’, ‘Japantheon’, ‘Oblique Chic: Japanese Designers’ – and contain the suggestion that Japanese fashion was inextricably linked with traditional Japanese peculiarities.¹² Allusions to Eastern clothing traditions through terms most commonly associated with the design of the kimono - ‘wrapping’, ‘folding’, ‘concealing’, ‘draped’, ‘knotted’, ‘looped’ - implied the collections were a sort of national costume from a country where high fashion does not exist.¹³ Removing the Japanese designers from having any real identity in the modern world - an example in *Vogue* declared the designers ‘heirs to Japan’s strong aesthetics and practical traditions’ whilst another noted ‘Tokyo creates waves with the wisdom learnt of centuries’ - constricted them into scripted roles of backwards and torpid dilettantes who had not progressed through ‘contact’ with the West.¹⁴ The latter notion finds its culmination in Nicholas Coleridge’s assertion that

¹² Polan, ‘Champagne and Saki’, p. 11; Mower, ‘The Kimono with added cut and thrust’, p. 11; *British Vogue*, ‘Japantheon: the collections of Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake’, September (1983), pp. 206-209; *British Vogue*, ‘Oblique Chic – Japanese designers’, July (1983), pp. 92-97

¹³ See for instance: B. Morris, ‘Loose Translator’, *The New York Times*, 30 January 1983, p. C7; ‘Quieter Look from Japan finds a place’, *The New York Times STYLE*, 7 September 1987, p. 60; J. Duka, ‘Yohji Yamamoto defines his Fashion Philosophy’, *The New York Times*, 23 October 1983, p. A63; J. Weir, ‘Update on the Japanese’, *The New York Times*, 15 July 1984:, p. 257-260

¹⁴ ‘Japantheon’, *Vogue*, p. 206;

Yamamoto is 'the dark fashion yogi of a dark decade', implying the Japanese occupy a kind of 'dark age' of culture.¹⁵ As Said writes on the subject of the native Other, dehumanising the subject is a way of enabling us to gain control over it.¹⁶ The same dehumanising effects were put in place by persistent reference to 'post-atomic', 'tortured-chic', 'bag lady' and 'Hiroshima' which began to appear authoritative through sheer repetition, as fashion writers quoted one another and in so doing condensed an entire culture into selective and supposedly representative tropes.¹⁷ Descriptions of the collections were characterised by martial language to emphasize separation and *difference* - 'confrontation', 'starkness', 'challenge', 'oppositional', 'nihilistic' - and frequently cited as a 'reaction to' or 'coming to terms' with what Carrie Donovan labelled the 'harsh reality' of the post World War II years in which the designers grew up.¹⁸ By propagating and disseminating the inconceivability of close 'contact' with the Japanese, one article even mapped out the geographical distance as 'some 6,053 miles stretch between Paris and Tokyo', whilst another noted the designs were 'as alien to Western eyes as their language is to Western ears'.¹⁹ Such narratives kept a civilisation at a distance whose heritage, historical progression and cultural intricacies could be controlled, fixed within the limits of an imposed ethnographic present.

Pratt's theory can be extended to the writing structure of many of the articles, which tended to juxtapose historical and ancient allusions to Japanese culture, regardless of

¹⁵ N. Coleridge, *The Fashion Conspiracy*, (London: Heinemann-Mandarin, 1989), p. 82

¹⁶ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*, (London, 1978), p. 108

¹⁷ See for instance: S. Mower, 'The bodyline debate: This house believes new woman should flaunt herself, another house believes otherwise', *The Guardian*, 24 October 1985, p. 20; B. Polan, 'Mighty Touchy: Brenda Polan on how to be sexy and like it', *The Guardian*, 19 May 1982, p. 11; Brampton, 'Tokyo Clothes', p. A29

