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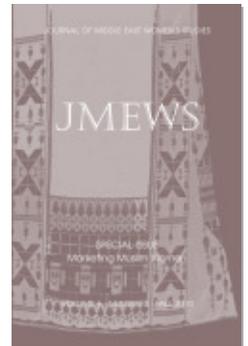
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THE BURQA IN VOGUE: FASHIONING AFGHANISTAN

ELLEN McLARNEY



ABSTRACT

In the months leading up to 9/11 and in its immediate aftermath, the media demonized the burqa as “Afghanistan’s veil of terror,” a tool of extremists and the epitome of political and sexual repression. Around the time of Afghanistan’s presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005, there were noticeable shifts in apprehensions of the burqa in the Western media. In Fall 2006, burqa images even appeared on the Paris runways and in Vogue fashion spreads. This article charts the burqa’s evolution from “shock to chic” and the process of its commodification in the Western media. The article specifically analyzes Vogue magazine’s appropriation of the burqa as haute couture.

I’ve long believed that the content of fashion does not materialize spontaneously but, in ways both mysterious and uncanny, emerges from the fabric of the times. That fabric has recently been darkly threaded by war and uncertainty. (Wintour 2004)

In the months leading up to 9/11 and in its immediate aftermath, American and British media demonized the burqa as “Afghanistan’s veil of terror,” a tool of extremists and the epitome of political and sexual repression (Shah 2001). But after the Taliban’s fall, when women failed to unveil

in large numbers, there were noticeable shifts in the media's representations of the burqa. Extensive exposure had already familiarized this sign of absolute difference, transforming it into a commodity used to sell news, films, documentaries, and magazines. In Spring 2006, the burqa emerged on Paris runways and later that year in *Vogue* fashion spreads photographed by the venerable doyen of fashion photography, Irving Penn, and modeled by girl-of-the-moment Gemma Ward (Penn 2006). This article charts the burqa's evolution from "shock to chic" in the pages of American *Vogue*, as "that which yesterday was reviled becomes today's cultural consumer goods" (Lefebvre 1971). Incorporated into the imperial imagination, the burqa became a fetishized commodity and an exotic good. Couturiers and their commentators sensed something dark in the burqa's cooptation by the fashion industry—a darkness that superficial analyses attributed to the Taliban's (and accordingly, to Islam's) oppressive attitudes toward gender. The designs of John Galliano for Christian Dior, of Dutch couturiers Viktor & Rolf, and of Japanese fashion house Jun Takahashi Undercover explore how the supposed liberation of Afghanistan obscures the blood-splashed, wounding, and disfiguring violence of that liberation, projected onto the material sign of the burqa. These representations of the burqa act as mirrors of the West's own gendered contestations, waged on material, aesthetic, and sartorial grounds. Interpreters of the burqa imagery—photographer Irving Penn, gender theorists Minoo Moallem and Judith Butler, satirist Terry Jones, and fashion journalist Olivier Saillard—comment on other forms of submission and domination that emerge from the American occupation, tied up in complex hierarchies of sex, race, and class. The darkness implicit in these representations is not just some nightmare left over from American involvement with the Taliban, but a reflection of the violence that neo-imperial, global capitalism inflicts on women's bodies.

LIPSTICK AND NAIL POLISH: "I AM A PERSON AFTER ALL"

Imagery of neoliberal emancipation accompanied the move of the Western gaze into Afghanistan, embedded in the military-industrial complex. Afghanistan—occupied by the Soviets, reclaimed by the mujahideen and the Taliban, site of enduring tribal conflicts—is fertile ground for the capitalist imagination: emancipation from the

stranglehold of communist ideology on local and regional markets, emancipation from an oppressive religious regime, emancipation from “backward” social and cultural practices, emancipation of the Muslim woman. These proliferating discourses of repression imagined a female body freed for the aesthetic, cosmetic, and sartorial accoutrements of the new capitalist economy. Even before 9/11, the Feminist Majority had done substantial work with the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) in lobbying both the U.S. government and Hollywood for support and, some argue, in preparing the ground for the invasion (Abu-Lughod 2002, 787; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002, 339). The American and British media played a critical role in imagining the liberation of Afghanistan as a liberation of women’s bodies from the Taliban and the burqa.¹ One documentary, Saira Shah’s *Beneath the Veil*, focuses on what she describes as an “undercover” investigation of the crimes of the Taliban. First aired in June 2001 on Britain’s Channel 4 and then in August 2001 on CNN, it barely made an impact. When it was shown again just after 9/11, it became CNN’s most watched documentary *ever*, with a television audience of five and a half million viewers (McMorris 2002). *Beneath the Veil* aired at least ten times on CNN, in seeming synchrony with U.S. military strategy. It was shown, for example, on October 6, 2001, the day before the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, and again on November 17, the day the State Department released its “Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women” (US/DOS 2001) and First Lady Laura Bush delivered her “Radio Address to the Nation” (Bush 2001). The report and the radio address focus on two key issues: restrictions on female education and restrictions on women’s dress. The report suggests that the burqa limits freedom of movement and hence violates “the basic principles of international human rights law.” It connects this violation to restrictions on adornment such as makeup and nail polish. These observations echo Shah’s documentary, where a beauty salon is described as “the most subversive place of all.” Shah says, “If they are caught, these women will be imprisoned, but they still paint the faces they can never show in public.... Women trying to keep life normal in a world gone completely mad.” One of the women in the beauty salon says, “This is a form of resistance” (Shah 2001). *Beneath the Veil* sets up a framework for interpreting the burqa as madness and the beauty salon as “normal,” and accordingly, the burqa as repression and the aestheti-

cization of women's bodies as liberation. The project of unveiling was not sufficient; Afghan women also needed to have their basic right of adornment and the freedom to paint their faces restored to them.

