

The Burqa in *Vogue*: Fashioning Afghanistan

“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.”

Anna Wintour, “Signs of the Times”

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. Already extensive exposure had familiarized this sign of absolute difference, transforming it into a commodity used to sell news, films, documentaries, and magazines. In early 2006, the burqa emerged on Paris runways and in *Vogue* fashion spreads, photographed by the venerable doyen of fashion photography, Irving Penn, and modeled by girl-of-the-moment Gemma Ward. 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 superficial analyses attributed to the Taliban’s (and accordingly, Islam’s) oppressive attitudes toward gender. The designs of John Galliano for Christian Dior, Dutch couturiers Viktor & Rolf, and Japanese fashion house Jun Takahashi Undercover explore how the supposed liberation of Afghanistan obscures its own blood splashed, wounding, and disfiguring violence, a violence projected onto the material sign of the burqa. These burqas 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 out of 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'm a person after all."

The move of the Western gaze, along with the military industrial complex, into Afghanistan, was accompanied by the imagery of neo-liberal emancipation. Afghanistan—occupied by the Soviets, reclaimed by the *mujahidin* and Taliban, site of tribal conflicts—is fertile ground for the capitalist imagination. Emancipation from the stranglehold of communist ideology on local and global 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 US 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. *Beneath the Veil* first aired in March 2001 on Britain's Channel 4 and then again in August 2001 on CNN, making barely an impact. When it showed 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). The film aired at least ten times on CNN, chronologically coinciding with military strategy. It showed on October 6th, the day before the US invasion of Afghanistan and again on November 17th, the day of the State

Department's release of its "Report on the Taliban's War Against Women" and of Laura Bush's radio address. The report and the radio address focus on two key issues: restrictions of women's education and restrictions on dress. The report suggests that the burqa limits freedom of movement and hence, violates "the basic principles of human rights." It connects these violations to restrictions on other forms of adornment like 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). The film sets up a framework for interpreting the burqa as madness and the beauty salon as "normal," and accordingly, the burqa as repression and the aestheticization of women's bodies as liberation. The project of unveiling is not sufficient; Afghan women also needed to be restored to their basic rights of adornment and to the freedom of painting their faces.

Several thoughtful analyses compare the mission to unveil women in Afghanistan to colonial feminism of the 19th and 20th century (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784; Cooke 2002, 469; Ayotte and Husain 2005, 121). Clearly there are close parallels between public unveilings orchestrated by the French and Oprah's unveiling of a burqa-clad woman in Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* (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 an additional phase of aesthetic rehabilitation. This process 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, but 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 and in producing 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 is an emancipation of women from their veils. The article “Beneath the Burqa,” playing on the title of Shah’s documentary, also depicts the unveiling of products on the open market. “Within days of liberation, the country itself was coming out of hiding,” writes Janine 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 to speak to di Giovanni does so only after the Northern Alliance liberates the city. The journalist, however, refuses to talk to her until she takes off the 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 Sarah Shah refers to as the normalcy of the painted face. The burqa, on the other hand, is unintelligible to the Western gaze. Commenting on this article, Mino 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... The 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 the 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 on Women” suggests, adornment is a basic human right. Di Giovanni repeats what had by then become common knowledge in American public discourse: that women under the burqa are not fully human. As Taheema Faryal, a member of the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA) had already said on CBS Evening News, women in Afghanistan have fewer rights than animals (McMorris 2002). In another interview, a former woman journalist shows di Giovanni a picture from the era of the Soviet backed Najibullah government. She is wearing a miniskirt, heels, and pale lipstick. “What I’m trying to show you... is that we were people before the burqa.” These signs of personhood—lipstick, dyed hair, eyeliner, miniskirts, and heels—make these women intelligible to a Western audience. If fashion is a language, as some have argued, then the burqa is incomprehensible (Barthes 1967, Lurie 1981).