¹⁸ See for instance: Morris, 'The Japanese Challenge to French Fashion', p. B7; McCoid, 'Rag and Beune Collection', p. 12, M. Sturdza, 'A look at Japan Again', *The Globe and Mail*, 22 January 1985, p. F6; B. Cassasus, 'Financial Times Survey: Japanese Fashion Industry', *The Financial Times*, 16 December 1982, p. 23 and C. Donovan, 'Much ado about the Japanese', *The New York Times*, 31 July 1983, p. 38

¹⁹ 'The Jolt of the Japanese', *The New York Times FASHIONS OF THE TIMES*, 28 August 1983, p. SMA213; Brampton, 'Tokyo Clothes', p. A29

spatial and temporal disjuncture, thus building a contact zone within the text. One journalist systematically linked the designs to disparate elements of Japanese clothing history, citing myriad references - 'kimono to catwalk...work-wear to paddy-field...militia to samurai'- which fused different time periods and contexts, reducing Japan to a world of referentiality with little account for history.²⁰ John Duka perpetuates this notion of writing *within* the 'contact zone', positioning creative Western modernity against mimetic Eastern tradition by juxtaposing references to 'cleaned-up versions of the recent English pirate fashions' with 'traditional Japanese fishing hats' and 'oriental ceremonial robes', projecting notions of backwardness and primitive qualities onto the Japanese, notions which allowed the West's attempts to modernise and reform without contest.²¹ The graphic and titular qualities of Brenda Polan's article 'Champagne and Saki: A Japanese challenge to French elegance' reinforces this ongoing dichotomy of Western civilisation (which she labels 'ooh-la-la chic') *versus* Eastern primitiveness ('beggar-women'), contrasting photographs of smartly-dressed models in tailored French designs with messy-haired, bedraggled representatives of the Japanese fashions (Figure 1).²² These shifting patterns of dominance between different groups in contact are reinforced by the use of language as a wilful tool for distancing and separating the Other, particularly through its miscommunication or misinterpretation. Frequent misspellings of the names of the Japanese designers appeared in *Vogue* and other British fashion magazines of the early 1980's, suggesting a lack of care in documenting an unadulterated and accurate study of foreign peoples. The designers' names were also utilised as a means of manipulating and highlighting Otherness – one journalist went so far as to spell out loud 'ray cow-wa-coo-bo [Rei Kawakubo]' and 'Yo-ge ya-ma-mo-

²⁰ 'International Collections: London, Paris, Milan, New York, Tokyo', *British Vogue*, January (1984), pp. 68-79

²¹ J. Duka, 'Yohji Yamamoto defines his Fashion Philosophy', *The New York Times*, 23 October 1983, p. A63

²² Polan, 'Champagne and Saki', p. 11

toe [Yohji Yamamoto]' – a method of recording and distancing not used when reporting on European designers.²³ The deep-rooted belief in the Otherness of Japanese fashion has been built upon the same manipulating capabilities inherent in the asymmetrical power struggles that the media reinforced and were reinforced by.

The strongly recognisable visual forms of the accompanying images were as instrumental as text in facilitating domination by casting the Other as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, the West. A typical example is *Vogue's* photo-shoot 'Japan: New-Fashioned Departures', which placed a Western model wearing the Japanese collections in various stereotypical locations throughout Japan, surrounded by indigenous peoples and engaged in their day-to-day life: harvesting rice, bicycling by the wall of an old samurai house, playing croquet with the local team, eating sushi and praying in the Zen rock-garden of a temple (Figures 2-4).²⁴ The documentation of Japanese natives leading their industrious, quiet lives far away from the continual innovations of the fashion industry at first appears to be an ethnographic portrayal, making no judgement but expressing natural abundance and human subsistence. It is as though the viewer has stumbled across an entirely natural scene, which represents truthfully a relationship between the natives and the West (personified by the presence of the model), who carry on undisturbed by her presence and are thus uninhibited or checked in their ordinary behaviour. Our attention is drawn to the subsistence techniques of the natives, depicting an overall sense of unexploited abundance, rather than a specific moment of contact between the representative human individuals from different cultures. Yet a closer look reveals the images are full of allusions to contact, in their very description of separation and distance