Several thoughtful analyses compare the mission to unveil women in Afghanistan to nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial feminism (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784; cooke 2002, 469; Ayotte and Husain 2005, 121). Clearly there are close parallels between public unveilings orchestrated by the French in Algeria and Oprah's unveiling of a burqa-clad woman in Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* (Lazreg 1994; Zoya 2002, 211; Whitlock 2005, 60; Macdonald 2006). Ensler's spectacle emphasizes the burqa as sexual repression, a subtext that has long been encoded into the veil. Yet there is an added dimension to how the British and American media approach unveiling by focusing on another phase of aesthetic rehabilitation. This rehabilitation is facilitated—or perhaps even mandated—by the transition on the ground in Afghanistan to a post-Soviet, post-Taliban consumer culture, where products and services suddenly become available for consumption. This is not just a critical part of the imperial, capitalist project of opening foreign markets, it is also a requisite of the culture of visual media—an intimate counterpart of the invading foreign armies—which traffics in exposing the inside story while producing the aestheticized images so essential to its own product.

Two similar articles, both published in May 2002, describe this aestheticization phase of unveiling. One, in the *World Press Review*, interprets fishnet stockings as a sign of women gaining rights in post-Taliban Afghanistan (Jones 2002, 36). The other, written by Janine di Giovanni for *Vogue*, echoes the prevailing message that the liberation of Kabul was an emancipation of women from their veils. Titled “Beneath the Burqa” (playing on the name of Shah's documentary), the article also depicts the unveiling of products on the open market. “Within days of liberation, the country itself was coming out of hiding,” writes di Giovanni. “There were new things for sale in the bazaar—strange, forbidden things: books, condoms, hair dryers. Now, packages of hair dye with scantily clad Swedish models adorn shop windows” (di Giovanni 2002, 254). She further illustrates this uncovering of products, hair, and bodies through human subjects. The first Afghan woman who speaks to di Giovanni does so only after the Northern Alliance liberates the city. The journalist, however, refuses to respond until she takes off her burqa, a seeming

condition for discourse. The woman then reveals her face: “Her hair was dyed blond, and she wore pink lipstick and blue eyeliner. She stared at me defiantly.... ‘Ah, you see,’ she said, ‘I am a person after all.’” It is not just through her face that she speaks, but through the products that adorn it: the dye, the lipstick, and the eyeliner.

These Afghan women are integrated into a readily understood system of signs by which women’s bodies are interpreted in the West—what Saira Shah (2001) refers to as the normalcy of the painted face. The burqa, on the other hand, is not only abnormal but unintelligible to the Western gaze. Commenting on di Giovanni’s article, Minoo Moallem observes:

The woman under the burqa only becomes a real person and achieves the status of subject for the reporter when the reporter sees that the young woman has bought into the signifiers of Western, white femininity—blond dyed hair, blue eyeliner, and pink lipstick.... [T]he conditions that open women up to objectification... are the very conditions that lead to the possibility of subjecthood for Afghani women. These representational practices call upon Afghani women to take on the marks of white, Western femininity to become subjects.... (Moallem 2005, 186)

Race is critical to these signs of personhood, but so is the act of participation in the world of commodities. These products signal women as active participants in the market, not as passively cut off from the global culture of exchange. Participation in this consumer culture gives them their humanity. Or, as the State Department “Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women” suggests, adornment is a basic human right. The “barbarism, medievalism, and misogyny” of the Taliban had already been amply publicized, with Taheema Faryal, a member of RAWA, stating on *CBS Evening News* that women in Afghanistan have fewer rights than animals (RAWA 1999; McMorris 2002). In another interview, a former woman journalist shows di Giovanni a picture from the era of the Soviet-backed Najibullah government. In the photograph, the Afghan woman is wearing a miniskirt, heels, and pale lipstick. “What I’m trying to show you... is that we were people before the burqa” (di Giovanni 2002, 254). These signs of personhood—lipstick, dyed hair, eyeliner, miniskirt, and heels—make Afghan women intelligible to a Western audience. If fashion

is a language, as some have argued, then the burqa is incomprehensible (Barthes 1967; Lurie 1981). It also becomes a dividing line between the human and the inhuman, the person and the non-person, the normal and the abnormal.

Nestled in di Giovanni's article is a sidebar titled "The Power of Beauty," describing a *Vogue*-sponsored project to teach beauty skills to Afghan women. The project would later become known as "Beauty Without Borders," implying that salon treatments are like medicine for the ill. An ulterior mission hovers uneasily behind the project: that of accessing women's bodies, making them receptive to particular goods and services, and preparing them for participation in the new economy. Readyng women's bodies for this emancipation is intensely corporeal: shaping, treating, trimming, cutting, extracting, waxing, plucking, coloring, painting, massaging (without mentioning Botox, liposuction, chemical peels, injections, and silicone). Participating in the physicality of this experience is described by Western beauty technicians in Kabul as pampering and "healing" (Mermin 2004).