Nestled in di Giovanni’s article is a shorter piece entitled “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: 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 hair, 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 as pleasurable, as leisure, pampering, and by the Western beauty technicians in Kabul as “healing” (Mermin 2004). A series of articles in *Vogue* documents the progress of the beauty academy through the collective efforts of the US 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 article 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 not only documented in the pages of *Vogue*, but also in the news media, in a documentary film “The Beauty Academy of Kabul,” and the published memoirs of expatriate hairdresser Debbie Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School*. The film stresses the beauty salon as both necessity and 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 voiceover are telling: the window of an Afghan beauty salon is framed in lace curtains, inside is the head of a heavily made-up blond doll, a product called “Prima Well,” and a Barbie doll 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, juxtaposes media images with emphasis on 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 face becomes what Judith Butler describes as “a condition of humanization” in the media (Butler 2004, 141). But such images of the face are themselves an artifice, its own kind of mask. These unveiled faces become held up as ideals, the very ideals (“models”) in which *Vogue* traffics. The unveiled face is made more ideal than real through cosmetic adornment and enhancement, making it more attractive and desirable than the “ordinary” (or real?) Afghan woman. This is what Butler refers to as the “aesthetic dimension to war” that exploits and instrumentalizes “visual aesthetics as part of war strategy itself” (Butler 2004, 148). This face, in service of a victorious and “gluttonous nationalism,” can hardly be said to express the humanity of the Afghan woman. When Emmanuel Levinas talks about the face as “a condition of humanization,” he means the face in its metaphoric sense of exposure, vulnerability, and self-revelation. He is not referring to the physical face, or the aesthetically enhanced face. Instead of exposing vulnerability, the media representations focusing on unveiling disguise the real forms of suffering Afghan women have endured. It functions as a foil, a distraction, a decoy, showing nothing of decades of war, famine, land mines, and poverty, which are largely the result of Cold War tensions in the region.² The disguising of this truth makes these images veritable falsehoods, not the “face” of exposure or vulnerability as understood by Levinas. This idealized human face produced by the media functions in another way, as “normative schemes of intelligibility [that] 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. Sometimes they produce images of the less than human” (Butler 2004, 146). In this schema, veiled women are unintelligible and inhuman, speaking a language that the Western audience cannot understand. For di Giovanni, the voice of the

Afghan woman is “muffled” until she lifts the burqa. “Islam,” Butler says, “remains unspeakable” (Butler 2004, 134).

The Market Value of Unveiling

Butler explores the relationship between language and humanity, speech and subjecthood. She quotes Levinas as saying, “Face and discourse are tied. It speaks” (Butler 2004, 138). 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 off-limits 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 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 approximates the nature of American imperialism than French colonialism’s preoccupation with cultural capital. Although the media purports to disseminate information, it is not exactly a technology of knowledge. It is more closely tailored to consumer desire, gauged by polls, statistics, viewer audiences, advertising markets, etc. 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 links 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, hungry to participate in 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. The State Department report on the war on women emphasizes that restrictions on women's movement makes it hard for them to go to the market. A woman's "hand could not show when handing over money or receiving a purchase." These images of repressed consumers are echoed in a *Vogue* article, published not long after the invasion of Afghanistan. Carla Power emphasized the markets, services, and products suppressed under the Soviet occupation and the Taliban regime. While visiting Kabul under the Taliban regime (in 1998), a waiter shows her a menu from before the Soviet occupation: of caviar, blinis, and vodka; lobster, filet mignon, and champagne. The waiter remarks: "Perhaps someday the Americans and foreigners will come back" (Power 2001, 84). Power remembers her childhood growing up in Afghanistan, nostalgically reflecting 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 the bazaars' vast array of goods in detail, writing about the "Money Bazaar" that dispensed dollars and the "Nixon Bazaar" named after the American president. The subtitle to 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 film, where she returns to her father's village, only to find it in ruins. The media representations never fail to mention pre-Soviet prosperity destroyed by the ensuing occupation. If only the US 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: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women in Islam*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the hugely 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 becomes the symbolic border between two oppositional worlds. Hirsi Ali interprets this opposition in terms of the tensions between capitalism and communism, she correspondingly extend this conflict to other binaries, between West and East, secular and Islamic, liberated and repressed, modern and backward, but also between rich and poor. Hirsi Ali's autobiography *Infidel* 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 main aspect of her journey is from poverty to prosperity. The distance Hirsi Ali traveled in her rise to fame and fortune is highlighted in an excerpt from her autobiography *Infidel*. The chapter 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's journey from poverty to riches becomes equated with a journey from Islam to the West and accordingly, from oppression to emancipation. Her current 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" (AIE Board of Trustees 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 wears Chanel pumps and an Escada jacket. She slips out of them 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, 206). These small nuggets juxtapose the supposed oppression of the hijab with the nakedness of the feet and the freedoms symbolized by not only cosmetic embellishment, but very expensive, high end couture.