²³ Donovan, 'Much Ado about the Japanese', p. 38

²⁴ 'Japan: New Fashioned Departures', *British Vogue*, January (1983), pp. 44-61

which aligns the Japanese designs with traditional dress - a tool that is used to preserve the boundary between fashion and non-fashion, the West and Japan respectively.²⁵ The model is grossly over-proportioned in scale and stature by comparison, she is the only member of the group to address the camera directly and her position in the frame is always marked by a certain spatial distance to the natives. The implication is a heavily unbalanced Japanese-Westerner relationship at work which removes the Japanese from having any real identity by reducing a multifarious culture to base and primitive essentials whilst making the designs subservient to the demands of the European wearer. This association between indigenous peoples and the Japanese designs - as opposed to showing the model in the high tech modernity of Tokyo - intensifies through the images' seemingly compositional objectivity and exploration of different forms of cultural encounter from the position of supposedly scientific fact.

The hybridity of Kawakubo and Yamamoto's designs

The Japanese designers have persistently rejected their membership of this group which purports to represent Japan as a nation, refusing any overt reference to either a particular culture or a specific historical situation. A clear statement of this refusal is demonstrated by Yamamoto: 'There is no nationality in my clothes'. He describes being pushed to adopt the role of representative of the '*mode japonais*' in Paris.²⁶ Equally keen to disavow categorisations of race and ethnicity, Kawakubo has expressed estrangement from Japanese culture: 'I have seen so-called 'traditional' culture maybe once in school, when I

²⁵L. Skov, 'Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization experience and a Hong Kong dilemma', in Jones, Carla, Anne Marie Leshkovich and Sandra Niesson, eds. *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2004)

²⁶ Y. Yamamoto in Wenders, Wim, *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, (Road Movie Film Production and Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, 1989)

had to. Things like Kabuki, one time only, in a class for elementary school'.²⁷ Her description of working methods – 'I start from zero' – can be seen as an attempt to evade any allusion to geographical or historical inspiration, most of all Japaneseness.²⁸ In the broadest sense, all fashion designers are informed, however subliminally, by human contact in and with the surrounding world's forces, whether they happen to be geographical, economic, political or cultural. These forces are all interrelated yet at the same time conditioned to an extent by an individual's epistemological knowledge, and a designer's own understanding of the points of contact between such subjects. To attribute certain tropes of national and cultural identity to a designer is to adopt, as Salmon Rushdie has pointed out, a 'ghetto mentality', and to define ourselves by narrowly confined cultural borders.²⁹ The political implication of this is the unarticulated conception of culture as a holistic, organic entity closely associated with the nation state, problematic not least in its glossing over of cultural diversity and fusion. As part of the post-war generation of Japan, both designers were familiar with Western tailoring and American popular culture but the total adoption of European style in their designs would have deprived them of their own indigenous identities. Yoshikuki Tokushige points to the designers' 'struggle to create their own identity' in between traditional Japanese and modern Western influences, highlighting the constantly shifting and metamorphosing nature of contact.³⁰ The aim here is not to deny the influence of certain forms of Japanese aesthetics in Yamamoto and Kawakubo's designs, but to situate this within a framework of cross-cultural contact with the West.