A series of articles in *Vogue* documents the progress of the beauty academy through the collective efforts of the U.S. beauty industry. The project is sponsored by fashion magazines (*Vogue*, *Marie Claire*), supported by product donations (Paul Mitchell, Frederic Fekkai), and staffed by volunteer aestheticians and hairdressers. The stated aim of the project is to provide skills and income for famine-starved Afghan women, but it also aims to establish a nascent service sector within the Afghan population. But the aim is also to create needs and desires. As one observer comments, what Afghan women want after years of "being covered up for so long" are "blunt cuts... body waves, blow-outs, and color." They also need "products like sunscreens and moisturizers.... These women find their skin especially sensitive after being hidden under a burqa for five years" (Powers 2006, 251).

The opening of the beauty academy is documented not only in the pages of *Vogue*, but also in the news media, in a documentary film, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* (Mermin 2004), and in the published memoirs of expatriate hairdresser Debbie Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School* (2007). The film stresses the beauty salon as both a necessity and a sign of normalcy. Rodriguez comments, "I've traveled a lot, to probably over forty different countries. This is the first country that ever really needed

me as far as my skills. I've never seen a country that wanted it so bad, wanted normal. That just wanted normal" (Mermin 2004). The images portrayed during the voice-over are telling: in the window display of an Afghan beauty salon is the head of a heavily made-up blond doll, a product called "Prima Well," and a Barbie in a silver lamé swimming suit. It is almost as if the lace curtains reveal the elements needed to attain the normative female embodied by the Barbie, a rehabilitation of the primal self with the aim of attaining wellness and beauty. A *Vogue* review of the film returns to the normalcy motif, juxtaposing media images that emphasize not just beauty, but making hair presentable. "Once the Taliban were ousted in 2001, most Afghan people wanted to get back to a normal life, be it watching TV or getting their hair done" (Powers 2006, 251). Hair tamed in another way, by getting it "done," becomes an alternative means of defining and shaping women's bodies.

The unveiled face is what Judith Butler describes as "a condition of humanization" in the media (Butler 2004, 141).

The media's evacuation of the human through the image has to be understood, though, in terms of the broader problem that normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human.... These normative schemes operate not only by producing ideals of the human that differentiate among those who are more and less human. (Butler 2004, 146)

These normative schemes of intelligibility produce ideals of the human, "models" like those in which *Vogue* traffics. But Butler questions the unveiled, aestheticized face's claim to humanity. Instead, she sees this face as a mask playing out in the theater of war, part of a strategy that "seeks not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself" (148). Media images of the unveiled face function as a foil, a distraction, a decoy, showing nothing of the war, famine, and poverty that are largely the result of Cold War tensions in the region.² The "mask" of the unveiled face replaces this history with a narrative of a triumphant and victorious U.S. nationalism. Such media images conceal or displace the humanity of the face and the raw truth of its history and its real vulnerability (142). But this narrative is unintelligible in the media script, partially because "Islam remains unspeakable" (135).

THE MARKET VALUE OF UNVEILING

The insistence on the burqa as repressive becomes what Foucault describes as an incitation to discourse: where talking about something presumed to be forbidden and taboo appears to liberate it from the shame of silence. Or, perhaps in this context, looking at something excessively seems to liberate it from its invisibility. Discourses have certainly proliferated around the burqa, about Muslim women, their sexuality, bodies, and identities, giving them a larger-than-life discursive presence. I am less concerned with the “regimes of knowledge” erected by these discourses than with what Foucault calls the “market value attributed... to what is said about sexual repression” (Foucault 1990, 7). The economic potential of capitalizing on this presumed repression more closely fits American imperialism than French colonialism’s preoccupation with cultural capital. Although the media purport to disseminate information, they are hardly a technology of knowledge, but tailor their product to consumer desire as gauged by polls, statistics, and other measures of audiences and advertising markets. Sex sells and sexual liberation promises, as Foucault says, “the garden of earthly delights” (perhaps in contradistinction to the garden of spiritual reward). The pleasures promised by this liberation are not just physical, but material.

The media link women’s emancipation to the emancipation of consumer desires, wants, and needs. This kind of liberation facilitates participation in the free market, the free exchange of goods, and free access to products. Bodies must be freely available to engage in this consumption, and hungry for the fruits of the consumer economy. The particular history of Afghanistan as a site of Cold War contestations makes the liberation of its markets a particularly important project for American capitalism. The State Department report on the Taliban’s war on women emphasizes that restrictions on women’s movements make it hard for them to go to the market: “a woman’s hand could not show when handing over money or receiving the purchase” (US/DOS 2001). Such images of repressed consumers are echoed in a *Vogue* article published not long after the invasion of Afghanistan. The author, Carla Power, emphasizes the markets, services, and products suppressed under the Soviet occupation and the Taliban regime. She reports that when she was visiting Kabul under the Taliban regime in 1998, a waiter showed