The pages of *Vogue* feature grand exemplars of women who have freed their bodies from Islam, women who have risen to reap the fruits of economic and sexual emancipation on the open market. *Vogue* recounts larger than life tales of success: of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Saira Shah, and Camilla

Al Fayed. All are Muslim women living in Europe: a Somali in Dutch parliament, a British journalist of Afghan heritage, an Egyptian heiress to a British institution. Shah's film *Beneath the Veil* was aptly produced by 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. 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 2001).

Another converted Muslim depicted in the pages of *Vogue* is Camilla Al Fayed, daughter of Harrods owner Mohammed Al Fayed. Her mother is described 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, takes Camilla as a date to fashion week in Paris. While this was the year (2006) that the collections made startling references to veiling and burqas, these go 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 Shah's case, expose it. In Al Fayed's case, she becomes heir apparent to a British clothing empire. Through their renunciation, these women gain access to what *Vogue* calls the "Master Class," a section of the magazine that puns on racial and economic hierarchies. On the other side are "Handmaidens of Terror" and supporters of Osama Bin Laden as profiled by Deborah Scroggins, a journalist who has made her career writing about women and Islam (Scroggins 2003, 2005a, 2005b). 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 this dystopic society is that women are not allowed to choose their own clothes, wear makeup, read magazines or books. Scroggins's next article for *Vogue* is about Darfur, with harrowing and graphic details of the *janjaweds'* rapes. 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, she wonders why they even bother 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 Florida, where the condominiums cost \$2 million a unit. Waking up with nightmares of Darfur, she 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 juxtaposition of these elements has the effect of further emphasizing the pleasures of privilege, but also the fears operating under the glossy's bejeweled surface. In September 2006, Kirsten Dunst appeared on the cover of American *Vogue* as Marie Antoinette (but curiously, not on the cover of French or British *Vogue*). The Marie Antoinette spread at Versailles is wedged between two "veiling" fashion shoots—between Viktor and Rolf's heavy mesh facemasks and Jun Takahashi's punk burqas. In the Marie Antoinette shoot, Dunst models a number of original designs from top couturiers at Versailles. One stands out as an aesthetic departure from the other period pieces, but also for its suggested political content. The dress by John Galliano resembles an oil spill of black aluminum foil, "ruched into undulating bubbles" (654-55). This Marie Antoinette is an American celebrity queen, oblivious not just to the blood, but to the confection of oil flowing at her feet. It is a "mirror of Hollywood," a reference to an indulgent celebrity class oblivious to poverty, current political events, and war on its doorstep.³

Galliano's own Christian Dior collection from Spring 2006 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. Inhabited largely by North African immigrant communities, the French media had interpreted the riots as an expression of these communities' continued disenfranchisement and lack of economic opportunity for unemployed youth. Hamish comment that "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*... His models' faces were powdered livid white... as visagiste Pat McGrath described it, 'modern Marie Antoinette'" (Bowles 2006, 142). Woven into these political references are references to the French revolution: *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* emblazoned on garments, 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 population in France are portrayed less as a threat to the values of the revolution than an embodiment of them. There are allusions to other political events in Galliano's collection: 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. In her letter from the editor, Anna Wintour calls these 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.

