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Revisiting *Fashion at the Edge*: An Interview with Caroline Evans

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In *Fashion at the Edge*, Caroline Evans places the past and present in conversation to investigate Nineties fashion's obsession with the spectacular, the apocalyptic and the melancholic Drawing on Ulrich Lehmann (2000) and Barbara Burman Baines's (1981) writing on fashion revivals, she reads the citation of historical imagery by designers such as Alexander McQueen, Walter Van Beirendonck and Hussein Chalayan as 'not so much a backwards as a forwards glance' (2023: 298), a contemporary projection of fears of the future and a collective response to the nihilism arising from the sensation of sitting at the end of history.

Fitting, then, that on the event of *Fashion at the Edge*'s reissue (see Figure 1), we return to a work that has become something of a cult classic the world over. Twenty years after it was originally published, Caroline and I sat down to discuss the book in the context of a very different fashion landscape, and question why fashion imagery is now less informed by themes of cruelty and deathliness, despite the persistence of collective anxiety and trauma. Our conversation took place on June 15, 2023. It has been condensed and edited for clarity.

< INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE >

Rosie: How did this project get started? I'm wondering if there was a moment you recall – a Benjaminian flash! – that prompted your enquiry.

Caroline: Weirdly, yes. It's unusual that you can track the emergence of a project to one event, but in a sense I can. It was the mid 1990s, and I just had this very strong sense of what was going on in the culture around, and particularly in, visual art – that there was a lot of work about the body, about abjection, about blood and guts and all that kind of stuff. And a very inchoate idea was in my head: I thought I wanted to write a book about the Medusa, which would be about the idea of a death-dealing gaze that was somehow being emitted by so much of the art and culture in that period. I was mulling all this over, and gradually realised that what was going on in art had already been written about, but no one had really written about fashion that way.

So, I thought I should focus on fashion. But then I also had a singular moment of apotheosis. I went to an exhibition in the Barbican called *JAM* (1996) that was about contemporary design, style and graphics. By the end I was footsore, so I sat on a bench, watching this video on a loop, which was the Alexander McQueen 'Dante' show (1996) that took place in a church in Shoreditch. It was a great collection, actually, and a great show.¹ I was just idly watching it, again and again. And that was the moment when I thought, 'right, I don't want to write about art and culture generally; I just want it to be about fashion'. Maybe the idea of the Medusa was the

¹ Alexander McQueen's Fall/ Winter 1996 collection, 'Dante', was shown in Christ Church Spitalfields, a church designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor and built between 1714-1729. Footage from the show is available to view on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2MIY4i73aA>.

catalyst, but Alexander McQueen was my direct route into the book, and eventually I wrote an entire chapter about him. So that was the genesis of the work.

Rosie: I'm thinking about how a lot of the clothes in the book were presented through catwalk imagery, so they speak strongly on a visual register because of how they were styled, their realisation in the context of the show. Do you think there's a sense in which those clothes on the body would, or were supposed to, produce the effect of alienation or anxiety in the wearer, or was it more about that mood being communicated through the garment's design rather than its material properties?

Caroline: I guess it's the latter, in the sense that a lot of what I was writing about was designed to be image and performance. You know, a lot of the fashion I wrote about consisted of show pieces for the runway that didn't go into production. They were one-offs that often disappeared into museum collections or designer archives, and sometimes I would see the same object again and again, over the years, in different places. There's a particular Alexander McQueen corset from the 'Dante' collection, in black lace over mauve silk, with a pointed, high collar that restricts the model's head movements, which I saw in an exhibition in Moscow, in another one in London, and another one in Paris or somewhere. And so those showpieces, which do become kind of auratic objects, disappear into the museum or the designer archive, and only occasionally resurface.

But that's not to deny their specific materiality. And I do think that the materials and techniques that McQueen used are really powerful – the wood, the lace, especially

the metalwork. I don't know that I can completely answer your question about the wearer. But I do know that much later on, when I was writing for the V&A catalogue about McQueen (2015), I thought I had a brilliant thesis, which was that the clothes discipline the body by forcing the model to move in particular ways. And so, the shoes, and the high necks, and the corsets would produce a certain walk and bodily stance. But when I interviewed all the models, they vehemently disagreed with me. They said they loved wearing McQueen because it was a challenge for them as performers and they enjoyed rising to that challenge. So, I couldn't quite write it how I wanted to, and readers afterwards took me up on it and said that I should have considered the question of the objectification of the models, as if the models' accounts weren't quite adequate. Fair enough, but I also felt I couldn't ignore their experience as they recounted it. I couldn't just be saying, like, 'oh here's my clever clogs argument' if the models were saying 'no, actually, McQueen's designs were a spur and a challenge that was missing from more conventional designers' runways, which pushed us to model more imaginatively'.