her a menu of caviar, blinis, and vodka; lobster, filet mignon, and champagne. He remarked, “Perhaps someday the Americans and foreigners will come back” (Power 2001, 84). Power recalls her childhood, growing up in Afghanistan, and nostalgically reflects on colonial-style class divisions: “Kabul seemed to draw some of its etiquette from the British Raj, where gradations of hierarchy and status were notoriously strict” (86). She describes in detail the bazaars’ vast array of goods, writing about the “Money Bazaar” that dispensed dollars and the “Nixon Bazaar” named after the American president. The subtitle of the article reads, “Will Kabul ever be the same again? Remembrances of things past may hold a key. Carla Power looks forward by looking back” (82). The shambles of a nostalgic paradise recalls the denouement of Saira Shah’s documentary, where she returns to her father’s village, only to find it in ruins. Such media representations never fail to mention pre-Soviet prosperity destroyed by the ensuing Soviet occupation. If only the U.S. had won that battle of the Cold War, Afghanistan would have remained free.

Because the twin specters of communism and Islamism had kept Afghanistan closed, the project of American liberation performs a double task of lifting both the Iron Curtain and the burqa. In her book, *The Caged Virgin*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the popular media personality, author, and former Dutch parliamentarian, refers to the veil as the “Islamic Curtain” (Hirsi Ali 2006, xi). In so doing, she suggests that the “clash of civilizations” has replaced Cold War tensions and the burqa has become the symbolic border between two oppositional worlds. Interpreting this opposition in terms of the tensions between capitalism and communism, she correspondingly extends the conflict to other binaries: between West and East, secular and Islamic, liberated and repressed, modern and backward, but also between rich and poor. Her autobiography, *Infidel* (2007), portrays her own passage from Somalia to The Netherlands as one from East to West, Islam to secularism, repression to liberation, backwardness to modernity. But the most striking aspect of her narrative is the journey from poverty to prosperity. The distance Hirsi Ali traveled in her rise to fame and fortune is highlighted in an excerpt from *Infidel* published in *Vogue* (Johnson 2007). The excerpt describes her visit to a Somali refugee camp to search for lost relatives, embellishing the lore surrounding her own controversial defection to Holland as a refugee. Hirsi Ali equates her journey from poverty to riches with a journey from Islam to the West

and, accordingly, from oppression to emancipation. Her current professional home is at the American Enterprise Institute, whose core purpose is to defend and promote “American freedom and democratic capitalism... private enterprise, individual liberty and responsibility, vigilant and effective defense and foreign policies...” (AEI/BOT 2005). How the AEI’s goals fit in with her own stated policy objectives involving Muslim women remains unarticulated. In the *Vogue* interview accompanying the excerpt from *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali is described as wearing Chanel pumps and an Escada jacket, and slipping off her shoes to reveal “naked feet... with perfectly painted toes” which the startled interviewer contrasts with the image of “one who used to cover herself daily from head to toe in a black hijab” (Johnson 2007, 226). These nuggets juxtapose the supposed oppression of the hijab with the nakedness of the feet and the freedoms symbolized by cosmetic embellishment and high-end couture.

The pages of *Vogue* feature grand exemplars of women who have freed their bodies from Islam and risen to reap the fruits of economic and sexual emancipation on the open market. *Vogue* recounts the larger-than-life tales of success: of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Saira Shah, and Camilla Al Fayed. All three are Muslim women living in Europe: a Somali native elected to the Dutch parliament, a British journalist of Afghan heritage, an Egyptian heiress to a British institution. Shah’s documentary, *Beneath the Veil*, was produced by the aptly named Hardcash Productions: she reportedly sold book rights to an American publisher for \$650,000, as well as rights to a British publisher, a French publisher, and Miramax, all for six figures each (Kramer 2002). Even Martin Kramer describes it as “the most successful commercialization of the ‘women in Islam’ theme since Sally Field got stuck in Iran in *Not Without My Daughter*” (Kramer 2002).

Another “good” Muslim depicted in the pages of *Vogue* is Camilla Al Fayed, daughter of Harrods owner Mohamed Al Fayed. The 2006 profile describes Camilla’s mother as “rais[ing] her in the English countryside instilling all the best British fresh-air values” (Norwich 2006, 114). The “crown jewel” of the international social scene, Camilla mingles with royalty, heiresses, and socialites. And this, of course, involves very expensive clothing. *Vogue*’s focus on her is partially motivated by her role as co-chair of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute gala, an event endlessly chronicled in the magazine, as high art meets haute couture meets high society. The author of the article, *New York*

Times style editor William Norwich, escorted Camilla to fashion week in Paris in 2006. This was the year that the collections made startling references to veiling and burqas, but these are completely unacknowledged in Norwich's chronicle of the fashionable Camilla's lifestyle.

These examples promise earthly rewards for those who would not only give up veiling, but in Hirsi Ali's case, denounce it, or in Shah's case, expose it. In Al Fayed's case, she is regaled as heir apparent to a British clothing empire. Through their integration into the culture of consumerism, these women gain access to what *Vogue* calls the "Master Class," a regular feature of the magazine whose title puns on racial and economic hierarchies. This is their neoliberal emancipation from economic deprivation, expressed not only through class identity, but through sartorial signifiers. In this respect, the burqa's oppressiveness is not just religious, cultural, and sexual, it is also a barrier to participation in the free market.