The French continue to battle the veil at a governmental and legislative level, seeing it as an obstacle to assimilation, to secularism, and to women’s sexual availability.⁴ There are certain key differences in how the Americans and British respond to resistance to unveiling. (In this context, it is relevant to note that Galliano is British, hence his embrace of the freedom to veil, consecrated in some very expensive couture.) Since the veiling persisted despite Afghanistan’s “liberation,” the media could no longer interpret the burqa as a sign of repression. Instead, in a distinctly American way, multicultural inclusion is deployed to incorporate this marker of foreignness. 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. By becoming 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, a sign of Muslim women’s assimilation into consumer culture.

Whereas earlier the “veil” served as a homogenous signifier of “Muslim woman,” suddenly they can be distinguished “by the Chloé eyewear and the angry inch of stiletto heel under an abaya,” by Tocca dresses and Seven jeans, and the latest Paddington bag (Woods 2006, 312). Moreover, variety is finally recognized in different kinds of veils, in abayas, chadors, and burqas that are apparently no obstacle to either adorning bodies or purchasing goods in the marketplace. The “Islamic curtain” is not rent, but becomes a commodity itself (Hirsi Ali 2006, xi). It becomes 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” (Buck 2007, 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 other side of the article is a photograph by Irving Penn of a woman wholly swathed in a burlap sack. Penn’s own long career in photography encompasses images of the exotic and iconographic shots of the fashion world. The woman in the burlap sack, with a fist raised as if to feel her way, closely resembles a picture taken by Penn in 1971. The earlier image portrays two “guedras” or Tuareg dancing girls in Morocco, with what looks like sacks over their heads and their wraps pulled tightly around them. The burlap portrait accompanying Buck’s article clearly evokes the burqa, but also alludes to the role of sackcloth in Western European history, as a cilice, a means of self-mortification or penance for adorning oneself. Penn recognizes the burqa images as mirrors through which Western society sees

itself. The 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. Fashion critic Stephanie Rosenbloom interprets some of these as sinister, like the burqa and bondage references, “as misogyny, as a desire to suppress, muffle, or stifle women” (Rosenbloom 2006). At the precise moment that she says “misogyny” in her multimedia presentation, the images shift from runway models to a random photograph of a group of women in burqas. But she acknowledges another way of interpreting these masks, 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.” Anna Wintour’s “letter from the editor” picks up the motif, writing that the 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’s message that “we should have never gone there; we should have never gotten mixed up with all of this” (Scroggins 2005a). 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 US’s own role in perpetrating violence, and not just as emanating from a nefarious “obscure” outside force. Again, the semiotic system seems to both perpetrate normative views, but simultaneously interrogate them, containing both as flip sides of the same sets of signs.

Jun Takahashi’s “burqa punk” collection sent seismic waves through the fashion industry. Takahashi’s Undercover line has long experimented with masks and full body coverings. His Fall

2000/Winter 2001 collection entitled “Melting Pot” covered the full body in one type of pattern, including matching makeup on the face. His Fall 2001/Winter 2002 “Decorated Armed Voluntary Forces” referenced the crusades and dressed women in *khimar*-like (covering hair and chest) chain mail head coverings. The collection’s slogan was “Anti-War.” Takahashi curated a recent issue of the Japanese avant-garde magazine *A* and filled it with masks: a photo shoot with naked women in burqa-like hoods, 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. So mask references are not new to the Undercover line. The shock value of the burqa is not lost on Takahashi, who combines facemasks 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 the model’s 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 in to the world of commodities and the ensuing neutralization of its shock value. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* Dick Hebdige describes this as the “neutralization” of punk’s meaning as it travels from “shock to chic,” losing its value as social commentary (Hebdige 1979, 16). The appearance of punk mail order catalogues, pervasive marketing, and safety pins on the runway all signaled its 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 writes. 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?”⁵

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.”