I think maybe it's better to think of this kind of fashion as performance rather than image. And for me that's interesting because my background is in art history. I'm used to focusing on images and objects as my primary sources, but writing *Fashion at the Edge* marked the beginning of my pivot towards an interest in fashion as a kind of performance. Then later, I began to look to new methods and bodies of literature from performance, music and dance studies, for example in *The Mechanical Smile* (2013), which was about the first fashion shows. And that interest of mine first surfaced in *Fashion at the Edge*, which had been published ten years earlier. Because it's about – well, it's performance, isn't it? When you look at the

book and the photographs, it's performance. And a lot of it is from fashion shows (see Figure 2).

< INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE >

Rosie: And I think that the effect of the book would have been so different if the images you included were museum catalogue-style images of the garments on mannequins.

Caroline: I think so. Another thing I wanted to do was to credit all the makers, not just the star designers. Because good designers are often very good at commissioning talented makers for accessories: someone who makes amazing feathered headpieces, or spiky jewellery and so on. I really wanted to credit those other designers by name, which doesn't happen in fashion very much. I was looking at the way a designer would pull in different types of makers and commission them to do something for the show. More than once, an accessories designer told me how much they got from stepping outside their boundaries in these types of collaboration. Naomi Filmer, the jeweller, said to me of McQueen that 'he could see something in others' work that would feed his project, and yet push those others towards horizons they hadn't even imagined' (Evans 2015, 192) (see Figure 3).

< INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE >

Rosie: I find so interesting what you said about the models' experiences, because it occurred to me that the reason for wearing is so specific in the show context. Often catwalk looks are critiqued for not looking comfortable – but maybe we don't always want to be comfortable. And certainly, in that context, where models must produce a performance – and this is something that performers often say about their costumes in theatrical settings – the clothes can either impede or facilitate the flow of what they need to do and the resources they need to draw on to successfully perform.

Caroline: Yes, exactly. One of the models I interviewed was Laura Morgan, who was McQueen's fit model at one stage, and who also modelled in his shows, and she was fearless. She would wear things that the other models wouldn't – an etched glass corset for example that would've shattered if she fell – and I think it is just about the nature of who she was as a performer. Or the model Erin O'Connor, who wore the razor clam dress in McQueen's 'Voss' show (2001, see Figure 1) and who came off stage without realising her hands were cut and bloodied because she'd been so immersed in her own performance as she ran her hands up and down the shells onstage.

Rosie: I wanted to invite your thoughts on how the dynamics and themes you explore in *Fashion at the Edge* are playing out differently in contemporary fashion. Would you agree that fashion now seems less informed by themes of cruelty and deathliness despite the persistence of collective anxiety and trauma?

Caroline: I was interviewed by Rosalind Jana on this very point, just as *Fashion at the Edge* was reissued (see Jana 2023). She attributed it to changing cultural mores, perhaps originating from a more “moral”, conservative collective sensibility, with less of an appetite for the shocking or macabre. Rosalind linked this to the immediacy of our awareness of danger now, such as the cruelty of fashion production, fashion’s role in the destruction of the planet, and so forth. We’re constantly saturated with media that makes us aware of the enormity of the multiple crises of our time.

If I wanted to oversimplify, I would say most of the changes of the last 20 years stem from new communications. We've just lived through the biggest invention since the printing press: Web 2.0 didn't even come into being until 2000, and so much flows from that. We've lived through this period of such incredibly fast technological development, stops and starts, platforms that have come and gone, and others which have remained. Global communications have changed beyond all recognition since I was working on this book. And I think that does change everything. Of course, there are many designers now making fashion responding to critical issues such as sustainability, or Black Lives Matter, and diversity of various kinds. So, it's not that everyone's become shallow; it's more that the way fashion responds to serious issues has taken a different turn.