Exemplifying hostility to neoliberal emancipation are the supporters of Osama bin Laden, profiled in Deborah Scroggins' "Handmaidens of Terror" (2003). The article's title plays on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—a novel about an oppressive totalitarian theocracy where dress codes play a critical role in the subjugation of women (one of the features of Atwood's dystopic society is that women are not allowed to choose their own clothes, wear makeup, or read magazines or books). A journalist who writes frequently about women and Islam (see Scroggins 2002a; 2002b; 2005b), her next article for *Vogue* is about Darfur, with harrowing and graphic details about the refugee camps there (2005a). Her account is dire: she uses words like apocalypse, nightmare, madness, hellhole, and monster. When she first arrives in Darfur, she interviews a woman in "a brilliant sapphire veil." Aware of the vast economic gulf separating the wealthy foreigner and the refugee, Scroggins wonders why the woman even bothers to talk to her. "Because," she reasons, "we khawajas [foreigners] are often the last hope left for people like this." She returns home to vacation in a two-million-dollar condominium unit in Florida, where she wakes up from a nightmare of Darfur and thinks, "We should have never gone there; we should have never gotten mixed up with all of this; will I ever feel normal again?"

The inordinate material privileges fetishized in the pages of *Vogue* sit uneasily with the refugees, the camps, and the famine. The juxtaposi-

tion of these elements has the effect of further emphasizing the pleasures of privilege, by way of contrast, but also the fears of deprivation operating under the glossy's bejeweled surface. In September 2006, the actress Kirsten Dunst appeared as Marie Antoinette on the cover of *American Vogue* (but curiously, not on the cover of French or British *Vogue*), in celebration of the release of Sofia Coppola's feature film, *Marie Antoinette*. The shoot at Versailles was wedged between two "veiling" fashion shoots—one with heavy-mesh facemasks and the other of Japanese burqa punk. In the Marie Antoinette shoot, Dunst models a number of original designs from top couturiers. One dress by John Galliano stands out as an aesthetic departure from the other period pieces, but also for its political allusions. It resembles an oil spill of black aluminum foil, "ruched into undulating bubbles," as the photo's caption states (Coddington 2006, 654–5). The image seems to be Galliano's reference to the current climate of war and petroleum politics, and an implicit comparison between the royalty of Versailles and Hollywood. This Marie Antoinette is an American celebrity queen, oblivious not just to the blood of class conflict, but to the oil flowing at her feet.³

Galliano's Spring 2006 collection for Christian Dior heavily references Marie Antoinette. *Vogue* contributor Hamish Bowles sees the designs as a commentary on current events, specifically the civil unrest that spread through working-class suburbs of Paris in Fall 2005. The French media had interpreted the riots in these largely North African immigrant communities as a protest against their continued disenfranchisement and lack of economic opportunity for unemployed youth. Bowles comments,

Galliano conceived his collection against a backdrop of the violent French street riots that were igniting cities across the country—the worst since the epochal student uprisings of 1968. He responded to the angst-ridden *Zeitgeist* with a collection that married the seek-and-destroy instincts of a Mad Max urban warrior with those of the French revolutionary *sansculottes* [sic].... His models' faces were powdered livid white... as visagiste Pat McGrath described it, "modern Marie Antoinette." (Bowles 2006, 142)

Woven into these contemporary political references are allusions to the French revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité* emblazoned on gar-

ments, “1789” painted on models’ faces and necks, portraits of Marie Antoinette on dresses, and blood stains on shoes and hemlines. “The embroidery houses were encouraged to simulate the splash of blood from fresh wounds,” reports Bowles, “leading *The International Herald Tribune*’s Suzy Menkes to dub it ‘carnage couture’” (Bowles 2006, 142).

Although the fashion press does not delve into the meaning of the political references, the images are clear, even if they do not cohere into a single message. The agitations of the North African and Beur population in France are portrayed less as a threat to the values of the French Revolution than as an embodiment of them. Galliano combines his references to revolution with allusions to veiling and the March 2005 ban on religious symbols in French public space. The Dior show was awash in headscarves and ostentatious crosses, precisely the “conspicuous clothing and religious signs” prohibited by the new law. Galliano seems to be making a statement about creative freedom and transgression of the law. But he simultaneously situates such rights within the sphere of the freedoms promised by republican values and the corresponding right to rebel against oppressive regimes. The Dior collection epitomizes how regimes of power enclose resistance in its own semiotic system, making disenfranchisement and privilege exist in the same range of referents. But it is also evidence, so palpable in the rag trade, that the extraordinary privilege of some is contingent on the disenfranchisement of others. The Marie Antoinette motif puts the fashion industry, and its preoccupations with status, society, wealth, and class distinctions, squarely on the wrong side of history. She is the epitome of decadence, overthrown so that justice can be served. Yet the Dior collection contains decadence (the couture) and revolution (the rioters and the demonstrators) within the same system of signs. There is a major shift in the symbolism of veiling fashions, from an emblem of repression to one of resistance and revolution. In her “letter from the editor,” Anna Wintour calls the season’s collections “an extraordinary series of protests against corporatism, conformity, and militarism” (Wintour 2006, 150). This attempt to write the fashion industry into the right side of history is like having your cake and eating it too.