²⁷ R. Kawakubo quoted in Skov, 'A Japanese Globalization experience and a Hong Kong dilemma', p. 224

²⁸ Sudjic, *Rei Kawakubo*, p. 10

²⁹ S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 72

³⁰ Y. Tokushige, *The Identities of Japanese designers as seen through Western eyes*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 2005), p. 235

A piece which exemplifies the hybridity of Kawakubo's design is the hand-knit wool sweater punctured with seemingly random, apparently moth-eaten holes for Comme des Garçons Autumn/Winter 'Lace' collection (1982-3)(Figures 5 and 6). The provocation of the design resides in the assumption that a sweater with holes in it must either have been disfigured, be the attire of the homeless or the undesirable consequence of a technical fault. Deliberately unscrewing her machine to create such imperfections she subverts the Western notion of aesthetic perfection in the ideal cut and faultless execution of a garment, constructing an ironic commentary on the sophisticated arts of lace-making and embroidery without failing to attain technological expertise. The maxim expressed by Kawakubo, and relevant to much of her early collections, 'I like it when something is off-not perfect', in itself is a subtle manifestation of the Japanese principle of *wabi-sabi* - the concept of beauty in the imperfect, impermanent and incomplete.³¹ Her aestheticisation of rags can be seen as an elaboration of the post-punk style championed by young London designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren.³² Herein lies the crucial point of contact in Kawakubo's design: the Western tradition of lace-making and the evolving King's Road street style of the early 1980s act as a palimpsest over which Kawakubo has grafted Eastern thought. The gap of ambivalence - the sweater is 'almost the same, but not quite' in its mimicry of lace - is a site of resistance and the movement of resistance arises at this very point that colonial authority in fashion can be seen to interact with indigenous cultural practice.³³ Bhaba points to mimicry as a hybridizing process which 'emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' - undermining the

³¹ Kawakubo quoted in Dresner, Linda, Susanne Hilberry and Marsha Miro, eds, *Refusing Fashion: Rei Kawakubo*, (Detroit: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), p. 117

³² H. Koda, 'Rei Kawakubo and the aesthetic of poverty', *Dress*, 11 (1985), p. 8

³³ H. Bhaba, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), p.125-133

authority of colonial representation mimicry by bringing to light the ambivalence of colonial discourse.³⁴ Once again, we can understand contact not as a benign force of learning, but as an exchange characterised by *asymmetrical relations of power*; whilst the site of contact remains, the determining of the outcome of contact has shifted. This shift is crucial in explaining the West's zeal for using funereal terminology, eliciting allusions to the urban dispossessed and dismissing the collection as 'Japan's answer to the atomic bomb'.³⁵

Yamamoto's white cotton plain-weave cutwork dress and trousers for his Spring/Summer collection (1982-3) also unsettle the foundations of racial categorisation (Figure 7). These loose-fitting cotton garments are punctured with meticulously cut holes, rendered in stylized patterns of floral and abstract shapes that evoke, like Kawakubo's sweater, the Japanese principle of *wabi-sabi*. Drawing on a simple, achromatic palette, the rips into the fabric cast soft shadows onto the garment and the wearer's skin, reminiscent of natural sunlight and the subtle colour tones of *sumi-e*, the monochrome Japanese ink-and-wash paintings (Figure 8). Dismantling notions of gender, age and shape, this unstructured and deliberately flawed garment can be seen to liberate the wearer from the conventions of Western fashion, whilst evoking the aesthetic sensibilities of shadows as described in Junichiro Tanizaki's novel *In Praise of Shadows*.³⁶ Pratt uses the term 'auto-ethnography' to refer to the instances in which colonized subjects represent themselves in ways that engage with the coloniser's own terms. Yamamoto manipulates and highlights his 'Otherness', mimicking the Western tradition of *Japonisme*, which since the mid-nineteenth century has consistently re-presented stereotypical images of Japan that conform to European aesthetic