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 US policy in the Middle East and corresponding attitudes toward Muslim women. A recent article in *The Guardian* satirizes the British media’s reaction to the detention of British naval officers. Why make Faye Turney wear a black

headscarf? How uncivilized, he remarks. Why not put a bag over her head as we do with Muslim prisoners, make it hard to breath, and circulate the pictures in the media that way?

Jones's question touches on imagery surrounding not just Takahashi's covered heads, but also the burqa in the media: the sado-masochistic intimations of anonymous sexuality, masks and face gear, bondage, sexual violence, eroticism, and fantasies of submission and dominance. In the 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 tales 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 she is being executed, 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, as a form of bondage, is continually refracted through clothes, as a form of disguise and containment and expression of hidden sexual content. Penn's burlap burqa, as form of sexual mortification, refers to this. Galliano's Antoinette collection is full of chastity belts and bondage gear. Takahashi's masks are accessorized by what looks like white straight jackets. Viktor & Rolf's face veils, closely resembling fencing masks, appear more belligerent, as both fighting tools and protection from invasive foils. Jones points out the contradictory (or complementary?) images in the media, of Iranian female warriors, tough and strong and of prisoners, the image of the prisoners with bags over their heads and the implicit reference to the Abu Ghuraib pictures. He asks the question: who is submitting and who is dominating, who is repressed and who is repressing? The answers, he suggest, lie in media representations, although meanings are seemingly inverted.

Another article in the issue of *A* curated by Takahashi is entitled "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 and a culture of mandatory self-exposure. The face is like a blank canvas whose identity is constructed through cosmetics and that designers and hairdressers “try to master.” We all wear masks, Saillard says, 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.” Saillard 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.”

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 together worlds 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. Takahashi, an avant-garde rebel of the fashion industry, 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 invasion of Afghanistan, the burqa seemed to resist the penetration of Western discourses, blocking off access to a highly charged realm: 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, shut off from the penetration of

Western values (Foucault 1985, 105). Such assumptions were endlessly reproduced in media analyses of the Taliban, where the presumed repression of women's bodies symbolized Islam's supposed repressiveness as a system (of free speech, of human rights, of individual liberties, of 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 words. The burqa as discourse has been born out of Cold War tensions, between the United States and the Soviet Union, between the *mujahidin* and the Soviet Union, and between the United States and the Taliban. Fetishized and ritualized as a shibboleth, the post-9/11 era ushered in the burqa's most recent incarnation. Conflict helped produced the burqa as ideology, vacillating somewhere between the opposing poles of resistance and submission, action and reaction, dominance and subjection.

Real criticisms of the burqa are: as inhibiting movement, instrument of isolation, shaming the face, and closing off the sensory realm. But the message is seriously compromised—and its motives suspect—when 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 US is supposedly combating is partly of its own making. The burqa was one effect 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 a symbol fashioned by conflicts fabricated in the West, as a product of the West's own design. Onto the burqa, the West projects its own conflicted gender

relationships, its own hierarchies of domination and submission, its own aesthetics coded into human sexuality.

NOTES

¹ In *Religion in the News*, Christine McCarthy McMorris analyzes the gendered imagery of 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)” (McMorris 2002).

² In Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind’s “Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of the Counterinsurgency,” they criticize how the Feminist Majority’s attention to the burqa disguises the realities of Afghanistan’s recent history, namely US involvement in bringing the Taliban to power (Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002, 341). Another article by Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain analyzes how focus on the burqa has covered over both the epistemic and physical violence the US invasion inflicted on Afghan women (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 116-125).

³ The media suggested parallels with American society, which Dunst’s southern California teenage slang and the movie’s pop music seemed to emphasize. Film critic A.O. Scott refers to 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 appears as an absolute obstacle to rights, democratic process, or civic participation (Scott 2007). 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 2007, 172).

⁵ *A Magazine* has neither page numbers, nor dates.

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