Rosie: In the book, you describe fashion as 'a hysterical symptom [...] able to put a finger on contemporary concerns in ways more coherent narratives could not achieve' (2023: 38). Do you still think that holds true?

Caroline: I think it is still relevant, but in a different way. As I wrote in the only new section in the reissue, 'Fashion that articulates anxiety and disintegration shows how thin the surface of everyday life is. It suggests the idea of an apocalyptic parallel universe that might be closer to home than anyone cares to think' (2023: 14). In 2011, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek argued that global capitalism was approaching its terminal crisis, specifically: worldwide ecological crisis; biogenetics, imbalances in global economics and 'the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions' (x). Since then, these issues have gained a new visibility, urgency and relevance through activist movements and digital media. By extension, themes of the fight for social justice, unstable geopolitics and the climate crisis have made their way onto the runways of designers like Pyer Moss, Marine Serre and Demna at Balenciaga.

Rosie: Turning now to consider methods, you write in the introduction that you realised in hindsight that you were developing a methodology: a media archaeology that is also a Benjaminian ragpicking and collation of chiffons (2023: 11-14). I'd love to hear about the value you see in this approach. What does it make available, why is it especially useful for considering contemporary phenomena/fashion?

Caroline: Years ago, I happened upon Walter Benjamin on my own. In the late 1990s, before Ulrich Lehmann published *Tigersprung*, I was thinking about Benjamin's various metaphors for time and historical methods, including the tiger's leap, the labyrinth and the telescope, and how I might apply them to fashion. At that stage I didn't know about media archaeology. And in fact, I think a lot of the key books hadn't yet been written. It was only much later, when I worked on

‘Archaeology of Fashion Film’, a fashion film project with Marketa Uhlirova, my colleague at Central Saint Martins, and Jussi Parikka, the author of *What is Media Archaeology?* (2012), that I became more familiar with the concept.

With hindsight, I was like the character in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (2022 [1670]) who exclaims something like, ‘oh, I’ve been talking prose all my life and I didn’t know’. As if I had always been a media archaeologist without knowing it! One aspect is trying to find methods to escape from the “cause and effect” thinking of linear history – that is, to avoid teleological accounts of how things happen. But the other lesson I might take from media archaeology is the approach that favours looking at the marginalised, the overlooked. You might look at the small things in history, or things that are not part of the dominant narrative of a discipline or a period. And by focusing on something marginal, or juxtaposing it with something else, including things that don’t normally get juxtaposed, you can produce a different account. And with hindsight, I thought, ‘well, maybe that’s what I was doing in *Fashion at the Edge*, all those years ago’.

In terms of a traditional historian’s methods, it’s obviously very problematic to pick something from the past and something from the present and say, ‘hey, they look like each other’. Two things may look like each other but they almost always mean something different. So, I did struggle with that question and I worked quite hard to avoid slipping into the error of making glib comparisons between the past and the present. That’s where I think the connection to media archaeology comes in, because I was trying to do something more structural – a bit more Foucauldian, in a way, in

line with his efforts to write the history of the present and his observation that, as we move through time, we're always re-seeing the past and reconstructing it in new configurations.² That's why we have to keep on writing history, because our present moment never stands still. I was trying to find a method to do that.

Rosie: As you were speaking, I was thinking about fashion design teams' mood boards: often they're ragpicking as well. Media archaeology as a method seems to mirror fashion design practice, in the way that temporality gets disrupted to produce garments that are, as you write, dialectical. And designers are making a tiger's leap to revive something from the past that we can use to interpret and understand our current moment. That is already happening in design, but perhaps bringing it into how we analyse fashion mirrors that dynamic in some way.

Caroline: Absolutely. In the introduction to *Fashion at the Edge*, I cite the historian Irving Wohlfarth who writes about the historian as a ragpicker, as a collector of 'the refuse of history' (Benjamin in Wohlfarth 1986: 144), who forages in the detritus of the past in order to make sense of the present. I used his ideas as a way to contrast historical methods with design methods, where the designer is a cultural scavenger of the past, rummaging in the historical wardrobe and putting historical ghosts to work, in order to produce something new. It's almost a sort of mimicry, isn't it, or perhaps an echo.

² On why he wrote the history of the prison, Foucault states, 'Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present' (1977: 31).

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