³⁴ Bhaba, 'Of Mimicry and Man', p. 126

³⁵ Brampton, 'Tokyo Clothes', p. A29

³⁶ J. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, (1933), trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, (London: Vintage, 2001)

styles.³⁷ This mimicry, simultaneously a contestation and re-inscription of power, highlights the unease of 'not quite, not white' which haunts the West.³⁸ Beyond the culturally specific, the design also gestures towards the historical cut-work textiles of London's post-punk style and modern art concepts such as Surrealism. Amy de la Haye suggests the garments are a continuum from Parisian couturier Elsa Schiaparelli's 1937 'Tear Dress', which depicted Daliesque illusions of torn flesh and savage rips onto a slender evening gown and head-veil, similarly elevating the imperfect to a new and surreal ideal (Figure 9).³⁹ The appropriation of Kings Road street style, which originated in the enervated and disintegrating economy of England, by Yamamoto, witness and participant to Japan's post-war affluence is a further point of resistance.⁴⁰ We see a contact zone in the form of Yamamoto's perspective which both manipulates and highlights Otherness, offering back, as Richard Martin notes, 'something better than a mirror – a critical study'.⁴¹ By fusing two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles and identities, he creates a vision that is *dialectical* in its ability to go beyond the negative and essentialist view of Japanese identity.

Going beyond established interpretations

Hitherto, commentators have acknowledged the complexities of the Japanese arrival in Paris, but have tended to gravitate towards one of two extremes, ignoring the subtle changes and shifts which Pratt's theory takes into account. Juniya Kawamura's sociological approach distinguishes between the utilitarian function of the Japanese designs

³⁷ T. Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A cultural history*, (New York and Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009)

³⁸ Bhaba, 'Of Mimicry and Man'

³⁹ de la Haye, Amy, 'A dress is no longer a little, flat closed thing; Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Junya Watanabe', *Radical Fashion*, (London: V & A Publications, 2001), pp. 28-38

⁴⁰ H. Koda, 'Rei Kawakubo and the aesthetic of poverty', p. 7

⁴¹ R. Martin, 'Our Kimono Mind: Reflections of 'Japanese Design: A Survey since 1950', *Journal of Design History*, 8: 3 (1995), p. 221

as material products of clothing systems and the status function of their intangible, symbolic outcomes that emerge from fashion systems.⁴² For Kawamura, the Japanese designers have destroyed the Western clothing system as a means of infiltrating the Paris fashion system and whilst their combined presence ‘appeared to shake the very foundations of the established fashion capital’ they ultimately reinforced the French supremacy of fashion.⁴³ She cements Japan as a consolidating agent which has contributed to the wider evolutionary progression of Western fashion, ignoring the potential for interaction, learning or exchange within an asymmetrical, but intercultural dialogue. Focusing on the sum of collaborative interactions between individuals and the role of the legitimising structures of Western fashion, Kawamura sidesteps the issue of hybridity but implies the clothes received a ‘sartorial sheep-dip’ as they passed through Paris.⁴⁴ References in the media do point out the designers’ role to ‘infuse the Paris fashion presentations with their inventiveness’, ‘add considerable lustre to the proceedings’, ‘give fashion a needed lift’, ‘liberate us [the West] from certain fashion strictures’, but Kawamura’s overriding assumption - that Paris’s status is fixed - ignores its ambivalent position which, as a site of conflict, is perpetually changing and shifting.⁴⁵ Turning to Kondo’s discussion of Japanese fashion, she concedes that this entry to the global market has been marked by essentialising gestures - defining the designers as the Other helped to dilute their clear achievements and affirm distance.⁴⁶ This argument is compelling, yet Kondo takes her discussion so far as to suggest the designers have brought about a radical reconfiguration of Eurocentric fashion – making clothes that, by being more flattering to Japanese bodies, have rearticulated the global conventions for

⁴² Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*

⁴³ Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*, p. 148

⁴⁴ N. Cambridge, ‘Review: The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion’, *Fashion Theory*, 10:3 (2006), p. 403

⁴⁵ ‘The Jolt of the Japanese’, p. SMA213; Morris, ‘The Japanese Challenge to French Fashion’, p. B7; Polan, ‘Mighty Touchy’ p. 11, Morris, ‘From the Japanese, Ruffles and Whimsy’, *The New York Times*, 16 October 1987: A26