Since veiling persists in Afghanistan despite the country’s “liberation,” the Western media can no longer sustain their interpretation of the burqa as a sign of repression. Instead, multicultural inclusion is deployed

to incorporate this marker of foreignness. The French continue to battle the veil at the governmental and legislative levels, seeing it as an obstacle to assimilation, to secularism, and to women's sexual availability.⁴ But the burqa's appearance on the runways, front center in the fashion world, belies the accepted wisdom of the veil as barrier to foreign penetration and assimilation. Now a fetishized commodity and an exotic good, the burqa is no longer an iron curtain barring Western capitalist expansion, but one of its instruments. Around the time the burqa appeared on the runways, a *Vogue* article featured "über-malls and über-spenders" in Dubai, another sign of Muslim women's assimilation into consumer culture. Whereas earlier the "veil" served as a homogeneous signifier of "Muslim women," suddenly they can be distinguished "by the Chloé eyewear and the angry inch of stiletto heel under an abaya," by Tocca dresses, Seven jeans, and the latest Paddington bag (Woods 2006, 310). Different kinds of veils—abayas, chadors, and burqas—are apparently no obstacle to adorning bodies or purchasing goods in the marketplace. The "Islamic curtain" is not rent, but has become a commodity itself (Hirsi Ali 2006, xi). It is as comprehensible as shopping for the latest fashions at the mall, a readily intelligible American vernacular.

By July 2007, the veil is fully liberated in the pages of *Vogue*. Joan Juliet Buck, former editor-in-chief of French *Vogue*, writes about "abayas and burkas" as this season's sun protection. It not only keeps her skin looking young, but frees her from having to expose "everything that other women display, the curve of this, the swell of that, the skin" (Buck 2007, 146). She inverts the burqa-as-repression motif, writing veiling as empowering, emancipating her gaze and protecting her body. "I can see you, you can't see me.... I am safe and I am free" (146). The Buck article illustrates the distance traveled by the burqa, from emblem of utter dehumanization to expression of fashion, protest, and even personal freedom. Lurking on the opposite page is a photograph by Irving Penn of a woman wholly swathed in burlap sack cloth. Penn's own long career in photography encompasses images of the exotic and iconographic shots of the fashion world. The image of the woman in burlap is reminiscent of a picture taken by Penn in 1971. The earlier image portrays two "guedras," or Tuareg dancing girls from Morocco, with what looks like sacks over their heads and wraps pulled tightly around them. The burlap portrait accompanying Buck's article clearly evokes the burqa, but also looks like sackcloth or the cilice, a Christian means of self-mortification or pen-

ance for adornment. Penn recognizes the burqa images as mirrors through which Western society sees itself. His *Vogue* photograph refers not only to a Christian practice analogous to the burqa, but also to fashion and its own forms of self-mortification.

BALACLAVAS, BOTOX, AND BURQAS

Masks, hoods, and veils flooded the Fall 2006 collections (first shown at the beginning of the year). In a multimedia slideshow on the *New York Times* website, fashion critic Stephanie Rosenbloom (2006) interprets some of the burqa and bondage references as sinister, “as misogyny, as a desire to suppress, muffle, or stifle women.” At the precise moment that she says “misogyny” in the slideshow, the images shift from runway models to a random photograph of a group of women in burqas. But she acknowledges another way of interpreting the masks included in the Fall collections, as “reflecting the mood of the culture, which is sort of dark... we are at war, some people see it as an expression of that.” In her “letter from the editor,” Anna Wintour picks up the motif that burqa chic dramatizes fashion’s darker mood, an aesthetic she believes “can only be a result of the darkening political climate” (Wintour 2006, 150). Connecting the burqa imagery with the climate of war, the veil is seen as somehow infecting the culture, spreading its nefarious influence, reflecting Scroggins’ message that “we should have never gone there; we should have never gotten mixed up with all of this” (Scroggins 2005a, 46). The violence of Islam as embodied in the violence of the burqa is seen as an ever-emanating source of darkness, terror, and warfare. Nonetheless, implicit in both Rosenbloom and Wintour’s commentary is a recognition of the U.S.’s own role in perpetrating violence, a realization that violence is not just emanating from a nefarious “obscure” outside force. Again, the semiotic system seems to both perpetrate normative views and simultaneously interrogate them as flip sides of the same set of signs.

Jun Takahashi’s Fall 2006 “burqa punk” collection sent seismic waves through the fashion industry. Mask references are not new to Takahashi; his Undercover line has long experimented with masks and full-body coverings. His “Melting Pot” collection fully covered the body in one type of textile design, with matching patterns painted on the

face. His “Decorated Armed Voluntary Forces” collection referenced the European crusades and dressed women in *khimar*-like (covering hair and chest) chain-mail head coverings. The collection’s slogan was “Anti-War.” Takahashi curated issue number 4 (2006) of the Japanese avant-garde *A Magazine*⁵ and filled it with masks: a photo shoot with naked women in burqa-like hoods, with piercings and bondage gear; photographs of stuffed heads kissing through the same burqa-like gear; even an advertisement for Hermès with dolls wrapped in abaya-like Hermès scarves. The shock value of the burqa is not lost on Takahashi, who combines face masks and head coverings with iconic references to punk and sado-masochistic culture. Takahashi undermines the media’s incessant connection of the burqa with repression and instead identifies it with punk rebellion against middle-class values, or even as a type of sexual play. Safety pins, both closed and pointing open, adorn his models’ clothes; a nose ring is attached to a chain, and multiple piercings on the outside of the headgear look like earrings. Takahashi clearly alludes to the fate suffered by punk: its incorporation into the world of commodities and the ensuing neutralization of its shock value. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige described this as the “neutralization” of punk’s meaning as it traveled from “shock to chic,” losing its value as social commentary (Hebdige 1979, 16). The appearance of punk mail-order catalogs, pervasive marketing, and safety pins on the runway all signaled punk’s appropriation into the mainstream. Is the burqa social commentary from the fringe of consumer culture? Takahashi alludes to an aspect of the return to veiling: Islamism as a mode of resistance to the all-consuming reach of American consumer culture. Yet this symbol, too, can be subsumed into the commercial life of things. His burqa gear encodes other assumptions about veiling: as self-inflicted violence, as a straitjacket, as opposition to Western values. The references are clear: the burqa as punk symbol; the burqa as statement against hegemonic sartorial norms; and the burqa’s incorporation as commodity.

When quizzed on his motives, Takahashi has little to say. Many critics try to attribute a political message to his work, to read something “dark and sinister” into it as Stephanie Rosenbloom observes (Rosenbloom 2006). He refuses to concede to this perspective or even to the politicization of his work. In the issue of *A Magazine* curated by Takahashi, Terry Jones, the British comedian, political satirist, and fierce

critic of the war in Iraq, interviews the Japanese designer. He asks, “A lot of people thought that [the last collection] was a dark collection because you wrapped the face. What was your intention?” Takahashi responds:

My first idea was to use one fabric and one colour on the whole body [a reference to his Fall 2000/Winter 2001 collection]. I thought it could be beautiful, attractive in a way. It wasn’t originally dark at first. I am realizing that people say it’s dark, but for me it’s beautiful. I’m trying not to make everything dark.

Jones goes on:

The last collection is especially interesting because with the masks you did a lot of jewelry work on the face. It had almost an erotic, sexual/masochistic feeling. It almost seemed to reflect a lot of our political situation. Was that something you were aware of? Or do you think you were influenced by the social, political system now? For example in newspapers, where you see Iranian women completely wrapped, but also very tough and very strong. They’re like female warriors. Then you also have the prisoner, the idea that we are all prisoners and wrapped, head masks. Do you see many things connected to post 9/11?... [It] looked like a political comment.

Takahashi responds:

It might have looked like I was showing my political message, but that wasn’t my intention. (Jones 2006)

The choice of Jones as interviewer, however, is clearly political. Was it Takahashi’s choice? That of the editors? Jones has been highly critical of British and U.S. policy in the Middle East and corresponding attitudes toward Muslim women. In a recent article in the *Guardian*, he satirizes the British media’s reaction to the Iranian detention of British navy and marine personnel in the March 2007 incident in the Persian Gulf. Why make Seaman Faye Turney wear a black headscarf? How uncivilized, Jones remarks. Why not put a bag over her head as we do with Muslim prisoners, make it hard for her to breathe, and circulate that image in the media (Jones 2007)?

Jones’s question clearly refers to imagery of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib: the sado-masochistic intimations of anonymous sexuality,

masks and face gear, bondage, sexual violence, eroticism, and fantasies of submission and dominance. In the short film *Submission*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo Van Gogh employ similar sado-masochistic imagery: of a woman with a face veil praying naked, of whipping a naked woman's body with Qur'an verses projected onto it, of clandestine sexuality brutally punished. Similarly, the public execution in Saira Shah's documentary has overtones of a snuff movie. It is never explained why the victim is being executed in the former soccer stadium, it seems for some vaguely sexual transgression. This is the stuff of Orientalist fantasies, but translated from paintings and photographs to film, television, video, and *YouTube*. Power—submission and domination, bondage and liberation, sexual repression and emancipation—is continually refracted through the clothes. Penn's burlap burqa, as a form of sexual mortification, refers to this; Galliano's Marie Antoinette collection is full of chastity belts and bondage gear; Takahashi's masks are accessorized by what look like white straitjackets; Viktor & Rolf's face veils, resembling fencing masks, appear doubly belligerent as both fighting tools and protection from invasive foils. Jones points out contradictory (or complementary?) images in the media, of tough and strong Iranian female warriors, and of Muslim prisoners with bags over their heads. He asks the question, who is submitting and who is dominating, who is repressed and who is repressing? The answers, he suggests, lie in media representations, although meanings are seemingly inverted.