⁴⁶ Kondo, ‘The Aesthetics and Politics of Japanese Identity in the Fashion Industry’

high fashion. If Kondo is correct, we might question the lack of Japanese designers who have achieved international status since Yamamoto and Kawakubo, not least her desire to reduce complex and fraught changes to a simplified 'East' *versus* 'West' model. Kondo's position, which she repeatedly invokes by stating 'we are from the margins', places her uneasily on the edge of race, ethnicity and nation categories so that the implication is not that she is fighting for better definitions, but against definitions, albeit with sweeping generalisations.⁴⁷ The most significant argument to draw from both scholars is that the Japanese were not doing this blindly; their arrival in Paris was both a business decision and an acknowledgement of the capital's position as the gateway to bigger, international fashion markets.

Both Yamamoto and Kawakubo were engaged, as Lise Skov notes, in the 'business of fashion', which is an important point since an examination of the aesthetic qualities of the clothes must not detract from their status as commodities.⁴⁸ The designs were first and foremost functional objects, further to their interpretation as sophisticated sites of cultural and political contest, operating within the commercial contact zone that constitutes the fashion world. Pratt's argument brings to the fore the contested dimensions that were being played out between the designers and their critics, which were firmly rooted in an economic agenda for both opposed factions. Paris is reliant on the human agency of its network of critics, journalists and editors, who, far from voicing opinions in a vacuum, had a fundamental role to counter the economic threat which the designers posed to the West. Kawakubo and Yamamoto had each established successful businesses in Japan but they wanted to succeed in Paris, to be acknowledged as international designers and to gain

⁴⁷ L. Skov, 'Review: About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theatre', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 24: 2 (1998), p. 426

⁴⁸ Skov, 'Fashion trends, Japonisme and Postmodernism', p. 142

access to the bigger markets that such recognition would secure. The designers achieved this by modifying their sizing to suit Western physiques and creating special collections for European preferences, but they also had to accept, to a certain extent, their national stereotypes as enforced by the West. In parading their Otherness they used the media's stereotyping to their advantage, active abettors in the political and cultural exchanges they had previously been passive subjects in. Thereby they subtly undermine Paris in such a way that can be seen to have made their economic threat *even* more tangible. Tokyo's establishment as a worldwide fashion city, recognised alongside London, New York, Paris and Milan, is testimony to the success of the designers, who engaged with, and responded to the Western representation of Japan.⁴⁹ The determining of the outcome, even the *progress*, of contact, can in part, as we have seen, lie within the grasp of the documenter and disseminator of cultural exchange at the very point where different peoples meet.

This essay has examined the reception and representation of Yamamoto and Kawakubo's designs in the early 1980s, as disseminated through Paris to the American and British media. I return to Pratt, whose statement that the contact zone between cultures is characterised by the *asymmetrical relations of power* is crucial to a more nuanced understanding of the Japanese arrival in Paris, which resulted in a series of shifts and slippage between Japan and the West. Fashion is always a contact zone because it is informed, however subliminally, by human contact in, and with, the surrounding world. Even if Kawakubo and Yamamoto did not wish to make some degree of comment on these forces, it would be an unconscious component of their life, and thus their work. These

⁴⁹ C. Breward and D. Gilbert, eds. *Fashion's world cities*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006)

things are not floating entities, but are all inter-related in a process of collision and difference, which incorporates interaction, learning and exchange between cultures. Instead of an underlying commentary on these cross-cultural relations that we see presented in the designers' work, Western journalism constructed a self-serving false dichotomy to reinforce Paris's *perceived* dominance. As the terms 'East', 'West' were subtly undermined, Japanese identity was noticeably re-inscribed by the media's condensing of an entire culture into selective and supposedly representative images. Contact is relative, and the Japanese designers held a critical place *as* a contact zone and *in* the contact zone, using Western stereotyping to their advantage. The Japanese may not have re-oriented Paris in response to the West's re-orientalizing, but their designs have achieved international acclaim, and an awareness, particularly over time, of a Japan which goes beyond narrow stereotypes.

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