Another article in the issue of *A Magazine* curated by Takahashi is titled "Masks Do Have a Face." The article by Olivier Saillard recognizes fashion as molding and shaping the human body. There is no primal, original natural body that must be liberated. The unveiling of the bodice or the cleavage has only led, he says, to "the expression of the thousands of artifices that make a whole era blush," referring simultaneously to both silicone injections and a culture of mandatory self-exposure. The face is like a blank canvas whose identity is constructed through surgery and cosmetics and which doctors, designers, and hairdressers "try to master." We all wear masks, says Saillard; faces are adorned or ornamented or obscured or revealed in manifold ways. He charts a short history of fashion's fascination with "the subject of concealment that is the mask." He denies that Takahashi's masks have anything to do with religion or sacredness, but asserts that they are a commentary

on fashion itself, as all-encompassing, enveloping the body, permeating corporeal existence. Takahashi's covered girls are like "artificial dolls, like fabric toys... standard-bearers of fashion going against the fashion.... Frightening for some, fascinating for others, the masks and balaclavas of Undercover amaze us as much as the unanimous masks of botox and silicone in our times should bewilder us" (Saillard 2006).

As a Japanese designer, Takahashi occupies an ambiguous cultural position between Orient and Occident. By packaging the burqa as a product, even as an artistic commodity, he ties worlds together through shared consumer values. His punk burqas simultaneously evoke resistance and submission, dominance and subjection, liberation and repression in the same semiotic field of his clothing. An avant-garde rebel of the fashion industry, Takahashi himself embodies these contradictions, playing within the field but also against it. This is the process by which hegemonic discourses succeed "in framing all competing definitions within their range" (Hebdige 1979, 16). Takahashi seems to say: people wear different masks; the gaze disciplines our body; power relations are woven into the very garments we wear.

Just before and just after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the burqa seemed to resist the penetration of Western discourses, blocking off access to the highly charged realm of women's bodies. Because "women's bodies [are] placed in organic communication with the social body," the veil has been seen as indicative of an entirely different social system, impervious to the penetration of Western values (Foucault 1990, 105). Such assumptions were endlessly reproduced in media analyses of the Taliban, where the presumed repression of women's bodies symbolized Islam's supposed systematic repression (of free speech, human rights, individual liberties, sexual freedoms). Analogously, the Taliban targeted women's bodies as a means of controlling the political situation and, especially, the flow of foreign influence in the region. The burqa's power lies within this dialectic, as an emblem of the so-called clash of civilizations and a symbolic border between oppositional worlds. The burqa as discourse has been born out of Cold War tensions, between the United States and the Soviet Union, between the mujahideen and the Soviet Union, and between the United States and the Taliban. The post-9/11 era ushered in the burqa's most recent incarnation, fetishized and ritualized as a shibboleth. Conflict helped produce the burqa as ideol-

ogy, vacillating somewhere between the opposing poles of resistance and submission, action and reaction, dominance and subjection.

Real criticisms of the burqa are that it inhibits movement, that it is an instrument of isolation, that it shames the face, and that it closes off the sensory realm. But the criticism is seriously compromised—and its motives suspect—when the burqa is used as it has been in the Western media: as tool of imperial domination, justification for warfare, disguise for violence, erasure of history, and method of reifying hierarchies of class and race. The violence associated with the burqa masks the hypocrisy of Operation Enduring Freedom; the violence the U.S. is supposedly combating is partly of its own making. This fetishized incarnation of the burqa was one product of the immeasurable violence of the Cold War, which may have been cold for the respective *métropoles* of the Soviet Union and the United States, but took countless victims in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Korea. This is perhaps the secret of the burqa's association with repression, as masking the violence of the liberation. The couturiers interpret the burqa in this vein: as an emblem of conflicts fabricated by the West, as a product of the West's own design. Onto the burqa are projected relationships of domination simultaneously infused with sexual content and the politics of capitalism's global expansion. Through a mode of neoliberal emancipation, the burqa has been incorporated into the dominant culture of signs and accordingly redeemed through a culture of consumption.

NOTES

1. McMorris 2002 analyzes the gendered imagery of contemporaneous reporting on the invasion: "For the press, the removal of the veil/burqa became an irresistible metaphor of that new freedom: 'Veil Is Lifted in Mazar-e Sharif; New Freedoms Embraced as City Emerges from Taliban Rule' (*Washington Post*, November 12); 'Women Shedding Cloak of Taliban Oppression' (*Boston Globe*, November 26); 'Veil Lifts on Afghan Women's Future' (*Denver Post*, November 27); 'In Kabul, Still a Veil of Fear' (*Newsday*, November 28 [2001])."

2. Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind criticize how the Feminist Majority's attention to the burqa obscures the realities of Afghanistan's recent history, namely U.S. involvement in bringing the Taliban to power (Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002, 341). Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain analyze how focus on the burqa has covered over both the epistemic and the physical violence the U.S. invasion has inflicted on Afghan women (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 116–25).

3. The media suggested parallels with American society, which Dunst's Southern California vernacular and the movie's pop music seemed to emphasize.

Film critic A. O. Scott referred to Sofia Coppola's film about Marie Antoinette as a "mirror of Hollywood" (*New York Times*, May 25, 2006).

4. In recent lectures, Joan Scott has argued that because women's citizenship in the West (in France specifically) is so closely tied to sexual identity, the veil is perceived as an absolute obstacle to rights, democratic process, and civic participation (Scott 2007a). In *Politics of the Veil*, she comments, "Entirely forgotten in the glorification of the freedom of French sexual relations was the critique of these same feminists, who for years have decried the limits of their own patriarchal system, with its objectification of women and overemphasis on sexual attractiveness" (Scott 2007b, 172).

5. *A Magazine* is undated and its pages are unnumbered.

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